

Semiotics – an indispensable tool

Interview with the President of the World Association of Massmediatic Semiotic & Global Communication

By Jorge Marinho

Abstract

In this interview, Professor Pablo Espinosa Vera, President of the World Association of Massmediatic Semiotic & Global Communication (ASEMASS & COMGLOBAL), analyses issues related with University Education, Politics and Economics, from a semiotic point of view. The development of human capacities and the construction of a critical mind are particularly highlighted.

Keywords: Semiotics; mass media; university education; politics; economics.

When composing or decoding messages, Semiotics contributes to broadening our horizons. Professor Pablo Espinosa Vera, President of the World Association of Massmediatic Semiotic & Global Communication (ASEMASS&COMGLOBAL), conducts research on the application of Semiotics of Communication in a range of areas, such as, for example, Politics and Economics. The relationship between mass media / receivers plays a central role in his research. Dignifying the human being is a key concern.

During the 2nd ASEMASS&COMGLOBAL World Congress, we interviewed* Pablo Espinosa Vera and it is his line of thought that we seek to share with our readers at this point. We will begin with the university domain.

The academic setting

Jorge Marinho (JM) – Within a university degree in Journalism and Communication Sciences, what is the importance of the Semiotics of Mass Media?

Pablo Espinosa Vera (PEV) – Semiotics is a very important tool in communication, so as to understand the depth, the intentionality underlying discursive practices, in the political and media spheres. We also have Semiotics to analyse discourse in the Arts, and text semiotics, to analyse literary languages.

The Semiotics of Mass Media aims to reveal who is behind the discourses, the invisible subjects of enunciation and the intentionality of each media operator in relation to its receivers. With Semiotics, we discover the Grammar of each media operator's signs and the relation between sender and receiver.

JM – These aspects are important for students studying Journalism and Communication Sciences.

PEV – Yes, they are. A student of Journalism and Communication Sciences who cannot count on an analytical tool such as Semiotics, will find he/she is highly restricted when it comes to decoding and producing messages.

JM – Semiotics can be used *a priori* and *a posteriori*.

PEV – *A priori* and *a posteriori* Semiotics serves to, respectively, construct and read a discourse. In this millennium, Semiotics is an indispensable instrument. I can't conceive of the study of Communication or Journalism without it. It would be like I were an architect who could go without the study of calculus or the strength of materials. I'm planning a building with excellent design, but it will fall, since I haven't studied Mathematics, calculus or the strength of materials. This is Semiotics. It is the

mother science to all communication systems. At the present time, it would be irresponsible to eliminate the study of Semiotics.

JM – What role does Semiotics play in Journalism and Communication Sciences degrees in Mexico?

PEV – Mexico is completely lagging behind when it comes to Semiotics. In the main public and private universities, the teaching of Semiotics is completely outdated, more linguistic and structuralist in nature, dating from the 1960s, and still based on Saussure. It is of course a very interesting and important form of Semiotics, but it really should be set aside. We are already at a fifth generation of Semiotics. Universities in Mexico stopped at the first generation.

JM – What need to be done to change this situation?

PEV – There is a need to train teaching staff in Universities, that is, provide information on the evolution and importance of Semiotics. We are talking of a movement whose main proponents are the universities. Semiotics has to be taught with a sense of social commitment, which should also be the case in the Semiotics of Mass Media and Charles Peirce. We have to establish a relationship between sign, object and interpreter. The latter performs a reading of the message. Semiotics is interested in finding out how people interpret the messages. As Umberto Eco stated, Semiotics focused on the receiver is what is most important. In this respect, Mexico is completely lagging behind.

JM – In your opinion, what training or background and characteristics should a teacher or researcher of Semiotics of Communication have?

PEV – In the first place, they need to have a heterodox, open-minded spirit and an interdisciplinary cultural background. Unfortunately, most teachers are formatted,

specialising in only one field from which they rarely deviate, like a horse with blinds. It is necessary to be the multidimensional man, in the words of McLuhan. This is the age of multidimensional men. A master or professor has to be multidimensional, interdisciplinary. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary science.

Development of a critical mind

JM – What is the relevance of Semiotics in a context of an educational model for the mass media directed at all citizens?

PEV – In the 1940s, Charles Morris presented the three main branches of Semiotics: Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics. Morris stated that, if a semiotic culture was not developed in children, as they grew older, people would become hostages of those who dominate the signs, the empire of the signs, the empire of discourse and grand enunciations.

