

Massimo Leone: digital communication, ontology and semiotics

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Interview with MASSIMO LEONE^a

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IN THIS INTERVIEW given one day after the lecture “The face of nature: a semiotic analysis” at the Department of Public Relations, Advertising and Propaganda and Tourism, at the University of São Paulo (CRP-USP), Massimo Leone, professor at Università di Torino, has shared his research trajectory and forays into the digital environment with semiotics. PhD in Art History and master in text and image studies, the Italian researcher studies everyday life in his several articles and projects, which are divided between East and West and has recently been supported by the European Research Council (Consolidator Grant). In his contributions to communication, he reinforces methodological commitment, limits of ethics in discussions on artificial intelligence and the use of images, as well as human face’s meaning transformations based on new technologies and ways of thinking about ontology in this context. Thus, he combines work with large amounts of data and qualitative analysis, which provides a descriptive and interpretative overview of the phenomena studied.

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MATRIZES: Your academic background involves communication, semiotics, art history, religious studies and other areas. How does this path contribute to your work as a researcher and university professor? What is your analysis of interdisciplinary and post-disciplinary contributions to communication?

Massimo Leone: One of the fundamental elements in my intellectual life is curiosity; since I was a child, I am curious about everything. When I had to choose my college degree, semiotics seemed perfect to discipline my curiosity without abandoning it, using this quality to find meanings common patterns in different phenomena that mattered to my mind. I have

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v13i3p129-135>

begun to learn about semiotics by reading Umberto Eco's books, as well as Omar Calabrese—a very charismatic semiotic professor at the University of Siena in Italy—, who deeply fascinated me and led me to specialize in art semiotics.

Since I was a boy, I have been fascinated by the baroque churches of my city, Lecce, in southern Italy. In my master's thesis I used semiotics to better understand the meaning of religious paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries. I realized quite early I could not interpret these works solely with semiotics, so I also became interested in their historical context, learning art history in Switzerland with Victor Ieronim Stoichita, one of my masters, and history of religions and theology at Sorbonne. These three dimensions—semiotics, the study of visual cultures, and the analysis of religious and ideological thinking—are almost always present in my research work. Communication is, in essence, an interdisciplinary area that requires multiple approaches to understand the objects of study. However, communication studies do not always show itself that way.

MATRIZes: In your studies we see the everyday life with the cultural semiotics point of view. In this sense, how do you understand semiotics place nowadays? The triadic contact with reality from Peirce's (1977) perspective, Lotman's (1996) modeling systems, or the counterculture perspective exposed by Umberto Eco (1983) also reflect this interest. How can semiotics be useful to think the changes and instabilities of current time and space?

ML: Semiotics began to succeed as a discipline by studying precisely popular culture and everyday life, for example with Roland Barthes' (1975) investigation of "myth today" or Umberto Eco's (1975) analysis of mass culture. At that time, academics did not study these phenomena because they seemed unworthy of university interest. Today, many "noble" disciplines study everyday life, including philosophy. Then the need for differentiation and positioning of its method arises from semiotics, as recent contributions I made in this field show (Leone, 2015, 2019). Semiotics has many advantages: the possibility to study digital culture by its texts, for example. Traditional sociology cannot describe the network users with its traditional methodological tools, because the digital sphere generalized anonymity is an obstacle to it; anthropology cannot apply its constitutive method either, that is, the participant observation. Semiotics, in its different subdisciplinary tendencies, and especially the semiotics of culture, can analyze texts that circulate in digital sphere to understand the fundamental ideological ways of contemporary society.

MATRIZES: There are many Italian semioticians, but surely Umberto Eco is the greatest reference. Could you talk about the author's main contributions to the current semiotics?

ML: Umberto Eco was a genius. His most important contribution was to propose a balanced conception of the meaning interpretation, based on the idea of interpreters' community. In the first period of his intellectual trajectory, Eco provided a greater opening for the text as a work, in which the reader's participation is essential. In the second period, against Peirce's deconstructionist interpretation, proposed by Derrida (1974), and mainly against his revisionist uses, Eco (1995) emphasized the need to understand meaning not only as a space of freedom, but also as a boundary field. The interpreters' community must integrate individual interpretation, determining the latter's reasonability horizon. One of the major problems of today's communication is precisely the impossibility to form a global community in the digital world, with the consequence of an often meaningless interpretation of the texts circulating in it.

MATRIZES: One of your articles (Leone, 2018a) resumes Eco's idea on the possibility to analyze everything that can be used to lie. From this point of view, how can we reflect on the importance of image in the digital environment and the relationship between communication research and semiotics?

ML: Umberto Eco's (1976) comical definition is very effective: everything that has an alternative can be an object of intentionality and, therefore, a source of meaning. The genetic code, for example, is not a semiotic element because we cannot lie with it. Our face is a semiotic element, though some features of it, such as the blush of shame, for example, cannot be concealed. In fact, Umberto Eco (1976) has defined semiotics as the discipline that studies everything that *can be used* to lie, not what *must be used* to lie. What is used to lie can also be helpful in telling the truth. Therefore, semiotics is not worried about the truth of communication, which is a topic for logicians and historians, but about its verisimilitude, that is, the way in which cultures produce ideologies and rhetoric of truth. The most important point in the semiotic study of contemporary communication is not the finding that digital texts often communicate ontologically false content, but the hypothesis that the ideology close to these contents is changing: the problem is not that we believe in what is false, but we no longer care about the truth status of what we believe.

