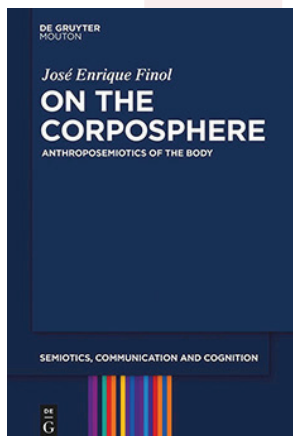


From the body to the body, through the body: steps to an embodied semiotics of culture

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On the Corposphere. Anthroposemiotics of the body

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For researchers without access to the Spanish language, this book, the English translation of *La corposfera. Antropo-semiótica de las cartografías del cuerpo* originally published in 2015, represents a true immersion in the thought and research of Venezuelan semiotician José Enrique Finol. Indeed, as Kalevi Kull states in the foreword, this book inaugurates, in the collection *Semiotics, Communication, and Cognition*, a vast translation project aimed at bringing work from other parts of semiotics to the English-speaking world on a global scale. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the work immediately displays three main characteristics.

The first concerns the semiotic transversality of the study object, the body in all its states, mediations, practices, and representations, and the transposability of the analytical methodology developed through various case studies. The second is what we could call Finol's theoretical 'ecumenism,' which he carries out by mobilizing and, more or less explicitly imbricating several semiotic approaches – Greimasian, socio-semiotic, pragmatic – which, in this way, can be addressed and exploited by an international audience.

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The third, on the other hand, refers to the socio-cultural singularity of the analyses conducted. Granted that the body, as an operator of semiosis, shapes the identity and the imaginaries of a given society and culture, it is all the more legitimate to claim a culturally and geographically situated point of view, as the case studies from the Venezuelan society testify. This cultural anchorage and the attention paid to the 'ritual' dimension of the bodily practices motivate the link between two fundamental terms of the volume, i.e., the corposphere as part of the Lotmanian semiosphere and the perspective of an anthroposemiotics of the body, which conceives the bodily phenomena as "part of history, a culture, and society, but also as the result of a show, as sense; a sense that, in turn, marks the society and culture to which it is actively articulated. We start, then, from the hypothesis that the body is not only an anthropological object, that is to say, a social and cultural object, but also a space full of meanings, full of senses that are based on the active semiotization of its morphology and of its totality" (p. 15).

The book consists of ten chapters in which theoretical proposals, exemplifications, and analyses alternate, to which is added a very rich bibliography (16 pages) with classic references from semiotics, but also from philosophy, sociology, literature, anthropology, and the arts, with particular attention to the Spanish-speaking production. The following presentation will focus on the global perspective that runs through the book and some of its variations.

Let us begin with an observation: the author undertook a considerable task, which the different chapters of the book reflect, namely the examination of the semiotic potential of the body in its wholeness, from the articulations of its anatomy (chapter 2) to its dramatizations (chapters 6 and 7), even its absences and camouflages (chapter 9) while passing by the spaces, the borders, and the bodily, imaginary, media, social and technological thresholds that it installs and which retroact on the experience and the practices of the subjects and the human collectives (chapters 3 and 4). This rich cartography of objects, practices, and disparate semiotic regimes builds up from four general articulations of the body: 1) "language: a system of signs," 2) "object: speeches about the body," 3) "space: scenario of other signs," 4) "reference: objects modeled by the body and whose mere existence *speaks*" (p. 18, emphasis in the text).

Thus, in the first chapter, this distinction allows Finol to distinguish three main levels of the human body (upper, middle, lower) and to thematize the axiological investments of which different parts of each level have been the subjects in both diachrony and synchrony. In particular, it examines the meanings and roles associated with the gaze, the torso, the navel, the hair, the hands, the feet, the sexual organs, and so on. Thus, continuity appears between ancestral meanings of a religious matrix and the transformations brought about by contemporary secular and social rites and practices. To this thematic distribution of the human morphology is added a differentiation between the interior and the exterior of the body, itself linked to a

distribution of values having a religious or scientific ground, and one concerning the opposition of gender between parts of the body and values traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity.

It is from the morphology and articulation of the body space that it is then possible to investigate the borders and the sexual, media, and imaginary limits of the bodies as the subjects experience the world lived by their bodies. In this perspective, to think in terms of *corposphere* means for Finol “to encompass all signs, codes, and processes of signification in which, in different ways, the body is present, acts, signifies” (p. 82). Thus, body and space are indissociable. Certain practices, like scarification, break the borders between the inside and outside of the body, whereas proxemics, the glance, clothing, and pornography (chapter 4) regulate the distance and the borders between bodies and between the body and the environment.

