

NEW CONVERSATIONS WITH JACQUES FONTANILLE

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- **ABSTRACT:** This interview, carried out from February to May 2014, deals with the most recent developments of Jacques Fontanille's work, French semiotician and one of the most prominent figures in European semiotics. In this testimony, the theorist revisits the semiotics of practices and the notion of forms of life, theme of his latest book, still unpublished. Throughout these conversations, which are a continuation of an interview performed in 2006 (PORTELA, 2006), Fontanille discusses the current state of semiotics in France, the relationship between semiotics and the human sciences and the role of the intellectual in society. For J. Fontanille, semiotics should seek to address crosscutting theoretical issues and respond to questions that are on the agenda in society, not focusing only on the aporias and on questions intrinsic to the semiotic currents as institutional groups. Thus, the biggest challenge for semiotics nowadays is to find new alternatives to reinvent itself as a discipline of predictive and strategic vocation.
- **KEYWORDS:** Semiotics. Practices. Forms of life. Human sciences. Epistemology.

This new interview with Jacques Fontanille echoes that which originally appeared in the Brazilian journal Alfa: Revista de Linguística [Alfa: Journal of Linguistics] (PORTELA, 2006), in 2006. If it can't be said that the intellectual landscape of semiotics has greatly and radically changed in recent years, it must be recognized, however, that the disciplinary, academic and social atmosphere has undergone significant changes.

The language science disciplines have become increasingly specialized, particularly in the field of theories of discourse. Based purely on a strict logic of theoretical and methodological selection, they have become accommodated within increasingly restricted perimeters and are often cornered in a defensive position, asserting their identities and rejecting even the most obvious close links: from close cousins to complete strangers, from an institutional point of view (groups, journals, seminars), discourse analysts, supporters of pragmatics, rhetoricians and semioticians, among others, have built up an epistemological rhetoric of difference and specificity – which has not always been tolerant, it must be said.

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The Semiotics which is called post-Greimassian has failed to escape its sectarian temptations: semiotic trends have been consolidated, and despite the apparently friendly dialogue between areas, bibliographical references of studies and their way of considering certain aspects of theory testify to a lack of in-depth dialogue, beyond the labels of schools. It is as if semiotics, fallen in love with itself, “contemplates its theoretical navel”, as says J. Fontanille, and has renounced developing contact strategies to make contact with peers or, even worse, with the surrounding world.

To this scenario add technocratic universities and a society, in economic and axiological crisis and even permanent ideological crisis, which continues to seek solutions to increasingly complex dilemmas from a technological, aesthetic and ethical point of view. What is the role of the humanities in this context? What can semiotics do when confronted with the strength of the “hard” sciences? What kind of semiotics for the future?

In this interview, Jacques Fontanille, as a man who has spent his “career observing the declining role of ‘intellectual’ in the life of the city”, as he himself reminds us, elaborates on these current issues, without neglecting, of course, his work as a theorist of kaleidoscopic lucidity who dreams of pursuing a semiotics “at the level of man”, where the study of the practice, ethics and forms of life helps us to think, through language, the very meaning of the adventure of life.

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First of all, Semiotics

Jean Cristtus Portela: We can just start where everything often ends for us: semiotics. Since our last conversation, in 2006, eight years ago, how do you see the present situation of semiotics?

Jacques Fontanille: Semiotics seeks new paths. At the end of the twentieth century, it consisted of two paradigms, Peircean and Greimassian, and the second consisting of theoretical “currents” that were both more or less struggling against each other and were also complementary: ‘standard’ semiotics, morphodynamic semiotics (Petitot), subjectal semiotics (Coquet), socio-semiotics (Landowski), interpretive semantics (Rastier) tensive semiotics (Zilberberg), among others. Today, these paradigms and currents are intertwined, the boundaries have blurred, and these differences have partly lost the institutional support that allowed them to remain separate and in competition. Despite the efforts of semioticians who would have liked, mainly for “socio-political” reasons, these currents to be incompatible, we have seen that their contributions can be combined and harmonized.

Instead of these weakened theoretical divisions, we can see the emergence or re-emergence of horizontal issues, whose unity is far from certain, and not even in view: semiotics of perception, semiotics of practices and forms of life, semiotics of the media and communication, semiotics of experience, etc. The previous “paradigms” and “trends” have been diluted in these horizontal issues, and, in order to address these problems, one can call upon, simultaneously and with equal effect, tensive, morphodynamic, Peircean, semantic-cultural, narrative, passionate, experiential and other elements.

Semiotics no longer dares ask whether it is still generative or interpretive, it rather questions the posture of immanence, the principles of textuality and wonders what attitude to adopt towards new mining methods and the automatic analysis of large databases that do not follow the principles of textuality. The irreducible heterogeneity of new types of large digitalized corpora has become a problem and a challenge which is at the moment still insurmountable to semioticians. More generally, the new horizontal issues (perceptions, practices, forms of life, sense experience) pose formidable methodological problems when it comes to forming corpora, to gather pertinent “observable” elements beyond the texts themselves. This is an urgent task for a science that, in the tradition of Saussure, Hjelmslev and Greimas, is by definition an empirical science.

Semiotics is also reluctant and slow to interrogate itself about its role among the sciences of culture, the sciences of the mind, and the human and social sciences in general. This is the time of doubt (often useful, sometimes fruitful) as to the epistemological and methodological foundations, and is also that of a profound interrogation on the identity of semiotics as a field of knowledge, and / or as a disciplinary field.

Personally, I had welcomed this substitution of *problematic issues* instead of trends and theoretical paradigms. It was even the theme and the aim of a conference of the French Association of Semiotics that I organized in 2001 to usher in in some way the twenty-first century! I would have loved to help organize a theoretical and epistemological device able to receive this transformation; I have tried with the problem of the planes of immanence and the typology of planes of expression. But the attempt itself was overwhelmed and diluted in the process of transformation, and it has now become one issue among others. So the general framework of this new state of semiotics is still to be invented, as are its methodologies.

J.C.P.: What about the institutional anchoring of semiotics in France?

J.F.: Semiotics no longer has almost complete autonomous and visible institutional anchoring in France. Nationally, there are no longer any semiotic team research projects at CNRS, and all the semiotics teams (Lyon, Limoges, Toulouse, Paris), are

often restricted to a very small core of researchers and belong to multidisciplinary laboratories which also deal with many other research programs as well as semiotics. This fosters scientific and disciplinary intersections, but partly masks the presence of semiotics in the university.

From the point of view of training, the list of the titles of undergraduate degrees and masters proposed by French higher education institutions has been streamlined and updated in 2013-2014, and none of them uses the word “semiotics” because no French curriculum deals just with semiotics. This does not mean that semiotics is no longer taught, but that it is included in broader areas (language sciences, information and communication, marketing, aesthetics, etc.).

This situation is critical: if compared with that of mathematics, which are highly developed in interfaces with physics, computer science, climatology or economics, but are clearly identified as such and independently, semiotics has almost no key research programs where, for example, the theoretical and methodological issues outlined above would be studied. The intersemiotic seminar in Paris, currently led by Denis Bertrand and Jean-François Bordron, is probably the only place where this fundamental exercise is still possible collectively, and with all semioticians visiting Paris, especially Brazilians. It is hoped that other research programs will develop to respond to existing or future theoretical alternatives.