MATRIZes: With your experience in different countries and resuming the relationship between communication and semiotics, how do you see the differences in semiotics thought and practiced in the West and East? How do you analyze the development of semiotics in Latin America and Brazil?

ML: Surely there are many differences. Issues such as the image research regulation in the West, specifically in the European Union, and in the East, influence the researcher's decisions. In addition, semiotics produces an intersubjective metalanguage about reality, but it is not an exact science: it is influenced by its cultural context and historical background. In Latin American semiotics, for example, the social and political issue is fundamental. European versions of semiotics are usually more descriptive; semiotics compromised with their positioning, as it was in the 1970s, are rarer. Personally, I really admire the *engagée* dimension of Latin semiotics, although sometimes it can be overly influenced by social polarization. It is essential for researchers to keep a certain distance from their investigation object, to indicate in their work the likely outcomes of ideological choices without mentioning which would be the most appropriate. Researchers should not work for one of these options to dominate, but for whichever dominates to be a fully enlightened choice. The contemporary political problem is not "what" we choose, but the fact that we do not truly know what one chooses.

MATRIZes: Recently, you have had a research project supported by European Union, dedicated to investigating face and identity in digital culture. These developments can be found in the article "The semiotics of the face in the digital era" (Leone, 2018b), but I also noticed that your face is replaced by Giuseppe Arcimboldo's work on social media. Could you tell us more about the origin of this project and the relationship between image and identity, as well as the theoretical-methodological frameworks used in this work?

ML: Face has always been my obsession as a researcher. Everything about the face fascinates me. Face is one of the most important interfaces of social interaction. When my father died, my mother, my brother and I had to choose a picture for his tombstone. A lifetime summarized in one photo! This brought me to reflect on the relationship between face and meaning, and I decided to focus on the changes that characterize the meaning of face in digital society. I publish many images of my face on digital networks, which is also a way to experience people's reactions to the different formats of representation. In my Facebook profile I use a modern version of a painting by Giuseppe Arcimboldo. The version is by Klaus Enrique, an American geneticist who, like Arcimboldo, plays a lot with the face's representations made with natural

elements. I have chosen the painting with a face made by vegetables because I am a vegan and I strongly believe in the continuity of nature. Therefore, we can say that this worldview is present in my research but guided by methodology. Nowadays, with the artificial intelligence possibilities, digital faces may distance from the ontology experienced so far, which resumes my choice for Eco's definition for semiotics.

The path used in the group I coordinate with researchers from different locations may be divided into three stages: the first, of syntax, is performed with an immense amount of digital data to define image patterns; the second one is a semantic analysis, also using database; the third one, focused on fewer researchers, is cultural semiotics, which analyzes the possibilities of meaning from previous patterns.

MATRIZES: Regulation and governance of practices, data protection by users, opening of black boxes are aspects discussed in the algorithmic, big data and artificial intelligence background that evidence this language social power. Which are the consequences of this panorama for the ethics in communication, research and for the constitution of subjectivity?

ML: Today, very few people technically know the digital languages and the modalities of their communication. The global computer system sells an illusion of individual creativity, but network users are very passive: they give information on themselves unaware of its importance and value. This also happens with the face. We need to be more informed about our face's value in the global communication market, and to learn to take care of it as we do with the physical face. We currently live on alert for aesthetic face care, but we do not have the same determination for the data that determines our digital identities. Relevantly, new generations know more about the technical digital communication codes. The scientific making of communication increasingly approaches the complementarity between technical and philosophical knowledge, in which the phenomena understanding crosses numerical, algorithmic language, together with writing and image. In my research group, ethical issues are strongly watched, because they involve ontological persona. Although access to profile images in social networks is determined contractually, we divide these faces into parts to hand them to researchers. Therefore, each of them does not access the set that forms the entire face.

MATRIZES: In this sense, a complementarity is visible between memetics, based on culture and genetics, from the nature perspective. This discussion stresses utopias and dystopias, recurrent in fictional audiovisual productions.

What is your point of view on a near future of humanity in contact with digital communication?

ML: As a researcher, my primary purpose is not to indicate conduct or communication options, but to describe as neutrally as possible existing options and to provide predictions about their consequences. I believe the distance from “physical” society is related, on the one hand, to its digital representation and, on the other, to violence. I believe in societies where this distance increases, social empathy decreases, and they are therefore more prone to conflicting deviations.

MATRIZes: Would you like to finish this interview with other issues on your study objects or to add any information?

ML: I would like to thank the semiotic community of São Paulo for the extraordinary opportunity to share my thoughts. I am very grateful to meet Clotilde Perez and her working group, to talk with Lucia Santaella about Peirce, to visit Casa Semio, and to enjoy the relaxed moments with other researchers. Brazilian culture is a hyperculture, because it comes from the encounter of many others; this is why it is a fundamental testing ground for contemporary semiotics. São Paulo, particularly, is the real center of this hypercultural network; studying how this complexity translates into today’s digital communication is an exciting challenge. ■

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