A semiotic culture is like a textbook against manipulation. Semiotic manipulation is terrible. Politicians are semiotically manipulative in their discourses, as are the great magnates of the mass media enterprises and many other people who hunger for power. Those who have semiotic power have power. So as to achieve some sort of power balance, a semiotic culture has to be developed from early schooling, indeed, right from primary schooling.

According to Charles Morris, semiotic culture is the point of departure for the construction of a critical mind. It is essential so that people can have a real view of the world around them. In the mass media, there are rhetorical figures which serve to seduce, persuade and manipulate... We see the huge audience ratings, millions and millions of people who are hostage to a massmediatic game which includes elements of fascination and seduction. These receivers can't resist, since they don't have the

means to do so. The great power of the mass media resides in the use of signs, to dominate mind and intellect. Audiences are manipulated with complacent, conformist, uncritical, hedonist attitudes... But the audiences legitimise the mass media. This corresponds to that which Greimas called the “enunciative contract” or that which Bettetini defines as “audiovisual conversation”. Others, such as Lucrecia Escudero, Omar Calabrese and Paolo Fabbri, focus on this relationship between mass media and audiences. These are just to blame as the very mass media operators themselves. There is a relation of complicity. There seems to be a pact, in which I, in the role of receiver, consent to being made a fool of.

The political-economic dimension

JM – Today, with fierce competition at all levels, creativity is important, to make products different, including the products of communication. What relations do you establish between the creative process and Semiotics?

PEV – Here, we are entering the domain of the Semiotics of Productivity and Design, thus, we are talking of the relationship between object and consumer. Those who control Semiotics, in this case, for example, designers, producers, and entrepreneurs, will unquestionably have full control. Today, we live surrounded by very expensive products which really serve for nothing. People revere these objects as though they were golden calves.

JM – Can Semiotics help to be more creative?

PEV – Semiotics can be applied to develop all these objects, but it should also be applied to deconstruct and analyse them, and to create response mechanisms on the part of consumers. It is about giving consumers tools, so as to raise their awareness and help them not to act so compulsively. We live in a consumer society, in

which there is a relationship between the mass media and the system of production. People just fall innocently into this perverse economic cycle.

JM – Does Semiotics have economic value or, in other words, to the media entrepreneur, is it an asset to work with people who have knowledge of Semiotics?

PEV – It is indeed. If I am in a position of economic, political, business or media power and I have a group of Semiotic specialists which provides me with ideas, concepts and consultancy, I will be more sophisticated and Machiavellian. In this respect, semioticians have, as professionals, boosted unbridled capitalism. But, on the other hand, we can't lay the blame on those who manipulate the signs or the signifying systems. There is no alternative to capitalism, there are no third routes, there is no socialism... There is only competition in dehumanised markets. Those who can hire groups of semiotic specialists are in their own right.

JM – Semiotics can contribute to the effectiveness of communication. If we think of the communication of public policies in countries, do you think that Semiotics can have strategic value?

PEV – Absolutely. When politicians and government agents realise the importance that Semiotics can have in influencing citizenship in an intelligent way, there will be an expansion of public policies.

JM – Can Semiotics in general and Semiotics of Communication in particular improve the lives of human beings?

PEV – The human being is a semiotic machine and, as such, we are interpreters of all sorts of messages. But we are also the producers of all sorts of messages, symbolisms, signifying systems... Here, we are talking of the systems of production of meaning. We produce meaning and external stimuli, in their turn, generate within us

meanings for different issues. These stimuli influence us, for example, when it comes to voting for a politician or buying a certain product. In this setting, a semiotic culture is truly strategic, if we take this to an almost warlike level.

As we study Semiotics, our decoding system, which would normally range from one to ten or from one to 20, goes from one to 1000. With a van Gogh painting, for example, with the study of Semiotics, I will gradually discover a range of elements like text, discourse, intertext, at the level of isotopes, plastic structure... Semiotics of Art is marvelous! If my decoder only goes from one to 10 or one to 20, I am a primitive man, I won't be able to transcend my human dimension. Thus, I'll remain on an earthly plane. Semiotics allows us to be sophisticated. Man was born to be sophisticated, not an animal.

JM – Man was born to be happy.

PEV – Yes. People are semiotic machines shaped by diverse codes. When we become specialists in Semiotics, we learn to decode these codes and to establish interfaces with other people. People who don't study Semiotics cannot establish interfaces, and will always resort to conflict.

In terms of international politics, semioticians should be building international relations. There should be semioticians building the world economy, public policies for social development and for Education.

Today, Semiotics is an indispensable tool. According to Peirce, Man is a sign. To forsake Semiotics is to forsake Humanity.

*Exclusive interview held in Monterrey / Mexico, on 21st October 2005.