The anchoring of semiotics is nevertheless that of the *programmes* (research programmes, training programmes) and is no longer that of the *degree course*. It must be said that: it is no longer possible, at least in France, to take a *degree course* in research and / or get a degree by only practicing semiotics. There has been a kind of dilution and dispersal that echoes my earlier remarks on the theoretical situation, but it's also a new responsibility for the actors: a *degree course* is supported by sustainable institutions, whose power and long-term prospects do not permit the participants to take initiatives; a *programme*, however, can always be affected by the initiative of one or more participants who decide to conceive it, defend it and carry on with it for a specified period, known in advance. The seminar in Paris has been working for fifteen years on this principle, with the thematic programmes, and this is why it has survived the dilution of the *degree course*.

J.C.P.: In this context, what is the future of semiotics as a profession?

J.F.: The professional field has narrowed considerably in academic institutions, and inversely has expanded and diversified in businesses and private organizations. The positions of professors and researchers in public institutions are fewer (and not only for semiotics!). In France, the situation of linguistics in general is very worrying from this point of view, because most positions that are offered are for French as a Foreign Language (FLE) and Natural Language Processing (NLP). Proposals for positions in semiotics therefore obey the new conditions mentioned

above: their maintenance or creation depends on the existence of active research teams, initiatives of other colleagues, and programmes they develop (or do not!).

By contrast, in private agencies, the need for semiotics has not weakened as semiotics has been more adaptable than its competitors (sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy) to the new requirements of the market of studies called “qualitative”. And the ethnologists and sociologists who work in these agencies mostly present themselves as “semiologues”, which is a way of recognizing both that semiotics “sells itself” better in commercial activities, and especially that the job of a semiotician has *a generic value and position* in the field of qualitative research. The profession is that of the “semiologue” and it includes the “socio,” “psycho,” “ethno”, “marketing”, “com”, skills etc.

One can thus define the profession as being that of the “semiotician” or “semiologue”, realizing that it can cover many different specialized skills. Even those who do not know what this exactly includes know that it is a profession, with skills, expertise, and focus areas. The minister who has chosen me as his chief of staff for the past two years (2013-2014), openly introduced me as “My semiotician,” and everyone seemed to understand, even without knowing what it had to do with my work, that it was my core profession, whatever my duties were. This issue of the profession is strange: if I have achieved at least one thing during forty years of professional activity, it is that one day a minister can proudly present his chief of staff to other foreign politicians as “*My semiotician*”.

J.C.P.: I do not know whether you've heard our dear colleague Pierluigi Basso trying to answer or ask a question by saying, “And if things were considered from a slightly more ‘diabolical’ point of view...” How can we actually conceive of semiotics in a “diabolical” way?

J. F.: No, I have not heard that. But he is capable of it! I don't know what he meant by a “diabolical point of view.” Is it a strategy for impertinence and provocation? An evil postulation? A posture of immanence and a method of systematic revolt against transcendence (rebellion against God)? Does he think that semiotics has something in common with a satanic cult? I think Pope Pius X, who was vehemently opposed to all “modernist” positions inspired by the principle of immanence (sic) would not have hesitated to think so. He even tried to show in the encyclical *Pascendi* that modern methods (in 1907!!) of the reading of sacred texts were the work of the devil. Personally, I prefer the “Luciferian” view: Lucifer, the “light bearer”, with critical activity that results from “throwing light on” of the semiotic preconditions and the phenomena underlying meaning.

J.C.P.: In this sense, the “diabolical” and “Luciferian” views return to the same point: what is at issue is the courage, freedom above all, the critical and independent spirit

of the semiotician – that which surprises or disturbs those who wish for “angelical”, obedient and tidy semiotics. As a “Luciferian”, do you distrust semiotics?

J.F.: The critical view was that of semioticians at the time of structuralism; I will have the opportunity to return to the attitude of Barthes and Greimas. This critical role was weakened or even forgotten, in the competitions between theoretical “schools”: critical activity was entirely devoted to internal debates. In addition, the foundations of the Hjelmslevian bases of our semiotics do not help to develop a critical perspective on cultural and social phenomena, because they focus attention on the consistency of the theory itself and on the adequacy of descriptions. Yet this critical exercise is part of the business of a semiotician, always on the lookout for implicit, unthought-of, outcrops of meaning effects that return to deeper immanent structures.

Recently, Viviane Huys and Denis Vernant (2012), in their book *L’indisciplinaire de l’art*, have proposed to define their approach as “indisciplinary”. But it is the “indisciplinary” status of art, not of semiotics. If there is indiscipline in semiotics, it is not because it would be unable to be formed as a discipline (the Hjelmslevian and Greimassian bases are disciplinary in nature), but because the descriptive posture it offers is always a challenge in terms of the agreed readings and “institutionalized” cultural and social interpretations of phenomena. This is the heuristic virtue even of semiotics, and this heuristic is assessed in proportion to the differences, shifts and movements of attention that causes the analysis. And I add that the principle of immanence is the mainspring of this heuristic.

J.C.P.: Personally, I think the semiotician does not excel in the art of doubt and we need to stimulate critical thinking especially among young semioticians. History could play an important role. Not history as chronicle, as a “family portrait” – which give us more certainties -- but historiography, a “meta” look on the way we think and do semiotics. Has not the time come for a “history of semiotic ideas”?

J.F.: I have long resisted this idea, which I thought was a temptation towards domination and closure: that which, carried out by the historian of a field of knowledge or discipline and who is tempted to regard them as completed, to freeze the results and processes, and, when all is said and done, to produce a *doxa*. But as you remember, there is another way to make the history of ideas, which can be beneficial for the ideas themselves and for those who handle them.

The main benefit of a recent history of semiotics would be a refocusing of the successive contributions of each of them. Today, semiotic research progresses blindly, at the base of a completely biased system of reference. If you look at the references used in articles or research works in semiotics, you can find two kinds: some are explicit, and these are the “grand masters” (Aristotle, Saussure, Cassirer, Peirce, Kant, Husserl, Levi-Strauss, etc.); the others are implicit, and are all more

recent works, which in some way make up the undifferentiated “common fund” and which support the “trends” and the lines of force of semiotic thought. Greimas is still hardly directly quoted: doubtless he’s too recent!

As a result, semiotic research advances and multiplies without real progress. Gardeners will immediately understand the following image: when a tree or shrub continues to grow from its base, thanks to shoots that grow from old stumps, it soon forms a bush, a thicket, a bunch of small trees stuck together, but not a real tree. We also know that the shoots that grow from the stump prevent the tree from having vigorous flowers and fruits, and in general they are coppiced each year. In short, we must choose between using the wood of the shoots and harvesting fruit: this is the case, for example, of the chestnut trees in Limousin, which can either be exploited for their timber (coppice stumps and shoots) or for their fruits, chestnuts and marrons (on large majestic trees). Today, the semiotic “shoots” proliferate from the stump, each cultivates and nourishes in the short-term shoots, to the detriment of the tree and its fruits in the long term, and only an objective historical perspective would allow us to re prune the tree to restore some vigour.

