

## **On Insignificance**

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Le vrai paradoxe est là : à l'échelle cosmique notre durée de vie est insignifiante, et pourtant ce bref laps de temps où nous paraissions sur la scène du monde est le lieu d'où procède toute question de signifiante.

(Paul Ricoeur, "Le temps raconté", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1984 / 4, p. 440)

### **1. On riding a bus in Japan.**

Riding on a bus abroad can be an instructive semiotic experience. To foreigners with no Japanese, buses in Kyoto exude with mysterious prospects of significance, each of them a decoding challenge. To western travellers, messages in English will appeal first, like life vests in a shipwreck. Characters in *rōmaji*, as the Japanese call the Latin script, will also pop out here and there, albeit unfamiliarly interspaced and surrounded by a myriad of unknown signs. A sign is, indeed, a promise of signification. Most tourists on their way to one of the Kyoto temples have no knowledge of hiragana, katakana, or kanji — the three systems of writing that Japanese constantly intermingles —, yet they trust that those 'bizarre' arrangements of dots and lines are no simple decoration. Several contextual elements (the place and structure of their appearing; some previous, although merely evocative, familiarity with the Japanese script; and, above all, confidence that the inside of buses is arranged across cultures in a similar way, offering passengers orderly clues about their functioning) urge them

to look at those marks, believe them to be signs, and even pathetically try to decode them. Such is human beings' desperate relation with language: although there are no chances that they will understand, they cannot help seeking to understand, assuming that deciphering language will provide better control over the environment.

That is the case with buses. Tourists tend to avoid them, riding on subways as soon as they can, for the latter usually obey more globalized, standard rules, while the former follow local schemes whose decoding is an essential precondition. Where and when should I buy a ticket? How much does it cost and for what category of fare? What should I do with it? How could I realize when my stop is near and what should I do to signal the driver that I wish to get off? In Kyoto buses, messages in unknown scripts beckon the foreigner by their bright color, perspicuous font, and noticeable size. They all seem to imply: "I am important; read me; understand me; follow my instruction". Yet, to the ignorant foreigner's frustration, they remain like mysterious warnings from a remote, incomprehensible deity.

## **2. On learning a new language.**

Learning a new language is, indeed, frustrating, especially when it involves decoding a new system of writing. To most western visitors, the use of kanji logograms in Japanese is a major source of despondence. Yet, for the same reason, learning a new language is exhilarating. Riding on the same bus day after day and studying the language, one experiences over and over again the miraculous moment in which the sign keeps its promise and delivers its content. In the case of Japanese, the syllabic scripts of hiragana and katakana first reveal their message of sound and, therefore, communication. However, eventually kanji too cease to appear as jumbled collections of dots and lines and, even before releasing their precise semantic treasure, start looking as patterned configurations underpinned by logic. One does not know what such logic precisely is but is confident that there is one and can be learned.

Psychoanalysis might suggest that the bitter-sweet feeling of learning a new language is attractive for it brings one back to a sort of second childhood, in which language is increasingly absorbed as means to gain control over the environment and, above all, in the relation to one's

parents. After all, learning a new language might mean wanting to talk to one's parents again.

Voluntarily putting oneself in a situation of linguistic ignorance might just be the necessary pain that one has to endure in order to subsequently taste — through hard study of course — the sweet flavor of becoming, again, a linguistic self, embraced by a community of speakers. As polyglots know well, learning languages can be addictive, and the addiction might be related to this unconscious desire of both identity and acceptance.

However, it can be also argued, out of the psychoanalytical framework, that the pleasure of learning a new language is intimately related to the instinct of preserving one's life. Surrounded by unknown cultures, human beings keep trusting that what they experience all around is not mere noise but signs, whose deciphering will turn them from potential promises of meaning into actual messages. Learning how to read them will provide a firmer grasp over the environment and, as a consequence, prospects of longer and better survival. Just as each living being in the natural universe strives to preserve its material existence, so each semiotic being in the cultural semiosphere strives to preserve its symbolical existence, seeking to attach meaningfulness to the myriads of unknown signs — yet, still signs — that seem to pop out in the environment at all time. We don't understand anything, yet we believe that we might understand. We shall die, yet we want to survive.

