

INTRODUCTION

The social life of signs in the age of the Web

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In the mid-1980s, upon reviewing the extent and the ways computers are used in semiotics, Pierre Maranda was disappointed to discover that very few semioticians were competent enough with the latest technological innovations, and thus able to deploy it to their advantage in their research. He hoped that 'as semioticians use the computer with greater and greater proficiency, they will inevitably come to reflect on its structure, its inner mechanisms, the programming languages which have evolved for it - in brief, they will want to see through the machine, to understand it as a semiotic object'. He goes on to predict that the development of semiotics will 'be linked to computer science, especially to new approaches in artificial intelligence. The association of the two fields would produce what could be labelled "semiotronics" or whatever other term should be coined to label that cross-fertilization' (Maranda 1987: 516).

Maranda's assessment of computer-based semiotic research, as well as his vision of the future, reflect the concerns of an age in which the computer was primarily valued as a computational rather than as a communication medium. Even the boldly interdisciplinary work of the late Peter Bøgh Andersen in the field of Organisational Semiotics, in the early 1990s, aimed 'to adapt and extend structuralist linguistics and semiotics, such that it becomes a coherent framework for understanding the semiotic aspects of computers and their use in work...a framework that allows...to understand and describe the interplay between work, organization, and language' (1990: 71), is still geared to the man/machine coupling of informatic activity. In Andersen's conception of the 'computer as a medium' (Andersen et al. 1993), in other words, the computer is still a data-processing machine. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, however, first the computer and subsequently the Internet, stopped being confined to the specialized uses of the corporate, governmental and research institutions, and proceeded to become an integral part of everyday life, bringing into being, within the span of less than a generation, a whole new communication environment, with radically transformative consequences and ramifications for the totality of human action and interaction.

Semiotics had been quick to respond to the sweeping transformation of the field of social communication that took place in the post-war decades, as a result of the explosive growth of visual and audio-visual media. Its energetic engagement with the powerful new media and modes of visual culture and communication - television, video, cinema, photography, design, advertising, comics, informational, scientific and educational imaging - proved instrumental in advancing the methodical investigation of the multimedia and multimodal sphere of modern visibility as well as the cultivation of effective visual literacies. Semiotics has proved rather slow, however, in responding to the rise of digital media and the new, Web-based communication environment.

During the early, meteoric rise of the public Internet, media theorists underscored the uniquely participatory and interactive character of the 'Second Media Age' (Poster 1995) or 'the network society' (Castells 1996). They strove to apprehend its cultural logic through concepts like 'hypertext' (Landow 1994, Bell and Kennedy 2000) and 'remediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1998), they explored 'the emergent conventions, recurrent design patterns, and key forms of new media' (Manovich 2001: 10) and charted the incipient cyber-cultures and cyber-communities (e.g. Penley and Ross 1991, Rheingold 1993, Potter 1996). Semiotics, on the other hand seemed to be under the sway of the outspokenly anti-digitalist postmodernist problematics of simulation,

disembodiment and hyperreality. The corruptive influence of this problematics is detectable in the section devoted to the digital media that Winfried Noth included in his volume on recent developments in media semiotics (Noth 1997). Be that as it may, in covering issues like chatting, electronic communities and the hypertext, the articles comprising this section were sure evidence that the younger generation of semioticians was starting to rise to the challenge of digital developments. But for a few exceptions (e.g. Jeanneret 1999, Codognet 2002), however, semiotics, and especially media semiotics, is conspicuously absent from the crucial debates and developments of the time in media theory and research.

In 2010, Marcel Danesi expresses his intimation that 'a primary aim of media semiotics' is to study the implications of the general 'semiotic law of media', according to which 'as the media change, so too the sign systems of culture' (Danesi 2010: 135, see also Danesi 2015: 485). By restating, in effect, in semiotic terms, Marshall McLuhan's controversial aphorism that 'the medium is the message', Danesi seems to favor the disentanglement of media semiotics from its customary focus on media representations and endorse the redirection of its attention to the bewildering scale and variety of semiotic changes and innovations spawned by the digital revolution. He proves reluctant, though, to flesh out this crucial intimation into a new research agenda for media semiotics in the digital era. Rather condescendingly, in fact, he describes the Internet as 'the primary platform for enacting the carnivalesque within us', convinced that its importance resides mainly in its role as a medium of parody pop culture or 'indie' culture (Danesi 2010: 148).