Establishing a history of semiotic ideas, understood as recent ideas, might allow us to change this hopeless collective practice which consists of indefinitely redoing semiotics by giving voice to the founding fathers, even periodically choosing new founding fathers, to forget what contemporary authors have brought to semiotics, and thus ignore the successive achievements. This practice clearly distinguishes semiotics, particularly within what used to be called the “School of Paris”, from all other social sciences. It partly explains this general feeling of trampling, of rehashing and of dilution that one sometime feels from the outside when one has contact with semioticians.

J.C.P.: In Pratique Sémiotiques [Semiotic Practices] (FONTANILLE, 2008), you updated certain hypotheses that have been dear to you since the late 1990s: the opening of semiotics to enunciative praxis and finally to practices, the question of relevance levels, the place of forms of life within the theory, dialogue with the social sciences, the problem of ethics, among others. How do you evaluate these proposals today?

J. F.: A lot of questions in one! For levels of relevance, I have already answered above, and I will return to it. For dialogue with the humanities, the movement is in progress, it has only been sketched out, and it is impossible to evaluate but it is clear that after having once claimed to impose itself as a “general methodology” of the human sciences, and having failed in this, today the road ahead is tough!

There remain *praxis*, practices, ethics and forms of life. This forms an inseparable whole for me, that of a *semiotics* “at the level of the human being”. For by dint of cultivating a “high regard”, which would place the semiotician

beyond any grasp of reality, and all intervention in the facts of meaning themselves, semiotics is in great danger of becoming an inhuman science (without being either “hard” or “exact”). Jean-Claude Coquet and Eric Landowski have always resisted, in their own way, this dehumanization of semiotics, the first in terms of epistemological and methodological “realism”, and the second in terms of sensory experience.

Praxis and practices cannot be thought of without an actant immersed in the doing, inherent in their own acts, an actant who is constructed the same time they act: this particularly is the first thing taught in sociological practices according to Bourdieu. From this submerged point of view, semiotic forms provide an outlet to individual and collective initiative, the process interacts with the system, and operators of the process may modify the system. And ethics always has the possibility, from these actants and the same point of view, to invent, giving them a coherent individual or collective form, value systems and rules of conduct. Life forms, finally, are vast, consistent and congruent semiotic configurations, which serve as individual and group identity markers, which the actors can give themselves, invent, distort and confront, without having to refer to implicit or explicit classifications that would be imposed by social determinations.

J.C.P.: Especially in terms of levels of pertinence, there are three points, it seems, to which one often returns to ask questions or find problems. First, the manner in which you use the concepts of “form” and “substance” to describe properties that move from one level to another. Then, the place and the appropriateness of the level of support-object along the path you take. Finally, the role of life forms as the top level, leading...

J.F.: The path of the levels of relevance (or “planes of immanence”) seems regular and hierarchical, but in fact they are neither one nor the other. Linear and hierarchical representation is more simple and practical, but other types could be used, because the different types of semiotic objects are very heterogeneous. The hierarchical linear layout is nevertheless particularly effective to explain the constraints and to identify critical issues. It is basically a tool to ask questions.

As a linear representation, it requires us, for example, to foresee ‘syncopes’ when the integration processes “jump” one or more levels (e.g., when a *sign* such as a logo incorporates by condensation all the properties of a *practice* or a *form of life*). When Pascal proclaims “Kneel and you will believe,” he is making a syncope between the general level of life forms (faith) and that of practices (prayer) or even bodily signs (kneeling). This proclamation is a rhetorical figure, which makes a provocative integration and substitution between two planes of immanence: to account for it, the theory must include both the distinction

between the planes, and the changeover and “jump” from one plane to another. In a non-linear representation, the syncopation would be useless, so we must ask whether they bring something to the description, before giving up a hierarchical arrangement.

The other constraint is that of the number of levels: this linear arrangement raises the question as to whether these six levels are enough to account for all the “semiotic objects” that represent a culture. For me, the question remains open. For example, some have attempted to add the level of the media, which does not strictly correspond to any of the levels. I remain doubtful, because the media can be treated, depending on the point of view adopted, as texts, as support-objects, as strategies, or as forms of life. But the fact remains that we must try to locate the media somewhere in the hierarchy, and that this does not work.

There is in this case a choice between two options: (i) the problem is eliminated by deciding that, since the hierarchy of levels of immanence has the problem of accommodating the media, this hierarchy should be abandoned; (ii) treating the problem by asking whether the media are homogeneous “semiotic objects” and relevant within a continuous analysis, and thus can be placed on a single plane of immanence. The second solution then uses the critical and problematic ability of the hierarchy of the planes of immanence: can we consider that a media is a “semiotic object” in this sense? I think not: a media is a socio-economic system that includes many different semiotic objects, one inside the other, and therefore, the path of the “planes of immanence” is not the most appropriate theoretical perspective to account for them as a composite whole, but it is perfectly suited to each of the semiotic objects (text, media, practices and strategies) that make up the media.

As for my use of substance and form, it is probably not very orthodox, but it envisages a point that is essential on the hierarchical path: certain properties, combined with relevant figures from a given level, are not themselves relevant to that level, but may become so at a higher level. At the level where they are not relevant, they participate in the *substance*. And at the level where they are relevant, as they take part in the *form*. For each “plane of immanence”, there are thus both exploited forms and exploitable substances. And for each property, there must be a substantial aspect and a formal aspect.

This is the case of plastic properties associated with figurative signs: in iconology, for example, the properties of colour or texture do not participate in the relevance of iconic signs, and one has to go to the level of the relevance of visual texts for these properties to become relevant. The Mu Group talks about “plastic signs”, but these plastic signs can only function as such if they are integrated into a visual text: in isolation, they can mean nothing except in the case of fixed and symbolic convention (of the type “purple = cardinal”). The

same for the support object: on the one hand there is a formal support, in that it adopts relevant properties for the inscription of a text (surface level, framework, dimensions, proportions, lines, orientations, etc.), and on the other it has a number of physical properties (size, 3D shape, weight, hardness, deformability, resistance, etc.), which are not relevant in terms of the texts and their inscription supports, but may become so at the higher level of practices.

In terms of this object level, I should have clarified that all may not necessarily work as supports for writings and texts. Yet all can potentially work, as shown by the example of fly-posting practices on posts, mailboxes, walls and doors. They are also frequently so through the use and patina that they make lasting inscriptions, on the surface and on the material form of objects, of the succession of practical enunciations in which they participate: these accumulated traces are then decipherable, as texts, by experts, historians and archaeologists.

Finally, life forms are presented as the last level of the construction of cultures, because they are defined *to be such*. If we can still doubt it, it is that the definitions I propose are not explicit enough, and not because they are not the ultimate level of immanence cultures. It is indeed to conceive what could be called the *immediate constituents* of cultures (as one speaks of the “immediate constituents” of the sentence). When a sentence is segmented, what one immediately obtains in the first analysis are syntagms, some autonomous, others not so. When segmenting a society, we initially obtain, before everything else, according to the point of view and society, social classes, castes, communities or social styles, etc. When segmenting a culture, one must obtain before everything else, and from the semiotic point of view I propose, “forms of life.”