### **3. On becoming aware of insignificance.**

There is a reverse to this parallel. As the instinct of survival prevents human beings to fully come to terms with their mortality, thus the semiotic instinct impedes them to entirely becoming aware of that which is, nevertheless, an absolutely central element of both individual and collective life: insignificance. The most disturbing aspect of this blindness is that it has affected not only laymen but also those who were supposed to be specialists in the field, that is, semioticians. It is as if doctors had studied, trained, taught, and worked for millennia in the illusion that the human body is immortal. Focusing on the sign as the natural object of their inquiry, semioticians have, since the very early pre-history of the discipline, cultivated a bias for the dawn of signification, a taste for the inaugural

moment in which reality shows itself as sign, promises to deliver a content, and finally releases it when the appropriate code is established. The entire semiotics of Umberto Eco can be read as an ode to this Sherlock Holmes' anthropology in which living consists in triumphing over the apparent meaninglessness of the environment through shrewd abductions, in mastering the signifying codes of society in order to correctly read and write messages (Eco and Sebeok 1983).

However, focusing on the elating moment in which meaninglessness becomes meaningfulness, the potential promise of the sign an actual delivery of content, and cooperation between texts and their ideal readers — perfectly integrated in their communities of interpreters — a hermeneutic standard, semiotics has guiltily overlooked something whose existential proportions are, nevertheless, monstrous. It has cultivated the illusion that meaningfulness is the rule of social life and insignificance its marginal exception. But is it thus? And can semiotics really answer the most urgent human questions about meaning, signification, and communication by adopting such a triumphant attitude? Can a doctor be of any use, when believing that death is actually an exception in human life and not the rule? Is not such an overconfident attitude toward insignificance, meaninglessness, misunderstanding, and noise as a macroscopic impediment to genuine, empathic, and ultimately useful understanding of society as it would be for a physician belittling the role of disease, infirmity, and pain in human life?

Unfortunately, most recent semiotic theory has been written by authors who knew very well how to communicate, as though the history of medicine had been written by physicians with no personal acquaintance with pain, malady, or death. And yet, the beginnings of the discipline should have been of better advice: on the one hand, a genial American philosopher, who died impoverished and forsaken; on the other hand, an equally genial Swiss linguist, with few disciples and a quixotic passion for anagrams. Perhaps it is time to take insignificance seriously.

#### **4. A typology of meaninglessness: undecipherable, incomprehensible, and uncanny.**

First, insignificance and meaninglessness are not the same, although these words, as the corresponding adjectives — “insignificant” and “meaningless” — can sometimes be interchangeably

used. Meaningless is that which has no meaning. It can be said of something whose meaning one fails to grasp and understand or it can be predicated of something whose meaning one is not in agreement with. In the first case, something in the environment appears as a sign, yet it refuses to deliver its promise of signification. Kanji instructions on Japanese buses are meaningless to most foreign tourists. Although contextual circumstances contribute to identify them as signs to both locals and visitors, the latter are unable to go beyond their potentially signifying expression and access the actual content that such expression stands for. Therefore, kanji are subjectively meaningless and not objectively so. That is why, while being meaningless to some receivers, they do not cease for that matter to be signs. Should foreigners study hard enough, their perception of meaninglessness would turn into one of meaningfulness, giving rise to the experience of semiotic awareness evoked earlier. In this first acceptance, “meaningless” is a synonym of “undecipherable”.

According to a second acceptance, “meaningless” can be said of a sign whose content one understands but fails to connect to a more encompassing logic. Another aspect of Japanese buses that often puzzles foreigners is the behavior of drivers. Every time a new driver enters the bus, he or she (but mostly he) takes off his or her hat and bows in front of passengers. Most foreigners are perfectly able to relate this gestural expression with a semantic content of deference. From this point of view, the gesture is not undecipherable to them. Its code resembles that of many analogous gestural codes one comes across around the globe, where the lowering of some parts of the body is used as a postural or gestural expressive device to mean subjection. However, foreign visitors to Japan are likely to find this gesture incomprehensible, which is the second facet of meaninglessness. In this case, tourists do not ignore *what* the sign stands for but that *whom* the sign stands to. Drivers enter, bow, nobody bows back (except some awkward foreign tourist), nobody among the locals even pays attention when drivers bow, yet Japanese drivers perform this gesture over and over again with no remissness. Why do they do it, foreigners wonder? That is meaningless!

