An introduction to semiotics?

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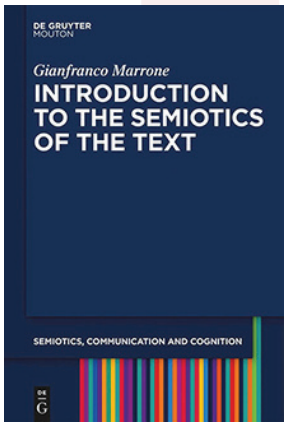

Gianfranco Marrone

Introduction to the Semiotics of the Text

Berlin: De Gruyter/Mouton, 2022. 197 pages. ISBN 978-3-11-068888-7.

Paul Cobley and Kalevi Kull, editors of the series Semiotics, Communication and Cognition published by De Gruyter, have persuaded De Gruyter and the International Association for Semiotic Studies to collaborate in sponsoring translations of important works in semiotics that are not yet available in English. This is a major development in the field that should have all semioticians, whatever languages they speak, electrified with excitement. Anglophone and Francophone researchers naturally address primarily the reading public in their respective countries; Italian authors logically enough write for Italian readers, Hispanic writers for Spanish-speaking readers, and so on. This also affects the bookselling market: it is, for instance, extraordinarily difficult even for someone who does read French to order French books from Greece.

One result of this situation is that, with the exception of a handful of globetrotting polyglot semioticians, the field of semiotics has gradually tended to separate into different theoretical traditions, on the basis not so much of nationality as of language.This is a pity: semiotics is not so strongly established that we can afford to ignore work published outside our own linguistic field of vision. The initiative of the series editors is cause for celebration, especially when it brings us books such as this volume by Gianfranco Marrone.

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Potential readers should, however, be warned: this is not your usual kind of introduction. Though he does fill the first 12 pages with a charming and accessible presentation of the basic semiotic concepts, Marrone's ambition is in fact to cover more than half a century of complex and sophisticated theoretical development in less than 200 pages, leaving the reader rather breathless. He has a knack for saying fundamental and complicated things in a seemingly simple way, so that we do not always realize the scope and implications of the apparently straightforward page we just read.

The book, as the title indicates, is built around the concept of the text. It takes the form of an impressive account of the development of Greimasian theory, from its original form as a theory of narrative through the semiotics of passion, the focus on enunciation and the extension to the analysis of images, sensory experience and corporeality. What is noteworthy is that Marrone presents this theoretical corpus not in terms of its gradual growth from the 1960s to today, but to a very large extent as an integral, coherent whole, in which each new development is seen as an extension of concepts that are already in place. He also constantly relates it to the work of other semioticians. The result is a sense of theoretical completeness and coherence that is largely his own achievement.

Marrone in his first chapter chooses to present basic semiotic concepts through something that he calls a "fable": a little story of arriving on a Mediterranean island for a holiday and driving around looking for a beach. This is characteristic. From the beginning, his central concern is with the text not only in the sense of the many institutionalised forms that are already culturally defined as texts, but in the less easily recognized form of the flows of information that we receive and interpret constantly in the course of everyday life. His little fable allows him to introduce central theoretical concepts and issues–expression and content, sender and receiver, communication and signification, inference and cultural context, difference, value, narration, form and substance–in an apparently self-evident manner. There is no over-simplification and, remarkably, there is no attempt to attribute concepts to any particular branch of semiotic theory.

This changes in the second chapter, which is a very brief summary of the historical development of narratology. Here, Marrone pays his respects to the structuralist tradition and its assertion that "highly diverse cultural manifestations … can be examined as texts *from a methodological perspective* even if they are not seen as such *from an empirical perspective* … The text as understood from a semiotic perspective is no longer a thing, an empirical object, but a theoretical model used as a descriptive tool under certain specific and explicit epistemological conditions" (pp. 14-15). This, as he rightly observes, leads to the socio-semiotic possibility of examining virtually every aspect of social life as a text. It also leads to what is essentially the breakdown

of the boundary between text and context. Context becomes "that which is not pertinent to textual analysis" (p. 15), or perhaps more exactly, that which is not pertinent to the analysis of what the researcher has defined this time as the text. The text, which as he says is the specific object of study for the semiologist, is constructed each time according to the pertinence selected. It is in constant connection with other texts and discourses, open, permeable, dynamic.

Marrone then rather quickly backtracks a bit from this dizzying prospect, discussing the properties by which we recognize textuality. The text is still always a product of negotiation, but can be provisionally delineated in terms of properties such as (relative) closure and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes that give it formal coherence and semantic cohesion. This brings him to narrativity and the Greimasian generative trajectory as a general theoretical model for textual analysis.