This intuition came to me while reading Lotman: he handles all kinds of semiotic objects, since he considers all to be texts. Poems, anecdotes, historical events, social groups, lives of historical figures, cities. But he fails to manage to coherently integrate them into the semiosphere and rather converts them by analysis into recognizable “modes of cultural existence”, which confront each other. Under this condition, in the semiosphere, the life of a princess can dialogue with a poem by Pushkin, or the military tactics of the Russian nobility with the urban structure of St. Petersburg. These are the coherent modes of cultural existence which I try to grasp as “life forms”.

In the theory of forms of life, there are three hypotheses that should be discussed separately in the following order: (i) cultures can be segmented into immediate constituents, (ii) these immediate constituents are forms of life (modes of cultural existence), and (iii) life forms are macro-semiotic objects (with a level of expression and a level of content). If one rejects the first hypothesis, there is no need to consider the other two.

J.C.P.: You're writing a book about life forms. How much have you written? Did you anticipate that this concept would be so successful today?

J.F.: The book is finished ("completed", I'm not sure...). I did not anticipate the success of the concept. Ten years ago I just decided to follow (alone or with others, depending on the occasion) a research program that would be based on the levels of immanence and the different types of semiotic objects, and to end up with the immediate constituents of culture, life forms. I have reached this last stage.

J.C.P.: Semiotic practices pose a very old problem and yet one which is very present, the problem of textualization. Recently at the Paris 2013-2014 Semiotics Seminar, Maria Giulia Dondero made an excellent presentation on the subject. In summary, she reframes the textual approach to analyse practices, advocating a more focused approach on practice itself. How to have access to them?

J.F.: I personally neither question the textual approach, nor, moreover, the approach by signs or objects. The principle of the path of the planes of immanence is precisely to give each of them, under conditions to be defined, and in a manner to be clarified, the chance to be relevant. The textual approach has become dominant with Greimassians because it clearly differentiates them from Peirceans; but this is a theoretical and political tactic. I argue that semiotics has lost something by not focusing on the "smallest unit of meaning", the signs.

And this is why it would be another error (also of a "tactical-political" nature, and not strictly scientific) to return the textual approach to oblivion on the grounds that there is a new interest in practices. Anyway, when the practices manipulate texts, and this is very often the case with human practices, the textual approach is needed at some point in the analysis.

In addition, access to the practices themselves is something that is rather more delicate. This is the general problem of individual and social cognition: we have to find means to open up the "black boxes", where practices are piloted. Bourdieu proposed problematizing and characterizing access to the meaning of practices, for a sociologist necessarily immersed in the practices themselves: access that could only be, in his opinion, "reflexive." But Bourdieusian reflexivity does not allow us either to open up the "black boxes", or to establish a corpus and gather comprehensive observable information that would be necessary for the description of a practice: he did not actually intend to make a semiotic description of practices!

Take the issue of translation: you can describe the textuality of the source to be translated and the target which has been translated, and compare the two. But this comparison will bring you nothing in terms of translation, because in order to

assess the degree of equivalence between them, you would have to initially have an ideal translated target reference text, and only the confrontation between both translations might usefully be considered in terms of textuality.

Because translation is a practice, and to access this practice, one must be able to observe what happens in the brain of the translator. There are all kinds of sophisticated observation devices in translation science, but none provides access to the “black box”. So there is no other solution, if you want to access the practice itself, not just in this simulacrum which seeks our own introspection, other than constructing an “observatory” and a questionnaire, which will collect verbalizations, gestures, behaviour, interactions, images and videos, various institutional information, and all this should be confronted with the source and target text translation.

Remember the observation questionnaire for metro users which was the origin of the study of Jean-Marie Floch, published under the title “Are you surveyors or sleepwalkers?” in *Sémiotique, marketing et communication* (FLOCH, 1990) [*Semiotics, marketing and communication*] (PUF). From notes taken on the metro, the users followed by investigators equipped with tables of observations, individual interviews, video recordings of the most typical behaviour, etc. This is the price to pay for access to practices. Obviously this is less convenient than making textual analysis of a photograph or a piece of news. But for a form of life, it is even more complicated, and I must admit that, at the moment, I have not proposed a questionnaire to collect data to describe a form of life (this is probably why my book is finished ... but not completed).

J.C.P.: With regard to the so-called tensive semiotics, it seems to me that you have started to follow along this track of thinking. You use certain principles, especially the virtues of the tensive model, which allows you to articulate and clarify some very interesting aspects of the analysed object. I think of this when I consider your path and the road taken by Claude Zilberberg since Tension et Signification [Tension and Meaning] (FONTANILLE; ZILBERBERG, 1998).

J.F.: Yes, Claude Zilberberg has been in semiotics for the last thirty years. He was in the eighties (1980) with the *Essai sur les modalités tensives* (ZILBERBERG, 1981), and he is still around in this decade (2010) with the *Des formes de vie aux valeurs* (ZILBERBERG, 2011). It is his work, his semiotics. *Tension et signification* was conceived and written by both of us as the meeting between tensive semiotics and the semiotics of passions. We deliberately made an inventory of certain concepts that are at the intersection of these two types of research, and the book was co-written at the intersection between the two, to join their respective achievements.

After *Tension et signification*, we each again went back to our own programmes, he in tensive semiotics, and I in semiotics of the body (an extension

of the passions) and then the practices and forms of life (an extension of textual studies). Zilberberg concentrated more and more on affect and its resulting passions, and I frequently exploited the descriptive potential of the tensive structure. The meeting was thus fruitful for us both.

What I remember most from tensive semiotics is not a new source of speculation or a new kind of formalism or schematism, but rather a way to examine the texts, practices and forms of life. Underlying the segmentation units, according to the structure and the relationship of opposites that give them meaning, there are other phenomena which may affect us directly, and which are in immanence of the order of *dependence*, in the sense of Hjelmslev. This dependence is both from the difference and from the interdependence. What we sense, in the core of the isotopies, are the trends, the directions of development, the flows that compete but remain dependent on each other. The tensive structure allows us to deepen the quest for immanence. As Zilberberg said in the eighties: "What is there behind the semes?" The reply in 2014: "Interdependent tensions between the competing flows".

J.C.P.: In Zilberberg, praise of affect is generalised as to call into question the centrality of the narrative, which now becomes an epiphenomenon, somewhat superficial. What is your opinion on this?

J.F.: The two are not at all the same level of explanation. Narrativity, understood as passionate, is involved in the explanation of the process and of its manifestation, and it consists of cultural patterns (such as canonical narrative schema) which search for, in the words of Greimas, the "meaning of life": in this sense, life forms prolong and reinforce the idea of narrativity as syntagmatic forms of the paths of life, as I believe, constitute the level plan of expression of the forms of life.