Of course that too is meaningless subjectively, not objectively. The fact itself that the gesture is recognized as such, that is, as a sign, indicates that what makes it appear meaningless is not an intrinsic quality but an external factor, namely, the tourist’s lack of cultural knowledge. In the first example, kanji instructions were meaningless to foreigners qua undecipherable, for they ignored the

linguistic code relating those patterns of dots and lines with a precise semantic content. Study of the Japanese language, as it was pointed out earlier, would turn meaninglessness into its contrary. In the second example, bowing gestures are meaningless to foreigners not qua undecipherable but qua incomprehensible. Foreigners ignore the cultural code relating those gestural patterns not with a precise semantic content (that is obvious: deference) but with a precise *pragmatic* content. Increased familiarity with the Japanese culture will lead tourists to turn this meaninglessness too into its opposite. They will understand, to start with, that entering an enclosed space in the Japanese culture entails a different range of semantic connotations and, as a consequence, pragmatic requirements than in most western cultures. Spatial thresholds work differently in Japan, and both verbal and gestural formulae must adapt to this different sense of separation.

Peirce's legendary definition of the sign implicitly supports both ways of construing the meaning of meaninglessness seen thus far. If the sign is "something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity", a receiver can fail to associate the 'something' of the sign with the 'something else' it stands for (meaninglessness as indecipherability); or he or she can fail to understand whom the something of the sign stands for (meaningless as incomprehensibility).

This differentiation allows one to better specify the 'contextual circumstances' thanks to which a sign is recognized and received as such although it does not yet fully deliver its promise of content. In the first example, foreign tourists ignore that which kanji instructions stand for but they trust that they stand to someone, that is, local passengers. That is why they still consider them as signs although kanji instructions are meaningless (undecipherable) to them. In the second example, foreign tourists do not know whom salutation ceremonies stand to but they are confident that they stand for something. They are meaningless (incomprehensible) to them but do not cease for that matter to appear as signs.

What happens, however, when both what a sign stands for and whom it stands to are ignored? A third example, always about Japanese buses, might help elucidate this third, even more complicated circumstance. Can a sign be recognized as such, that is, as a promise of meaning, although one ignores both the semantic and the pragmatic code of its functioning as a sign? Riding on Japanese buses at night, one sees often bits of hemp string knotted to the railings. To most if not all foreigners, such bits

look meaningless both in the sense of ‘undecipherable’ (it is not clear what the strings stand for) and in that of ‘incomprehensible’ (it is not clear whom the strings stand to). However, something in such bits of hemp string will still qualify and present them as signs, that is, as promise of signification. A recurrent bus passenger, indeed, will soon realize that: 1) only bits of hemp string appear, not of other materials; 2) they are always knotted around the same railings; 3) they are always knotted in the same way. Thus, although foreign passengers do not know either what these bits of hemp string stand for or whom they stand to, they will start realizing that their appearance in the world is *patterned*. Bits of hemp string on Japanese buses are meaningless not because they are undecipherable, and not because they are incomprehensible, but because they are both.

That is the third definition of “meaningless”: something whose both semantic and pragmatic functioning is ignored is meaningless in the sense of ‘uncanny’. This acceptance too is inherently contained in Peirce’s definition of the sign. A sign is not only something that stands for something else and not only something that stands to someone but also something that stands “in some capacity”. When a foreign passenger repeatedly comes across bits of hemp string knotted to the railings of Japanese buses, these bits look to him/her not only meaningless qua undecipherable and not only meaningless qua incomprehensible but also meaningless qua uncanny because of their both indecipherability and incomprehensibility. Yet, they still look like signs. They still prompt a subtle, mysterious, even disquieting promise of signification, which results exactly from their patterned nature: bits of hemp string do not appear in whatever material, shape, or position, ergo they must signify something. In other words, the fact that only some aspects of their material existence were recurrently selected, while some other aspects were discarded, suggests that such selection is likely to act as the perceptible expression of the capacity wherein a sign stands for something to someone. Passengers ignore the ‘something’ as they ignore the ‘someone’, yet they surmise that those bits of hemp string result from a promise of signification, a promise so feeble, in this case, that only its abstract capacity is beheld. Yet, that is sufficient for the sign’s foreshadow to appear. Assiduous frequentation of Japanese buses will allow the puzzled passenger to realize that those bits of hemp strings are actually relics of the leaflets that are tied to the bus’ railings for distribution early in the morning and are mostly all gone at night time, taken away by other passengers. The bits of hemp

strings are, therefore, indexical relics of this practice of leafleting, customary in Japanese public transport.

If in the first example meaninglessness was turned into its opposite through familiarization with the linguistic code behind the sign and if in the second example that happened through acquaintance with the cultural code behind the sign, in this third example, empirical observation allows the passenger to associate a potential signifying capacity with an actual meaning. Only repeatedly taking the same bus at different times will turn the uncanny into the familiar or even into the banal.