There follows, in the next chapter, 35 pages on Greimasian narratology, including its later extension from narratives of action to narratives of being, i.e., to the semiotics of passions. Marrone begins with the semiotic square, its dynamics and the value systems (axiologies) that it articulates, continues with a very brief discussion of the essential elements of narrative grammar, modalities and narrative programmes, to arrive at the canonical narrative schema, which as he observes is essentially polemical in structure. This leads him to the need for a parallel theory of subjectivity, affect and the semiotics of passion, which also has its canonical schema. His presentation of the schema of passion relates it very effectively to the canonical narrative schema, showing how the moments of subjective pathemisation (constitution, sensitisation, moralisation) interact with the corresponding moments of action (manipulation, competence, performance and sanction).

The final section of the chapter returns to the canonical narrative schema in order to question the central position it gives to polemical, goal-oriented action. Marrone is certainly not the first researcher to note that this model of narrative is culturally determined, "a very precise cultural conception that tends to valorise action over passion, institution over sentiment, doing over being" (p. 58). However, it seems that his objections concern the applicability of the model to *behaviour* or forms of life: real Subjects do not always pursue very clear Objects, may have individual goals that are not socially recognized and do not fit neatly into a model designed to account basically for the stories we tell. I am not sure that I agree.

It is certainly true that forms of life are less explicit–probably less coherent–about goals and values than a Russian fairytale, but that does not imply that their values are not as fundamental and as deeply felt as those behind any romantic heroic story. We have only to consider the lengths people will go to if they feel that their way of life is threatened. The canonical model (as Marrone implies) needs to be applied with some flexibility. Rejection of dominant social values

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is also an axiology; the sanction of any particular choice of action or non-action does not have to take a social form but can be purely internal, such as that of the conscientious objector or the vegetarian. The model of the canonical narrative schema is capable of any number of transformations. Marrone is well aware of this: alternative forms of life "can all probably be traced back to a *coherent deformation of standard models of civil living*", deformations that can "enter into common use … and become a source for negotiation in the social arena" (p. 59). But such alternative forms of life acquire their meaning of contestation or subversion precisely *by their divergence* from the standard schema–i.e., their divergence can be described and made meaningful only by comparison with the canonical form.

Marrone then turns to the next focus of textual theory, namely enunciation. This is the preferred term, in the Greimasian tradition, for the process of communication. It has its roots in the linguistics of Emile Benveniste, who pointed out that any utterance implicitly includes information on the speaker (among other things, in the use of personal pronouns, temporal and spatial indications, verb forms and so on). In other words, as soon as a language is put to use in communication, the act of communicating becomes inscribed in the utterance.

Greimasian semiotics has preferred to use the linguistic concept of enunciation rather than that of communication, because to treat communication as a process of enunciation allows us to examine how subjectivity emerges in discourse. "It is possible … while analysing the enunciated text, not only to reconstruct the semantic structures of the message, but also the enunciative structures that have created it" (p. 67).

Such an analysis does not lead us to the actual speaker/producer of the text or to the actual reader/receiver; it leads us to their simulacra as constituted by the text, an Enunciator and an Enunciatee that can be seen as actants in a narrative of communication. The concept is familiar from literary theory: the implied author/narrator and the implied reader are textual constructs, not to be identified with any actual author or reader. But when applied to other forms of communication–especially highly mediated forms, such as mass media–it has interesting consequences. Marrone notes that between the actant positions in the text and the actors who take up these positions in actual communication, "there is almost never a one-to-one correspondence" (p. 68). Many different people and a great deal of sophisticated technology all assume the actantial role of a single Enunciator in a television news broadcast. If Enunciator and Enunciatee are seen as "differently constructed forms of subjectivity" (p. 69), they can have different degrees of modal competences (obligations, desires, knowledge, power). And their communication becomes less a transfer of information and more a negotiated relationship, an implied or explicit *contract*:

> The result is an idea of communication and language that is very different from the traditional one. The criterion of an utterance's truth or falsity is not so much determined by its relationship of adequacy to the external reality … but from the relationship between Enunciator and Enunciatee, that, on the basis of respective modal charges, can find an agreement on the truth of the communicative process … The truth, from this perspective, is not the effect of a representation but the result of an inter-subjective relationship (p. 69).

In other words, we tend to accept a statement as true, not on the basis of external evidence, but on the basis of our trust in the source of the statement. In an era of anti-vaxxers and flat-earth conspiracy theories, that is something worth bearing in mind.