Therefore, since “the semiotic place is a space of transits between the possible meanings, the meanings under construction and the senses ultimately made. It is a process, contrary to what could be thought, multi-linear and not uni-linear” (p. 213); the different ways of observing the body (language, object, space, reference) are always integrated into bodily networks that manage, for example, the relations between presence and absence (chapter 11). In particular, the semiotician distinguishes three body networks: 1) ‘extero-corporal,’ concerning the relations between the body and the environment; 2) ‘inter-corporal,’ referring to the relations and the interactions between the bodies, and between a body and a non-body, 3) ‘intra-corporal,’ concerning the difference between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ body (cf. p. 215ff). In the cases of photography, sculpture, and of the interaction between bodies and objects represented or physically present in a given space – whether urban or of the image – this articulation allows distinguishing four types of anthroposemiotic categorizations of the bodies that Finol names as follows: a-phenomenical, para-phenomenical, pro-phenomenical, ultra-phenomenical (*ibidem*). In brief, these correspond to different modes of the presence of the bodies, in the meaning that Jacques Fontanille gives, which are the result of diverse ways of articulation between matters and energies, and which can thus give place to several figurative manifestations of the tensions and the adjustments between the flesh and the envelope (cf. Fontanille 2004).

In this respect, the case study of the *Misses* ritual (chapter 7) is emblematic because of the very nature of the rite which, “although modified and adapted to current times and media, continues to fulfill its main function of being an expression, and at the same time a model, of fundamental values of the society that generates them or of the means that they impose on societies” (p. 170). In this sense, the rite includes and crosses a space and operations which affect the body morphology, a techno-symbolic space that acts in the background of the sensory transformations of the bodies, and a practical and mediated space that remedies these same representations. The author

analyzes the syntax of the beauty contest, a major television event in Venezuela and neighboring countries. Throughout the different moments of the show, we can observe how an implicit conception of beauty, also linked to identity issues (national and/or transnational concerning the Caribbean identity), fabricates ultra-mediatized bodies through which one seeks to naturalize this same fabrication. Thus, investments of a political type can be grafted onto bodies that are now totally disembodied from their experiential thickness but fully integrated into the imaginary, social, and technological environment shared with other bodies.

Because of all these elements, we can affirm that Finol's work outlines a general model of the body and its semiosis, aiming at understanding, on the one hand, the properly somatic constraints before the construction of meaning and, on the other hand, the interactions experienced in several spaces of meaning that also refer to anthropological macro-configurations of sense-making.

Examining the meaning of certain gestures in social rites (chapter 6) is, in this sense, emblematic: the micro-modifications of the military salute allow the gesture to be transposed to other practices while keeping a semi-symbolic anchoring of their meaning. However, in the case of kinetic analysis or co-verbal or non-co-verbal deictics—as in the case of dance (cf. De Luca 2021)—the mode of semiosis of gestures does not seem to be reducible solely to the semi-symbolic mode. Algirdas Greimas (1968) had already noted the difficulty of segmentation and constitution of a gestural syntax precisely concerning the objective of identifying *cultural projects*, from which a typology of the various gesturalities (mythical, practical, mimetic, ludic) followed.

If we turn to the typology of the different declensions of the body and the examination of its morphology, we cannot fail to notice the resonance of this model with the *figures of the body* set up by Fontanille (2004). Finol does not mention them explicitly, but we can assume that this articulation is underlying his methodological approach. Indeed, the distinction between *body-flesh*, *body-envelope*, *body-point*, and *body-hollow* (*corps-chair*, *corps-enveloppe*, *corps-point*, *corps-creux*) encompasses both the morphology examined by Finol and how the opposition between inside and outside is thematized by other objects (clothing), media (the photographic image) and semiotic practices (rites). In the same way, the Venezuelan semiotician's observations about movement and spaces installed and experienced by the body can be related to the *fields of the sensible* (*champs du sensible*) identified by Fontanille as syntactic macro-configurations of the interaction between the body and the senses, without being limited to each of the senses taken singularly (touch, smell, hearing, vision, taste, movement). In this respect, exploring the variety of cultural valuations associated with the different declinations of poly-sensoriality would have been interesting. All the more so as they manifest themselves in practices (such as food or funeral rites) having a solid anthropological basis, which Finol does not fail to mention.

To conclude, the anthroposemiotic vocation of the book may be linked to recent proposals put forward in post-Greimasian semiotics (cf. Fontanille & Couégnas 2018). Taken together, the link between the semiosphere and the modes of world-making by human and non-human collectives can perhaps become clearer. Nevertheless, the original point of the book remains, in our opinion, precisely the idea of conceiving the body as a corposphere, which can only encourage analysis of the forms of translation or integration of culturally situated patterns in other socio-anthropological organizations.

Finally, we can only welcome the publication of this ambitious book concerning the fields of work that it opens for future research.

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