## **5. Types of meaninglessness and types of signs.**

To resume: a sign can be meaningless because its semantic content is ignored but not its pragmatic functioning (meaninglessness as indecipherability); it can be meaningless because, vice versa, its pragmatic functioning is ignored but not its semantic content (meaninglessness as incomprehensibility: the colloquial expression “it makes no sense” also captures this version of meaninglessness); or it can be meaningless because both its semantic content and its pragmatic functioning are ignored, but not its capacity to act as a sign (meaninglessness as uncanniness).

This tripartition does not overlap Peirce’s equally tripartite semiotic typology but combines with it in interesting ways. Arguably, a specific sphere of meaninglessness predominates in each typology of sign. Symbols can be meaningless qua undecipherable, but they can hardly be thus qua incomprehensible or uncanny. Recognizing a sign as a symbol, indeed, is tantamount to implying that it must stand to someone although that which it stands for is ignored (that is the case of kanji instructions on Japanese buses). Similarly, recognizing a sign as an icon is equivalent to implying that it must stand for something although whom it stands to is ignored (that is the case of bowing ceremonies on Japanese buses). Finally, recognizing a sign as an index amounts to implying that it must stand for something to someone in some capacity, although both the ‘something’ it stands for and the ‘someone’ it stands to are ignored (that is the case of bits of hemp strings on Japanese buses).



## 6. Meaninglessness *versus* insignificance.

However, indecipherability, incomprehensibility, and uncanniness are not insignificance.

Insignificance is something else. A sign can be meaningless because one fails to access its semantic content, pragmatic functioning, or both. However, a sign cannot be insignificant. That would be a contradiction in terms. In order for a sign to be insignificant, it should deny itself, that is, it should deny its own nature of sign. It should appear as something about which one does not only ignore what it stands for, or whom it stands to, but also the capacity in which it stands. An insignificant sign is a sign that stands for nothing, to nobody, in no respect or capacity. It is a non-sign. It is a thing.

The history of modern semiotics, especially from the 1960s on, has constantly overlooked the possibility of such a non-sign, of such a thing. Eminent semioticians have emphatically hammered into the vulgate of the discipline that everything can be studied as a sign (Eco 1976). It does not matter, indeed, that a sign stands to no interpreter as long as it can stand to an interpretant, that is, as long as it harbors potentiality for interpretation. Nothing in the entire universe is irremediably insignificant (Goethe), since everything can, given the right circumstances, become part of the joyous chain of unlimited semiosis, of the multifarious snake that enfolds the whole universe and bestows upon it the sparkle of intelligibility. From this point of view, “insignificant” is nothing but synonym of “meaningless”: it is just a matter of time, dedication, scrutiny, and each object in the world will be awakened from its apparent insignificance and given a place in the splendid realm of human signification.

However, is this really the way in which human beings experience meaning in their valley of tears? Are they really surrounded by a universe of potentially titillating stimuli, each the key to a new adventure of knowledge and interpretation? It is difficult not to suspect that, behind such iridescent conception of how signification works, lies the bias of scholars who looked at the matter from a particularly privileged point of view, from the perspective granted by an exceptionally gifted, exceptionally curious, and exceptionally inquisitive mind. Semiotics has long extolled the fictional

character of Sherlock Holmes as the champion of the discipline, as the herald of abduction, and as the epitome of the tremendous perspicacity of the human mind in the whirlwind of semiosis. It is perhaps time to suggest that most human beings are not Sherlock Holmes. They are Watson. The world to them is a platitude. They themselves are a platitude to the world. Most of what happens in their life is not simply meaningless, in the sense that it is waiting for a struck of Holmesian genius to be turned into a source of meaningful insights. Most of what happens in their life is beyond meaninglessness. It is irredeemably insignificant. It is not just waiting for the right interpretant to associate it with a semantic content, and a pragmatic value, with a linguistic code or a cultural semiosphere. It is just a thing. It is a thing that stands for nothing, a thing that stands to no one, in no respect or capacity. It is a black hole in the supposed entelechy of the universe, a blind corner, a mute sound, a transparency that nobody looks through, a letter that nobody will ever read not only because it is written in a language spoken by none and not only because it is enclosed in a bottle that will never be opened but also and above all because nobody ever will recognize it as a letter. It is insignificance. It is that which not even the cleverest semiotician can talk about. It is that which the exuberant liveliness of gaudy scholars instinctively suppresses, covering it with fantasies of encyclopedic gushing. If life is semiosis and semiosis is life, as equally happy-go-lucky bio-semioticians repeat like a mantra, then insignificance is death; death human beings live by.