The affect, however, is at the centre of ante-predicative conditions of meaning. I have recently discovered a little known French philosopher, Michel Henry, who built all his work on the relationship between the manifestation and its deep "essence". To access this essence, he adopts a posture of radical immanence, and at the deepest point of this immanence, he discovers "life itself". But the immanence of *life itself* is nothing but an *affect*, a pure feeling of existing, whether joyful or painful. And this affect does not have an origin; it is itself the beginning, since the living flesh is not characterized by the fact that can "self-affect". Both affecting and affected, the living flesh 'feels' life and living. Living and self-affecting are the same thing.

The fate of the affect can then, approaching the manifestation, borrow from many channels, those of intensity, of course, but also those of the extent, from the start of the process, in time and in space. This is why Claude Zilberberg can explore tensive variations of the affect over a very long time, without even using

narrativity, making the intellectual effort to stay as deeply as possible in the perspective of this radical immanence. With narrativity, the semiotics of Greimas is much closer to the manifestation and is thus linked to the collective regulations and cultural formations. Tensive semiotics may encounter narrativity, but it can also ignore it definitively: is enough to cultivate the “shoot” instead of the tree.

J.C.P.: This happens differently in Eric Landowski, for example, who continues to expand the narrative model with other types of routes, actants, junctions and unions...

J.F.: Eric Landowski has taken the side of experience (and not of narrativity in the Greimassian sense), and it is, in my opinion, a path for semiotic practices in the broadest sense: it is no longer a question of a textualist approach to narrativity, but rather immanent approaches (a non-radical immanence) of interactions. And to avoid the pitfall of observatories and other protocols to constitute practical data (see above), Eric Landowski makes his research on facts which are nevertheless textualised, but also fragments of experience, “motives” taken from life daily and processed in the manner of ethnosemiotics.

Eric Landowski also worked very close to the event, and his results are easily integrated into a general semiotics that makes room for experience as much as perception or cognition. Experience, for Landowski, is also “life itself”, but on the side of the sensible manifestation in all its unpredictable diversity, not within the limits of the fundamental immanent affect.

J.C.P.: Does not the denial of the primacy of narrative rationality seem to you to be somehow the denial of an access deemed too easy to intentionality?

J.F.: I'm not quite convinced that, at the level of radical immanence of basic affect, one can speak of intentionality. Deleuze has also contributed to this problem, in “L'immanence. Une vie” [Immanence. A life], his last published text, and he equally radically identifies immanence and life as the essence of a level of immanence, but stating that in this kind of immanence, there are only singularities and intensities, and there is no possibility of actantiality and intentionality. Thus a semiotics of the affect, completely free of the process, the manifestation, and their cultural formations, is in the most radical sense a semiotics without intentionality.

J.C.P.: In this fairly diverse landscape, it apparently becomes more difficult to teach semiotics. Eight years ago, you were already in favour of the classics: Saussure, Peirce, Hjeltmslev, Benveniste, Greimas and Eco. In terms of the generative trajectory, Courtés, enunciative instances, even the modalities, Coquet ... What has changed in your teaching?

J.F.: I cannot answer this question at the moment, because since the last interview, I have taught very little, just a Masters course each year to present my latest research. I have been totally occupied by my “political and administrative duties”. But these functions have allowed me to make experiments (very unusual for a semiotician), and these experiences can be found in part in the guidelines and case studies of the book *Formes de vie*.

J.C.P.: Des images à problèmes [The Semiotic Challenge of Scientific Images], written by Maria Giulia Dondero and yourself (DONDERO; FONTANILLE, 2012), is a very unusual book among your works, and in terms of objects analysed (the scientific image, mathematics, popularisation) and the theoretical basis (the purpose of broadening the concept of utterance, at least in the visual field). You begin the book by determining the difference between “image” and scientific “imagery.” Can you return to it? And what did you think of this experience with the scientific image?

J.F.: The book you mention was written from a collaborative research program with French, Italian and Belgian teams, who are devoted to scientific images. It was a collective challenge, which originated in discussions at a visual semiotics conference held in Venice in 2009, and a proposal by Paolo Fabbri. The challenge was twofold: that of scientific expertise, and that of the opacity of technology. The challenge was initially of disorientation, as semioticians, including visual artists, are in principle familiar with humanistic culture, arts and communication, and this familiarity is of no use to understand scientific images. Of course, we saw that some were struggling to go beyond their implicit aesthetic limits, but that was the challenge.

Regarding the competence, it must be reported, especially in a position of immanence: it was necessary to understand how the readers of these images understand them, and thus reconstitute their competence, even though this was not that of the analyst. For other types of images, the analyst believes it is possible to neutralise differences in competence based on a shared and implied competence, a kind of diffuse cultural heritage. This is a general problem with the immanent method: one might be tempted to think that, since it is agreed not to seek external explanations, semiotic analysis has a true competence over the “substance” of the analysed object. But immanence is not an encouragement for naivety!

For the scientific image, the difference in competence is an obstacle, a theoretical and methodological problem. In short, *an immanence without collusion*. It's also a way to remind all semioticians that in semiotic analysis there are always two types of skill involved, two intertwined areas of knowledge: semiotic competence itself, and the disciplinary competence attached to the object itself.

The two are not necessarily united by each semiotician/analyst, but they should be integrated in the analysis.

On the side of the opacity of technologies, the challenge was also theoretical. When one reads a novel, you believe you can ignore or regard as irrelevant the fact that it was written by hand, by machine, dictated to a secretary, etc. When you contemplate a painting, you begin to focus on the specifics of touch and the line, but you take little interest in whether the paint was placed with a brush, a knife, a brush, a stencil, a manual or mechanical spray gun. With the scientific image, this bracketing technique is not possible, because it participates directly and centrally in the understanding of the image.

That's why, in the book with Maria Giulia Dondero, we used "imagery" as much as "image". The imagery is the technical device, and the whole, /imagery + image + operators + readers/, participates in a scientific or medical practice. We must first build the semiotics of this practice of imagery to understand how the image itself is determined and configured. This is a case of the image where the practice cannot be "transparent" and where it should be seen as part and parcel of textuality.

And that's why we had to revise even the conception of the visual utterance and enunciation in general. It is no longer a case of just putting the system in action, and of making the language exist by putting it into operation. We must anchor the enunciation in a sensible, scientific, and technical experience and rethink the process of enunciation as one of the exploration of this experience. In the case of visual enunciation, the exploration sequence "tells" in some way the stages of an interaction between the "energies" and the "matter". The energy can be that of photons, electrons, quanta, ultrasound, radio radiation, etc. And the phases are principally the excitation of the material, the response signal of this material, its transduction into other forms of energy, and into other materials, to the final stage of visualisation.

J.C.P.: After reading this book, which is also less difficult than it seems, my first reaction was, "This is a book that all scientists should read..." A few seconds later, I realized the challenge: I had, it was first necessary that it be "translated" for them!" How do you see this, if every time something takes place, there is the fear of misunderstanding?

J.F.: Once a book has been written and published, I always say that its future escapes me. There are always regrets I had stopped, maybe too fast, but I accept without qualms this separation after delivery. And when a child is born, this is where it all starts, because it is necessary to bring it up and support it through life. On the contrary, a book has to live without its author among other books and readers. I have no fear of being misunderstood, because misunderstanding

is the basic rule: it is on this misunderstanding that every reader will build their own appropriation of the book, a necessarily partial and personal appropriation, which is a function of the interests and skills of the moment. It is always better that the first impression of the reader is that of misunderstanding: if he has the impression of immediately being able to take in everything, he will never make the effort to understand and do little with the book.