Danesi is convinced that media semiotics 'can provide relevant insights into the interconnection between technology and culture, perhaps like no other discipline can' (ibid). Once again, though, he fails to spell out the significance of this crucial point for the semiotic research agenda. The rise of the Web-centered communication environment has brought to the fore the issue of the technology-culture interface with a force and urgency, that no previous technology has ever done before. Semiotics is indeed in a privileged position to apprehend this interface as encompassing simultaneously the interaction of humans with machines and the mediated interaction between humans. But this potential has yet to be developed. In the tradition of Kittler's notion of 'semiotecnologies' (Kittler 1997), both Noth's notion of 'semiotic machines' (Noth 2002) and Jeanneret's notion of 'le techno-semiotique' (Jeanneret 2014) address the heterogeneous assemblages of technological and meaning-making operations characteristic of digital media in an explicitly negative manner, intended, as they are, to castigate the domination of technology over meaning. A much more fertile perspective has been developed by the actor-network theory (ANT) of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law, whose 'material-semiotic' method of mapping the intricate relations between humans and technology, replaces the neat division of the world into subjects and objects with dynamic constellations of human and non-human entities interlocked in relations of interpenetration and interaction through an endlessly recursive series of semiotizations and resemiotizations.

An especially constructive starting point for the advancement of web semiotics can be found in Gunther Kress's effort to adapt social semiotics to the needs, challenges and potentialities of the digital age. Having initially addressed the issue of the new literacies demanded by the new media (Kress 2003), his recent book on multimodality offers, in effect, a succinct outline of his social semiotic approach to communication, updated in a manner that takes full account of the historical distinctiveness of the 'new communicational world'. Kress suggests that the semiotic effects of the latter are felt at all three levels of the production, representation and dissemination of signs (Kress 2010: 6). Its most essential impact, however, is felt at the level of the social relations of communication. Siding with the emphasis placed by Poster (1995), Castells (1996), Jenkins (2006) and many others on the socially empowering and emancipatory potential of the new communication media, Kress takes the central characteristic of the contemporary media landscape to be the sweeping redistribution of power in communication (Kress 2010: 21). Having over the previous decades gradually detached himself from the traditional emphasis of semiotics on either structure, grammar, competence or ideological critique, Kress focuses here on the primacy of agency, which he conceptualizes through the metaphor of 'design'. The protagonist of the new social context of communication, Kress argues, is the semiotic labor of individuals as

makers and remakers of meaning through their 'equitable participation in the shaping of the semiotic and social world' (Kress 2010: 6).

The evolution of semiotic engagement with and contribution to the investigation and understanding of the digital age is certainly much more complex and variegated than its rather simplified and broad-brushed view I have outlined above. A more detailed account of this engagement, which gives due attention and credit to all implicated persons and projects, is undoubtedly required. It is certain that such a comprehensive assessment will reveal a much more favourable picture, particularly if we also take stock of the widespread use of semiotics as a constituent of a variety of interdisciplinary approaches, like cultural, visual, media and software studies. It is equally certain, though, that on the whole, the import of semiotics to what is, by all accounts, the paramount challenge of contemporary social and cultural sciences, leaves much to be desired.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, semiotics appears entrenched in its role as a valuable tool in the applied fields of web marketing (Stockinger 2001, Oswald 2012), Web and interface design (De Souza 2005, Speroni 2006, Islam 2011). The profusion of Web 2.0-related innovations, specifically, has significantly fostered the growth of semiotic research in areas like the emoticons (Warschauer and Grimes 2008), social tagging (Huang and Chuang 2009), mobile devices (Kress 2010), new forms of informational media (Cotte 2011), online gaming (Thorne et al. 2012), the novel forms of authorship (Junida and Sukyadi 2012) and multimodal digital humanities (O' Halloran 2015). The list is, of course, purely indicative, and is getting more expansive and diversified as the millennial generation of media-savvy researchers appreciate the fertility of semiotics in interrogating the workings and phenomena of the digital semiosphere. If the twentieth century history of both our social and our scientific responses to media change has taught us anything is that these responses are above all a generational matter. Quite evidently, then, it is primarily to this millennial generation of semioticians that *Punctum's* special issue on the 'Semiotics of the Web' addressed itself. Their response to our call has been particularly enthusiastic, vindicating our rather risky decision to inaugurate the publication of *Punctum* with a theme that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been treated by any monographic or collective volume as yet.

This special issue devoted to the 'Semiotics of the Web' opens with a backwards glance at the interactional space we take more or less for granted in our daily use of digital devices. Florian Hadler and Daniel Irrgang offer a genealogy of the concepts and theories that have contributed in shaping the human-computer interface. Revisiting a set of interface theories from backgrounds as various as philosophy, literary theory, architecture, media studies and computer science, the authors methodically expose the fundamentally historical and cultural character of interface design, i.e. its radical contingency, its overdetermination by a host of conflicting dictates, principles, values and perspectives.