## **7. Insignificance matters.**

Two questions: if insignificance does not signify, how is it possible to recognize it? And why should we care?

### *7.1. Awakening into significance.*

Insignificance can be recognized through contrast with significance. The contrast can be perceived both ways. On the one hand, there is the passage from insignificance to significance. Let's go back on a Japanese bus. Most foreign visitors to Japan will be struck by how often locals fall asleep in public

transport. Buses, metro, trains, no matter: the foreigner will be often surrounded by Japanese people who drowse, doze, nap, sink in their seats, lean, slant, slope, and then miraculously awake at their stop. Initially, most tourists laugh at that, as when human beings are confronted with that which they do not understand and that, nevertheless, concern them. Less superficial beholders will hypothesize that Japanese people work too hard, get up too early, or spend too much time in public transport. However, in some cases, this bizarre experience will give rise to a passage from insignificance to significance, one that it would have been impossible without the anthropological experience of traveling into another culture. The passage does not consist simply in interpretation of the Japanese habit of sleeping in public transport. That would be on a par with transition from meaninglessness (in the sense of incomprehensibility) to meaningfulness, through relation of such habit with a certain aspect of the Japanese semiosphere.

On the contrary, in this case, passage from insignificance to significance entails a much more startling revelation about what public space in one's non-Japanese culture is. Seeing how easily and how commonly Japanese people fall asleep in public transport, indeed, will lead some foreigners to think: "I would never feel comfortable doing that in the metro of Paris, or on a bus in Rome, or on Madrid's suburban trains". Japanese people fall asleep in public transport not only because they must, as naïve interpretations suggest (they work too hard, etc.) but also because they can. They can for they trust their public space. They trust their society. They trust their fellow Japanese. They trust them to the point that falling asleep in public, at the mercy of other gazes and intentions, does not worry them. That is the passage from insignificance to significance that such anthropological observation leads to. Upon traveling on a bus in Japan, the wake that characterizes riding on public transport in other countries will cease to be insignificant; the alertness by which exhausted passengers struggle to keep vigilant will stop appearing like a natural behavior and look for what it is: a significant choice, the result of a whole social system, the quotidian, banal, and for that reason even more pernicious outcome of a long and complex history of violence and injustice, of centuries of hunger, poverty, exploitation, crime, all weighing on the shoulders of each passenger of the metro of Paris, Rome, London, Madrid, all whispering to their ears: "don't fall asleep, it's dangerous".

That is the passage from insignificance to significance. It is the moment in which the color of the air starts to show itself. It is the instant in which voices theretofore unheard begin to whisper their message of truth. It is the institution of a new code, one that breaks the muteness of second nature and reveals it as the burden of history. Traveling frequently entails the adventure of turning meaninglessness into meaningfulness through familiarization with an unknown cultural code; however, a rarer and much more enlightening outcome of the anthropological experience of traveling is not that of learning or discovering such outward code but that of instituting a new inward code, able to bestow new intelligibility not upon the culture of the other, but upon one's culture. From that moment on, being awake in public transport will not seem so natural anymore; its opposite will not appear as so laughable either.

Nevertheless, revelatory passages from insignificance to significance are rare. They arise in circumstances of travel or anthropological exploration, which are activities precluded to most. To most human beings, the violence of public space, as well as hunger, poverty, dirtiness, oppression, etc. are not simply meaningless. That would be already something. It would mean that, given the appropriate conditions, a search could be launched in order to find the cause of the curse and eradicate it. The problem is that, to most human beings, pain, hunger, poverty, dirtiness, oppression, and violence are insignificant. And they are insignificant not as much for their beholders as for those who suffer from them. They hurt but naturally thus; they hurt like cold. For the child who has starved all his life, or the woman who has been beaten since she was a teenager, or the worker oppressed and exploited since she or he was an infant, pain is not a semiotic habit. It is an insignificant, mute condition of existence with no alternative horizon. That is one of the most serious moral mistakes of modern semiotics: thinking that semiotic habits are innocent per se qua outcome of the unceasingly semiotic labor of a community of interpreters. Semiotic habits not only are not necessarily innocent, they are also mostly blind, meaning that when they establish themselves they offer no access to the liberating activity of semiotic interpretation. Only comfortable scholars could have thought that unlimited semiosis is destined to crystallize in the most suitable, most rational, and most equitable habits a community is capable of.