J.C.P.: We have just talked about the reader's misunderstanding. I would like to discuss this misunderstanding or rejection of semiotics vis-à-vis the new objects of analysis. You know I am working on the history of the semiotics of comics. Since the 1970s, when they attracted the attention of the semiologists of the period, comics have been both a known and unknown object to semioticians. In France, apart from J.-M. Floch and J. Courtés, the Greimassians have shown little interest in the subject. What do you think are the reasons for this rejection?

J.F.: I do not feel that comics have been rejected. They were left aside after an initial period of considerable interest. The pioneers of the analysis of comics in France have all but disappeared without forming disciples in the area, and in any case, almost all of them (Floch being the first) were interested in many things other than comics. I think comics suffer from two handicaps. The first is in their simultaneous marginal and playful cultural status: they are not part of "serious" cultural objects, despite the enthusiasm of the public who read them as a leisure activity. The second, more importantly, is that of their academic status: there are departments of visual arts, communication or film and television in the universities, but not departments of comics. Visual semioticians obviously move towards topics that provide opportunities for jobs!

J.C.P.: Do you read comics? What do you see as the challenges of the semiotician in the analysis of comics?

J.F.: I sometimes read comics, but less and less. As leisure reading, I think the comic does not work: either it is too short a read (compared to reading a novel), or it is a reading of contemplation and appropriation of visual detail, and then it is no longer leisure reading. A matter of taste and lifestyle...

The challenges of the semiotician who takes as an object comics are numerous. Firstly, the two handicaps that I mentioned above come together to unite in one: to design and develop a semiotics of comics, one must first have a thorough knowledge of all contemporary productions, and this knowledge, as seen in literature or cinema, involves a long accumulation of collective tasks. From this point of view, after decades of neglect, there is a long way to catch up.

In addition, the dominant orientations of contemporary comics are much more diverse than in the period from the sixties to the eighties, when in France, Floch

and Fresnault-Deruelle published their work. The comic is still “narrative”, but it’s not necessarily the pleasure of reading stories which is initially required. The plastic and compositional dimension is now the subject of countless fascinating research in aesthetics, there are diverse graphic styles, and the fashion in manga has had a lasting effect on the recent history of plastic choices and graphic styles. Comparing comics to the cinema, for example, it is clear that whereas films are constrained by the use of human actors and natural or realistic sets, comics can invent all kinds of figuration of live beings without being called “experimental” or eccentric. This plastic inventiveness is inherent to the genre itself. The grammar and the method of description of these different aspects, which are specific to comics, have still to be invented.

Another challenge is the nature and forms of visual, thematic and narrative links between the different components (illustrations, bubbles, etc.) on a grid and between grids. The narrative reading imposes in principle linear chains; plastic and tabular reading proposes other forms. And in this regard, the comic has a great latitude for invention, which allows it to multiply the combinations and types of tensions between these two modes (at least) of reading. This very fact, the organization of formal support, left to the initiative of each author and each utterance, maintains conflicting and negotiable relationships with the achieving of a narrative organization. But the tension between two modalities of practice (moreover, observable through modern observation technique of eye movements and fixation) is by definition the source of passionate affects and effects. So there would be a passionate component specific to comics, a pressure for a sequential reading, entering at the heart of tensions, on the one hand, and on the other, the proposed tabular readings. This would be comparable to the tension between the image of the reel and the film soundtrack in the cinema, but yet more “dramatic” than in the cinema, since it takes place inside the only visual sphere.

Semiotics among the human sciences

J.C.P.: The 2013-2014 Semiotics Seminar once again examines an interdisciplinary subject: “Semiotics and Human Sciences II: The principle of immanence and the pragmatic surroundings”. The intervention you made last December was entitled “Semiotics faced with new social challenges in the human and social sciences”. You have apparently chosen to draw conclusions as regards the humanities, putting aside the question of immanence. This strategic choice suggests the direction of your current approach...

J.F.: The question of immanence interests me in the highest degree, and I made my contribution to the publishing programme of Luisa Moreno and Alessandro

Zinna on this issue, but, when talking about the relationship of semiotics and the humanities, the question of immanence is not a priority, because it crosses the entire field of knowledge, and must be raised at a different moment.

I wanted to ask a question that baffled many who attended the seminar, in part because it was not the question asked by the organizers. The seminar focused on the relationship of semiotics with other humanities. But what interested me was rather the challenges to the humanities by all the current movements in the fields of knowledge, *small-sized* challenges such as the future of humanity, our societies and our planet. And within this general question, I wondered if semiotics had the opportunity to take part in the response of the humanities. In other words, not only was my interest in what lies beyond or on this side of science, but also more in the relationships with the exact sciences and the natural and life sciences than in the relations with the human sciences.

Disciplines and research programs are always defined and designed in response to the expectations, needs, and horizons of collective questioning. When universities were detached from the religious institutions in the Middle Ages, and especially when they managed to become autonomous, it was not for the sole reason that it was necessary to develop other fields of knowledge than those allowed by the theological power. It was because it was necessary to answer a diffuse expectation aroused and maintained by other authorities (royalty, nobility, the bourgeoisie, etc.). Similarly when a discipline withers and dies, when it has hardly any more members and candidates, we must assume that it no longer meets these expectations, and that its horizon of questionings is now empty.

This is the gist of my presentation: there are today expectations and horizons of questioning for the humanities, and can semiotics make them its own? When Barthes and Greimas came to the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, they responded to two types of expectations of this nature: (i) the invention of a new humanism after the collapse of humanistic values during the Second World War and the Holocaust, and on the horizon of a Cold War that seemed to be permanent; and (ii) the development of a critical method to deal with the new socio-economic functioning of the Western world installed on both sides of the Atlantic by the “Marshall Plan” and the “thirty glorious years” that followed, particularly in Europe.

We had to rebuild the economy of Europe devastated by war, keeping alive a capitalist economy threatened by Soviet influence, and in order to do this, we had to obtain a general socio-cultural adhesion to the massive distribution of American and then European consumer goods, supported by the American investment. In this strategy of rebuilding the global balance, socio-cultural support was inseparable from what we began to call the “consumer society”. Full support, which was particularly seen in the massive and unquestioning consumption of

tangible and intangible goods. The human sciences (anthropology, sociology, philosophy and semiology . . . in particular) thus made a fresh start to rethink the relationship between society and individuals, on the one hand, and tangible and intangible goods on the other, but also to rethink the place of man in the elaboration of knowledge.

It is no coincidence that at the core of the anthropological theory of Levi-Strauss there is a theory of exchange and communication of material and immaterial goods. It is no coincidence that the narrative theory of Greimas is a permanent questioning of the values involved in narrativity. It is even less a coincidence that the most successful and best-known book of Barthes, *Mythologies* [*Mythologies*], was a proposal for critical method with respect to our relationship to material and immaterial goods. No, it was not coincidence, this is what has been retained and valued of all the works of research, and among all the other proposals, because this is what echoed the horizons of the questions of the time, and the need for a critical approach to understanding this “democratization” of unconditional support and consumption.