Marrone also uses the concept of enunciation to touch very briefly on other issues, such as discourse, inter-mediality, theme and figurativity, which are not necessarily best understood as aspects of enunciation. A more serious caveat, however, is something that he acknowledges from the beginning, namely that "reinterpreting communication as enunciation" (p. 62) "tends to play down the concrete communicative contexts (casual or constructed) of production and reception, together with the economic motivations (political, social, familial, emotional, etc.) that lead a given social actor to propose a particular communicative pact to a given public that accepts (or refuses) it" (pp. 62-63). His argument is that these concrete contexts are recuperated in the analysis of the process of enunciation: "Semiotics rediscovers these circumstances in the discourse, according to the basic semiotic principle by which the *communicative context of a text is inevitably present*" (p. 63).

The validity of this claim obviously hinges on the degree to which a semiotic analysis of enunciation can recuperate the full circumstances of the enuniative act *using purely semiotic methods*. Personally, I do not think that this is possible. A great deal of cultural knowledge goes into any interpretation of a text, and this is equally true for the traces of the enunciative act that can be found within it. With more or less contemporary texts from our own culture, we apply this knowledge implicitly. When we are confronted with texts from another culture, or from a more distant historical period, and not infrequently when dealing with complex technological processes of text production in our own society, we need to reconstitute such knowledge. In practice, that means that we have to rely on other disciplines (history, anthropology, technology, sociology) that use different methodologies. We still need semiotic analysis, but we cannot rely on it exclusively; semiotic methodology is simply not enough.

Much as he uses enunciation to introduce discourse and intermediality, Marrone in the next chapter uses textualisation–the passage from the plane of content to the

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plane of expression–to introduce the analysis of images as texts. He very rapidly disposes of "so-called iconism, i.e. the natural or conventional nexus between images and reality", specifying that "the image signifies thanks to perceptive cultural grids" (p. 85). As in his discussion of narrativity, the presentation moves smoothly (and very briefly) through nearly half a century of work on the semiotics of images, selecting the concepts that have proven useful (figurativity and plasticity, semi-symbolism, the plastic categories of eidetic, chromatic and topological together with light and texture) ordered into a coherent theoretical framework.

He then integrates this attention to the image with a discussion of how the visual can invoke the other senses: "Looking is a *process that involves the totality of the perceiving body*" (p. 100). This phenomenological approach leads him to a discussion of "the relationship between sensory and somatic processes that we have referred to as aesthetic" (p. 111) in its original ancient Greek meaning of *aesthesis*, sensation. Although "from the semiotic point of view … the senses are not the starting point for the cognitive relationship between subject and object", but are already culturally trained and formed by the "perceptive grids that, through specific cultural models, direct that very perception cognitively and pragmatically" (p. 112), he feels that it may be possible to perceive especially the plastic dimension as artists do, as a kind of "other" vision of the world, in what he calls the *aesthetic grasp*. It is an attractive idea, but I wonder whether, at this point, the notion of corporeality is not becoming dangerously metaphysical.

These 120 pages are then followed by nearly half again as many pages of an appendix on the history of the notion of text. The title is misleading. There is indeed a detailed presentation of how the concept of the text has evolved through the work of major theoreticians, from Barthes, Eco and Greimas to Lévi-Strauss and Lotman. But behind the discussion is Marrone's own passionate argument for a socio-semiotics, for bringing the whole methodological apparatus of text theory to bear on social phenomena. This is something that informs the whole book; the appendix provides historical and bibliographical support for it.

Marrone is sympathetic to Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, in which texts interact dynamically and what from one point of view is context can from another point of view itself become text. He also seems to approve of the perspective of Lévi-Strauss, where all versions of a myth are part of the meaning of the myth. There is one major drawback of such a perspective, namely that it becomes impossible to examine the relationship of any particular occurrence of the myth to its cultural and historical context. Different kinds of texts are constrained by different conventional rules of discourse. However, these are issues for further discussion, as is the relation of socio-semiotics to other social sciences that I remarked on earlier.

Marrone provides very full additional bibliography for further reading at the end of each chapter. The parenthetical references in the main text are kept to a minimum, which makes for much smoother reading but might perhaps be a little unfair to some other researchers. There are some minor problems caused by the translation from Italian of what was originally French terminology: the French thymique should probably be rendered in English as *thymic* rather than *timic*, and the French *sème* corresponds to English *seme* and not *semi*. But these are very minor details. The elegance of Marrone's integration of more than half a century of textual theory makes this book an essential part of every semiotic library and an invaluable asset to students of the Franco-Italian (i.e., European) tradition of semiotics.

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