Linguistic anthropology has long established the fruitful distinction between –etic and –emic perspectives (Pike 1967). Bizarrely, semiotics mostly ignores it. To most semioticians, semiotic habits are the close toward which the rationality of the functioning of the sign naturally leads unlimited semiosis. When semioticians analyze a semiotic habit, they see it as the best response a community of interpreters was able to give to the puzzle of signification. Such perspective, oblivious to the anthropological distinction between –emic and –etic, fails to realize that semiotic habits are actually semiotic only from an external point of view. It is from the external point of view of the analyst, indeed, that they can be seen as alive, as cultural constructs that emerge from the tentative configuration of a code, from its progressive establishment, until its solidification into stable sign, resisting the fibrillations of history as long as an ideal community of interpreters agrees on its rationality. From an internal point of view, instead, semiotic habits are not semiotic anymore. They are insignificant. They are not too different from religious beliefs, or routines, or any other example of human predicament or conduct in which cultural choice is absorbed as second nature, as unquestionable standard. That is why it would be too generous to say that our semiotic habits are meaningless, in the sense that we do not know what they stand for (they are undecipherable); whom they stand to (they are incomprehensible); or in what capacity they stand (they are uncanny). More disquietingly, our semiotic habits are insignificant, because they are the bio-cultural mechanism through which social choices transmogrify into natural selves. Thinking that such transmogrifying is always the best possible or thinking that a struck of genius could shake it at any time from its semiotic torpor into the revived fizziness of unlimited semiosis is frankly immoral.

The space of public transport in most European cities is unsafe. One could not sleep in it. One can sleep in one's car, or at home, or in one's office in certain cases, and also in such places diminished alertness would sometimes entail danger. Yet, Europeans do not miss sleeping in public. They do not know it. They do not think about it. The relation between sleep and public space is insignificant to them, at least as long as their socio-semiotic habits are not revealed as such through encounter with a different civilization, in which the same relation is shown, on the opposite, as significant. Then one realizes not only that a different form of public space is possible but also that this alternative form is preferable. One becomes aware of the insignificant violence one was inflicted upon. This is how

semiotic habits work: not as refined encyclopedic sedimentations that communities distill through history by means of placid academic dialogue and that individuals absorb upon probing reality through alternative interpretants. Semiotic habits are like little pebbles in one's shoes: it is only getting rid of them that one realizes how better walking without them is and might have been even before. They are like a pain so engrained in one's body that one forgets about it while still excruciatingly suffering from it. They are a chronic disease one gets accustomed to.

Affirming that semiotic habits tend to become insignificant from an internal perspective is not tantamount to advocating the utopia of life in accordance with unbridled unlimited semiosis. Such option is precluded to most human beings and viable only to some privileged individuals (artists, for instance). On the contrary, reflecting on the insignificance of semiotic habits is meant to subvert the idea of their intrinsic rationality. It is not true that a community of interpreters always selects the best interpretants as the pragmatic close to the chain of unlimited semiosis, as it is not true that such close is always temporary, open to reactivation at any moment, should the community believe that alternative interpretants offer a better solution to the riddle of shared meaning. Conversely, one could redefine violence as the persistence, in a community of interpreters, of semiotic habits that, while invisible for most members of the community, inflict suffering on some of them to the advantage of others. Slavery too was a semiotic habit. It too was selected as the best suitable representation of humankind from a chain of alternatives in which it crystallized as close and final interpretant. It gave rise to mentalities, behaviors, trade, and jurisdiction. It inflicted unspeakable pain. Yet it was insignificant to most. It was not meaningless. It was not undecipherable. It was neither incomprehensible nor uncanny. It was part of (second) nature. Yet it was monstrous, and when some courageous minds were able to point at it, and fought against it, and finally outlawed it, then humanity realized how intolerable it had been to turn such a choice into a habit. Perhaps, one day people will realize with the same dismay how blind it was to have people die while attempting to cross national frontiers, or how intolerably invisible a semiotic habit it was to slaughter other animals to feed human beings, and so on and so forth.

Semioticians are not primarily called to fight violence and injustice in the world; yet, they are not called either to turn into the detached bards of the rationality of semiosis, developing

sophisticated theories to justify the status quo. Only from a privileged position in history, society, and life can one advocate for the spontaneous reasonableness of semiosis. As soon as one steps out from this coddled vantage point, one realizes that human beings often turn violent interpretations into semiotic habits, share them as communities of interpreters, turn them into moral rules and legal norms, inflict pain through them, sponsor intellectuals who depict these semiotic habits as the reasonable outcome of human interpretive rationality, and ultimately create a realm in which violence, injustice, and suffering perpetuate themselves as second nature: unquestioned, mute, and insignificant. Semioticians should show that not all that is significant is right and that not all that is right is significant. They should reveal the insignificant pain of humanity.