I therefore repeat my question by dividing the question into: (i) what are the horizons of inquiry addressing the human sciences? and (ii) what are the issues and semiotic work that can now be identified and valued because it echoes and responds to these questions?

J.C.P.: Your presentation was very programmatic, you said there are some important areas where the semiotician can intervene, as well as the types of interventions that could be made. In your opinion, where are we?

J.F.: First of all, if one wants the humanities and semiotics to be taken seriously when assessing needs and expectations, it is necessary that this assessment take into account the qualitative aspects of human existence, and not only of the GDP! These qualitative aspects, support, trust, a sense of personal fulfillment, the experienced impact of the ongoing or foreseen transformations, social adaptation to and/or participation in change and its consequences on the emotional lives of people, are related to the “objectification of the subjective,” and most of these elements have a semiotic dimension.

Thus, if we wish to influence the evolution of things themselves, not just intervene as an afterthought to understand what happened, it is necessary to work on the processes of choice and decision-making: understand the processes that determine behaviour and its modifications, in both individual and collective terms, including, and especially, when they seem irrational or unmotivated, and understand the mechanisms of formation and accumulation of opinions. But this is not enough, because it must also be able to help develop models of public decision-making, be able to analyse controversies, and also all the emotional and

passionate collective and/or public decision factors. It seems to me that semiotics is not without weapons when facing these questions.

But there are also more specific challenges, where collaboration with other sciences is required, provided that semioticians have built a clear and explicit intervention position: for example, the challenge of new forms of sociality related to aging populations and the reorganization of the lives of seniors, that of social integration, especially due to research on education. Research on the practices and forms of life can help semiotics to reply.

There are also recurring questions which belong to all periods, but which have become acute in the 21st century, partly because of globalization. Access to cultural heritage and its preservation are not only technical and economic issues, as it is useless to keep a heritage that people no longer understand, where certain types and genres have been forgotten, and whose codes have become inaccessible to decipher. In addition, when we look at safety and risks, it is not enough to devise systems of prevention, monitoring and protection: it is also necessary to know what to protect, and one does not only protect that which we place value on! Safety and risk prevention are first and foremost about axiological values and choices. In both cases, semiotics can play a decisive role.

J.C.P.: You have said that collaboration with other sciences is required. Indeed, interdisciplinarity is a subject on the agenda. Nevertheless, we know that interdisciplinary work is not always a bed of roses, especially when working with one's nearest neighbours . . .

J.F.: The above remarks do not apply to *interdisciplinarity*, because what is “between” the disciplines does not allow one to reply to the “great challenges” of our time. What is “between” the disciplines, are boundaries established from a tactical and institutional point of view, each discipline requiring a defined “perimeter” to identify its objects and implement its own hypotheses and methods. It is customary to remember that the great advances in science have taken place in these “in-between” areas when the boundaries move or are changed. This is what happens, for example, when genetics makes an alliance with mathematics and statistics, and invents a new field of knowledge, systems biology.

However, when problems on the horizon of major challenges in society are addressed, we know immediately that none of them properly belongs to a single discipline, and this is when it is a *multidisciplinary* issue. Multidisciplinarity consists of treating a problem through a number of disciplines. For example, historians of Imperial Rome have found that a significant part of the Roman population died from lead poisoning, and their first interpretation, in isolation, vaguely attributed this poisoning to the use of crockery and cookware containing

lead. Meanwhile, geophysicists analysing ice cores from the North Pole found traces of lead pollution in the layers of ice in this period. The link could have been established that when archaeologists specialized in industrial techniques and installations were able to show that gold factories located in Spain at the same time used lead in their furnaces, which gave off a large amount in the atmosphere ... right to Rome and the North Pole.

This is an example of multidisciplinary scientific inquiry, and a division of roles that is perfectly clear: the story asks the question, geophysics finds an answer, and industrial archaeology provides evidence supporting the relationship between question and answer.

Semiotics can find a place in such scientific scenarios. For example, all national radioactive waste treatment agencies must address long-term problems (that of the length of life of radioactivity); and among the many technical difficulties of landfill, protection and contention, there is one that speaks directly to semiotics: what kind of support, with what forms of inscriptions, and under what semiotic features, can these landfills be reported to the populations and civilizations of a future that is itself inaccessible to our forecasts, projections and imagination? Thomas Sebeok already tried to answer, creating a genetically modified animal species that would be sensitive to radioactivity! This unreliable suggestion (genetic modifications are themselves modifiable in the long-term and species disappear in the medium-term) has not been accepted! Currently, an international multidisciplinary network has been established, in which CeReS Limoges takes part, to go back to the question.

So these are the issues that attract multidisciplinary, and not disciplines. Let us put ourselves in the "problem solving" mode, and we will find all sorts of other useful disciplines, and not just other human sciences. Basically, whether we face the frontiers of knowledge, in *interdisciplinary* mode, or deal with horizontal issues, in *multidisciplinary* mode, it is with the other human sciences that interactions are less fertile and less useful. You are right, we must get out of the family business.

J.C.P. : Still on your presentation at the seminar, on the question of immanence, you limited yourself to saying "semiotics should not only be interested in itself, in man as it imagines him, as it conceptualizes him, even in the sex of immanence!" That's a fairly provocative image.

J. F.: It's easy to provoke. Making people understand is a little more difficult. Immanence is a question that interests me, but as long as it is not a mere opportunity for the semiotician to contemplate his theoretical navel and persist in his habits of thought. Immanence becomes interesting when you understand that it crosses all fields of knowledge and culture: it can be found in philosophy, of course, but also in religion, law, politics and economics. And in any case, it is an

intellectual strategy of resistance to explanations and especially impositions and regulations from outside of the life of every man, and from above (transcendence).

Immanence is a form of life, or rather, it is what makes possible the construction and free choice of life forms “at the level of man”. Immanence is a humanistic strategy. It begins with Thomas Aquinas in religion and philosophy, continues with the Renaissance in cultural practices, with the Enlightenment to the invention of democracy, and it leads to the twentieth century, and after structuralism, in the invention of a new humanism. For me, immanence unites the directions I wanted to give my research on practices, ethics and life forms.

J.C.P.: You have spent your entire career developing theoretical models and analysing a variety of objects, always somewhat oriented towards language, to the work even of the semiotician as pure purpose, let us say. And now you say, “To arms, semioticians!”...

J.F.: In order to sing “To arms, semioticians!” now. But at least there must still be some semioticians to hear this. I have spent my whole career, as have other colleagues of my generation, especially in Brazil, for here there are still some real semioticians to hear the call to arms. I have also spent my entire career observing the declining role of “intellectuals” in the life of the city: Sartre was heard in the sixties! Which intellectual is listened to today? And before you finally shut me up, I feel the need to publicly say: we have power and the duty to publicly intervene! The chats “between peers,” semiotics “among friends”, is not enough to justify the salaries they pay us, even if they are not so very high!