The following three articles explore the digital sociality of the image, and more specifically, give insight into the ways the Web-based modes of the social circulation of the image function as conduits of powerful social and cultural energies. Julius Erdmann's article concerns everyday visual communication on social networking sites (SNS), a field he considers to have been both neglected and over-simplified by current research. Underlining the profuse heterogeneity of visual signs on SNS, the author dismisses its reductive treatment either in terms of identity-construction strategies or of mere technological processing. Combining a techno-semiotic with a social semiotic approach, Erdmann focuses on the still images on SNS, revealing the complex interplay of inter-individual meaning-making and the cultural conventions inscribed in the operations enabled by the graphic user interface.

Gabriele Marino, in his article, investigates the vast and variegated field of the Internet memes, the exemplary case of what Jenkins (2013) calls 'spreadable media'. Beginning by clarifying the distinctive textual characteristics of Internet memes, the author proceeds to systematically map both their semantic and syntactic aspects. The anatomy of their distinctive structure enables Marino to identify the features that make them amenable to the wide variety of uses and contexts, ensuring thus their recursive resemiotizations.

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Annick Girard's article deals with another singular phenomenon of popular web-culture, and, more specifically, Web celebrity culture: the making of animated 3D films to illustrate celebrated paintings by famous artists, like Picasso's *Guernica*. Owing to these peculiar acts of homage, that combine animation and musical accompaniment, these paintings acquire a totally unforeseen aspect, potency and aura. At the same time, they are transformed into creative self-performances that are the currency of the symbolic economy of Web-based sociality.

The next two articles pertain to the revitalization of the language of documentary through the use of digital tools and platforms. In the 1990s, the digital revolution was castigated by many as an anti-realist counter-revolution that undermined documentary evidence and veracity. Patricia Nogueira's article on the genre of interactive documentary, however, proves otherwise. Drawing upon a detailed analysis of David Dufresne's *Fort McMoney* (2013), Nogueira focuses on how the genre's characteristic multimodality, non-linear structure and interactive interface provide viewers with a kind of experience and understanding that foster new, powerful ways of critical meaning-making and active engagement with the issue at hand.

Catherine Bouko and Maria Giulia Dondero examine the form and functions of interactive documentary-dramas, as they have recently been developed by history museums on social networks like Facebook. Drawing from the semiopragmatic models of Hanot and Jost, the authors provide a detailed analysis of these highly innovative and popular audiovisual productions, highlighting the complex mix of authenticating and fictional strategies that they employ to create more immersive and engaging ways of cultivating historical literacy.

The final two articles of this special issue both concern issues of democracy in the Web. Jonathan Zittrain has used the concept of 'semiotic democracy', originally coined by John Fiske (1987) in the context of television, to describe the workings of online communities. His example of choice is the Wikipedia community, on account of its success in putting people of diverse cultural backgrounds to work together on the basis of a common ethos of discussion and consensus (Zittrain 2008: 147). In her article, Svetlana Sheypak examines a vital dimension of this democratic collaborative ethos, and specifically, the politeness rules governing interaction amongst the members of the global Wikipedia community. Employing a discursive approach centered on the concept of Face Threatening Act (FTA), the author focuses on a comparative study of the politeness rules found in the English, French and Russian pages of Wikipedia, revealing both the divergences caused by cultural variation but also, the equally notable convergences that stem from the singular ideology of the Wikipedia participatory model.

Turning to the wider issue of democracy on the Web in the final article of *Punctum's* special issue, Allan Bahroun takes up the issue of censorship and surveillance on the Chinese Internet, the fastest growing on a global scale. The author distances himself from the polarized positions prevailing over most of the prodigious cross-disciplinary literature that has developed around the issue of the so-called 'Great Firewall', since its construction in 1993. Taking Jeanneret's techno-semiotic perspective as the theoretical basis for his approach, Bahroun offers a detailed examination of the intricate interplay of power, resistance and technology, or, alternatively, of techno-power and techno-empowerment, demonstrating the need for a non-teleological conception of semiosis and a correlatively non-instrumental understanding of media.

To close, the principal intention of this special issue was to provide a forum for ongoing research projects on the semiotic phenomena, patterns and processes of the Web. It was inspired by the need to recast semiotics for the digital age and in the hope that young semioticians will be encouraged, true to Saussure's definition of the primary objective of semiotics, to pursue even more systematically and resolutely the study of the life of signs in the age of the Web.

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