### *7.2. Sinking into insignificance.*

However, insignificance can be revealed not only through the passage from insignificant to significant, as in realizing the violence of European public space while riding on a Japanese bus, but also in the symmetric passage from significance to insignificance.

Finding new meaning is always somehow thrilling. It is thrilling when the undecipherable is decoded through intuiting what a sign stands for. It is thrilling when the incomprehensible is understood through grasping whom a sign stands to. It is thrilling when the uncanny is recognized as the capacity in which a sign stands. Yet, the most thrilling semiotic experience of all is when a new sign is born. A new sign that one would ignore it would stand for something else, to someone, and in some capacity. It is the awakening of the world as language. It is the turning of the thing into being. It is the realization that nature has yet another false bottom, a secret chest in which culture is hidden. The euphoria of the discovery is unrelated to the actual semantic content or pragmatic value of the sign. On the one hand, one can painfully discover the insignificance of violence as matrix of signs theretofore invisible, such as the nervousness of the body in public space. On the other hand, one can exultantly uncover joyful insignificance, for instance when realizing the value of silence, or that of having one's body surrounded by natural sounds. In both cases, an innate instinct bestows upon human beings a positive chemistry when they are able to turn yet another mute corner of the world into language, no matter what it says. One could argue, as a counterargument, that obnubilation too is a pleasure;

sinking into indistinctiveness; becoming a machine; perceiving the world as thing and not as language; living an existence with no alternatives; embracing necessity. Yet, that is a dangerous trend. It is a perilous addiction, whose moral entailments stand out when one analyzes insignificance not as the point of departure of moral awakening (the realization that a better world is possible) but as the point of arrival of moral sleepiness (the internalization of the idea that one lives in the only possible world). Furthermore, if one develops a taste for sinking into insignificance, it means that he or she is already unable to perceive its thresholds. When human beings start enjoying acting like robots, they do not act like robots anymore; they are robots.

Indeed, as long as one keeps faith to one's humanity, that is, to one's bio-cognitive endowment, one cannot be content with becoming a machine. Every time we realize that what we do or say stands for nothing, to nobody, and in no capacity, we should feel a sharp pain. We should feel an unstoppable longing for escape. We should change. That is not only a moral but also a bio-cognitive imperative. If we accept to live surrounded not by language and meaning but by mere things, then we are abdicating our role in the evolution. We are regressing through the history of the species. Turning the environment into significance is that which grants human beings a better control over it. One might choose to relinquish this capacity for the sake of the utopia of a mystical reunion with nature. However, in most cases, when human beings are pushed to sink into insignificance, to do and say things they do not know what they stand for, to whom, and in what capacity, they are transformed into things not out of their own utopian initiative, but so that other human beings might use them as 'human tools'. Deep down, when some human beings plunge into insignificance, some other human beings profit from it.

What lesson can be drawn from riding on a Japanese bus about the relation between significance and insignificance? This time, it must be a personal lesson. The reason for which the present article adopts Japanese buses as source of semiotic examples is that its author has been recently working as visiting professor at the University of Kyoto for one sabbatical semester (riding on many Japanese buses back and forth from home to office as a consequence).

A sabbatical can be an enchanted period for an academic. Suddenly, he or she is granted the possibility to spend long hours in libraries, archives, and laboratories; meeting new colleagues; having



long, philosophical discussions with them over exotic meals; imparting new knowledge to attentive students; secluding oneself in a little study, unencumbered by too many personal items, in order to read, write, and, above all, think... But wait a minute: is not that exactly that which a university professor should be paid for doing all the time, during his or her entire career? Are these not exactly the normal occupations of a scholar?

Those, indeed, are the activities that should make the life of a scholar significant, meaning that he or she exists in the firm conviction that what he or she does stands for something relevant, to someone who cares about it, in a capacity that is the best one given the personal vocation, training, and skills of the scholar. During a successful sabbatical, a university professor revels in significance. He or she cultivates the trust that his or her efforts are not vain, that they contribute to a better humanity.

However, such feeling of significance is in sharp contrast with the predicament most university professors go through at home, working in their own institutions. Of course, some universities are better than others, some give researchers more freedom than others, more opportunities for scholarly encounter and socialization, wider and quieter office space, etc. Nevertheless, that is not the point. A sabbatical is normally destined to be a scholar's better experience, no matter from which institution he or she comes from, and no matter in which institution he or she lands. That is the case because to a scholar a sabbatical period normally means extracting him- or her-self from most of that part of university life that is insignificant.