J.C.P.: You mentioned Brazilian semiotics. Since when have you worked with Brazilian semioticians? Based on this experience, how do you see the development of Greimassian inspired semiotics in Brazil?

J.F.: My first contact was with Diana Luz Pessoa de Barros, a young and brilliant semiotician who came from São Paulo to attend the Greimas seminar. I arrived (from not so far, Limoges), also for my first year with Greimas and his group, in 1977. Greimas set up a “literary semiotics workshop,” in which Felix Thürlemann was responsible for the animation, and where Diana and I worked on the analysis of a fable by La Fontaine, *Le dépositaire infidèle* [*The faithless depositary*]. A co-authored article resulted from this, which was published in an American journal (long disappeared!).

And then, exchanges and mutual visits with Diana but with many others too, have been taking place for thirty years. Brazilian semiotics greatly resembles French semiotics, but is much bigger: there are well-structured research teams, dedicated publications, strong semiotic networks between universities, and a variable balance between an anchoring in language sciences and development

with the science of communication and media. And it is much larger: there are more universities, more researchers, more doctoral students and Ph. D.s, and a vitality that pays credit to Brazilian universities. For me, the reception of my work in Brazil has always been a crucial test: I knew right away what was successful and what was not. And in return, in Brazil topics that the French dare not or no longer approach, or badly or seldom address, are emerging: fashion, design, comics, didactics, TV shows, social interactions, cultural interactions, among others.

J.C.P.: In the last twenty years or so, you have been the founder and director of the Centre de Recherches Sémiotiques, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, President of the University of Limoges, President of the Centre for Research and Higher Teaching Limousin Poitou-Charentes, Vice-President of the Conference of University Presidents, and, until recently, you were Chief of Staff of the Minister of Higher Education and Research, Geneviève Fioraso. You are obviously a politician. But in what sense exactly?

J.F.: I am in politics within the strict limits of my academic skills and my academic legitimacy: to chair a university to develop reforms and organizations I believe useful as a result of all my previous experiences, and to participate in a government to take these reforms and organizational principles to a higher level of action, has for me always been and still is the job of a university. Otherwise, we must accept that this political work is done by others, without any experience or academic legitimacy. And believe me, I have met many in the ministries of these professionals of reform and these professional of organizations, just waiting for one thing: that academics do not bother with political work and let them take their places, and so that they themselves can take care of academics!

The feeling of participating in a moment of the history of one's country can be exhilarating, but it's just a personal satisfaction, and I am under no illusions about the importance of my role. I know exactly, and humbly, why, when and how I acted so that such a decision is made rather than another. But I also know that this might have happened the same way if I had not done anything, or if others had done so.

I can also specify that I take part in political action without being the member of any political organization of any kind whatsoever, except of course the International Association of Semiotics, the International Association of Visual Semiotics, and the French Association of Semiotics! This does not mean I do not have opinions and positions on political matters. I believe that political action is too important to be made a partisan affair.

J.C.P.: You know, of course, the Eco/Tabucchi controversy on the role of the intellectual in society. Tabucchi describes Umberto Eco's proposals as follows: "When the house is burning, Eco says, the intellectual can only try to behave like a normal person, using good sense, like everyone else, but if he considers that he has a specific mission, he is mistaken, and he who invokes it is a hysterical person who has forgotten the number of the firefighters" (TABUCCHI, 1997, p.39).

J.F.: In the posts I have held, I have sometimes been forced to be a firefighter, but I have more taste and talent to prepare the ground before to prevent the spread of fires: in this area, I've learned a lot. And with regard to Eco, when he describes himself as capable of acting in politics as a "normal person, with good sense," a big smile comes to me, from one ear to the other: I see it always as an irony, including with regard to his own person... But he forgets that in business and political circles, "normal people, with good sense" are a very rare and valuable species, whose minds should be competed for by the whole world.

Lighter (but not so much) questions

J.C.P.: A theoretical regret?

J.F.: I have not found the semiotic opportunity to prove the existence of God. Only that of Lucifer. It's a bit disappointing, isn't it?

J.C.P.: A key concept?

J.F.: *Immanence* and *catalysis*, the only way to go under the meaning without undressing it.

J.C.P.: An underestimated concept?

J. F.: *Mutation*: commutation and permutation. No one longer tests the validity of the hypotheses by the operations invented by structuralism. We have lost the sense of falsification. So we hold forth, without worrying about making any kind of verification whatsoever, like the good old days of the medieval gloss.

J.C.P.: An overrated concept?

J.F.: *Discourse*: I have manipulated this notion a lot to have something to say about a subject that fascinated the competition (i.e., the "discourse analysts"), and to refer to Benveniste. Finally, I must admit that Per Aage Brandt, who told me one day that "discourse" not only did not exist but was of no use in semiotics, was partly right. "Discourse" is an out-dated concept, which we learn to go without although we never realize it.

J.C.P.: The imponderable of analysis?

J.F.: *Intuition*: a critical trap. It has an irreplaceable heuristic quality, but it transforms analysis into a process that cannot be replicated, whereas it would need to be the opposite of what it is, in equal initial conditions, always reproducible. Intuition is the initial imponderable condition.

J.C.P.: An object not yet explored?

J.F.: Political life in a ministerial cabinet. It resembles a soup of excited electrons at a very high temperature. I am waiting for the temperature and excitement to fall in order to explore it.

J.C.P.: The nightmare of the semiotician?

J.F.: A psychoanalyst who wants to explain to him why he does semiotics. Or a specialist in “gender studies” who insists that he recognises that the semiotic square is a macho invention.

J.C.P.: There are people who may think that an interview like this can be a kind of hagiography. Is it bad or pretentious to say that these people have never read Plato's dialogues?

J.F.: Have you told me what you expected? Have I delivered your truths?

J.C.P.: But no! You play quite the stubborn Socrates...

PORTELA, Jean Cristtus. Novas conversas com Jacques Fontanille. *Alfa*, São Paulo, v.59, n.3, p.591-617, 2015.

- **RESUMO:** *Esta entrevista, realizada de fevereiro a maio de 2014, trata dos desdobramentos mais recentes da obra de Jacques Fontanille, semioticista francês que é uma das figuras de destaque da semiótica europeia. Neste depoimento, o teórico revisita a semiótica das práticas e a noção de formas de vida, tema de sua última obra ainda inédita. Ao longo destas conversas, que dão continuidade a uma entrevista realizada em 2006 (Alfa: Revista de Linguística, v. 50, n. 1, 2006), Fontanille discorre sobre a atual situação da semiótica na França, sobre a relação entre semiótica e ciências humanas e sobre o papel do intelectual na sociedade. Para J. Fontanille, a semiótica deve procurar enfrentar problemáticas teóricas transversais e responder a questões que estão em pauta na sociedade, não se concentrando somente em aporias e em questões internas às correntes semióticas enquanto grupos institucionais. Desse modo, o maior desafio para a semiótica em nossos dias é buscar novas alternativas para se reinventar como disciplina de vocação preditiva e estratégica.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Semiótica. Práticas. Formas de vida. Ciências humanas. Epistemologia.*

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