During the last financial and economic crisis, Italian universities have introduced a complex system of evaluation and self-evaluation on multiple levels as a means to progressively rationalize and eliminate unproductive practices and behaviors. Evaluation and self-evaluation are certainly useful in every field of human activity. However, as it is frequently the case in Italy or countries with a similar cultural attitude, this originally Nordic framework of self-scrutiny has been imported only in its form and not in its substance. As Director of a Masters program, the author of the present paper must collect every year a long series of statistic data, compile them into a pre-formatted report, assess the situation of the program, and formulate promises for its improvement. All that looks great in appearance. In reality: statistic data are often fake or at least collected in such a poor way that they are totally unrepresentative of the actual state of the program; focusing exclusively on numbers, the

report fails to capture that which really matters, that is, the quality of teaching and research in the program; there are no resources to effectively carry on that which is promised in the report; and, worst of all, nobody really reads these reports, except those bureaucrats who content themselves with controlling their formal impeccability. As a consequence, this activity of evaluation and self-evaluation 1) stands for nothing, since it does not really represent the status of the program; 2) stands to nobody, since nobody, neither student or professor or institution leader will take it seriously; and 3) stands in no capacity, since it fails to select significant aspects of the object it is meant to signify. Yet, collating these reports is compulsory and takes an awful amount of time, a very precious time that could be spent doing more significant things, like reading a book or talking with a student.

If life is semiosis, and if significance is the destiny of the species, then academic bureaucracy is death. Compiling insignificant reports is like dying; it is turning into a robot, into a machine, into a thing. It is abdicating that which scholars treasure the most, that is, an amorous relation to language, in order to become the automata of an insignificant way of life. Moreover, as it was suggested earlier, this transition from significance into insignificance is not innocent. Every time human cognitive energy is diverted from a significant relation to the environment into an insignificant one, someone or somewhat is using that energy as a tool, as a device of stupidity. In the case of academic bureaucracy, hypotheses on where such exploitation might lie abound. Who is benefiting from the fact that time of significance is subtracted from the life of professors and students in order to satisfy the hungry demands of bureaucracy?

## **8. Conclusion.**

Reflecting on the semiotics of insignificance is important not only in order to answer this question, but also so as to realize that academic bureaucracy is just the tip of the iceberg of semiotic alienation. That which makes most present-day university professors so acutely nervous — in a way that seems incomprehensible, laughable, or even contemptible from an external point of view — is that most of them can still realize the difference between significance and insignificance. There are, of course,

suicidal scholars who embrace bureaucracy and even shovel it into their colleagues' free time, but fortunately they are still an exception, and probably have long ceased being scholars or were never good at it. Most university professors, on the contrary, still realize how luminous their life becomes when they can study in-depth a topic before discussing it with their students; when they can read a new book; when they can take the time to craft a sentence which will survive them in an article. And they can also feel the violence of being obliged to perform insignificant tasks. Feeling the nervousness of the passage from significance to insignificance is healthy, as it is healthy of any human being who realizes that things are not as they should be, and that they could be better. Protest, migration, philosophy, they all in different ways point to the same blessed inability to grow accustomed to pain, suffering, injustice, and exploitation.

However, for most human beings, this instinct of semiotic survival has long gone. They have been battered into insignificant forms of life, whose insignificance they cannot even realize any longer, to the benefit of more significant lives. In the 1960s, utopians would dream of a world in which there would be no work without creativity, and no creativity without work. In the present-day conditions, asking for every human being to be given the chance of leading a creative life is probably not only fanciful but also sinful. It is somehow shadowing the awareness that most human lives today are not only uncreative but they are also insignificant. They consist in a quotidian burning out of time and energy in accomplishing activities about which one completely ignores what they stand for, whom they stand to, and in what capacity.

Semiotics must denounce the insignificance of human life and also stigmatize with equal vehemence all its placebos. People are starving from significance: they long for it in the microscopic thrills of egotistic satisfaction that they receive from instants of exposure in social networks; they yearn for it when they sink in the irrationality of 'strong thoughts', embracing fundamentalism, superstition, and obscurantism; they strive for it through falling for the lure of consumption; they hanker after that golden existential moment in which they will finally believe that their effort mean something, mean something to someone, and mean something to someone in some capacity.

Semiotics cannot and must not teach the meaning of life; however, it can and it must warn about the death of meaning.

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