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PANEL

On Faces and Myths

ERC Consolidator FACETS, directed by Massimo LEONE, PI

Abstracts

KEYNOTE: The Visual Semiotics of Prosopopoeia

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Prosopopoeia is a rhetorical expedient through which the voice of a narration is attributed to a character that cannot be identified with the empirical author of the narration itself. The presence and semiotic efficacy of this technique is particularly remarkable when such voice is attributed to non-human subjects, such as deities, but also animals, objects, and even cities or abstract entities like 'evidence' (in courts, for instance). The face is central both in the etymology of this narrative device ("prosopon" meaning "face" in Greek, so that "prosopopoeia" is, etymologically, the act of bestowing a face upon something, to attribute and 'make' a visage for the actant narrator of a story) and in its functioning: storytelling, indeed, acquires a different connotation when it takes place through "a face".

The keynote conference will propose several examples of prosopopoeia from different historical epochs, cultural contexts, formats, genres, and styles, concentrating on instances of 'visual prosopopoeia' and pointing out, in particular, how this rhetorical expedient is crucial in redefining the status of mythical voices. As Quintilian, the great master of Latin rhetoric, would write about prosopopoeia, this figure of speech is able to "bring down the gods from heaven, evoke the dead, and give voices to cities and states" (Institutes of Oratory, IX, ii).

Key-words. Face; Myths; Prosopopoeia; Semiotics; Rhetoric.

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Selfies: The Myth of Narcissus in a Socio-Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract. According to many scholars (e.g. Buffardi and Campbell, 2008), people compulsively sharing selfies have a narcissistic personality which reveals something dysfunctional. As this behaviour is very common in our society, many connect it to a culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1979). However, other scholars (e.g. Turkle, 1996), underline how our self-representation on a screen can become a powerful instrument to construct our identity. In this perspective, selfies can be seen as “work” we conduct with others, a common reflection about who we are, who we want to be, how our image can be accepted, by whom, etcetera. The latter interpretation – which is shared, in its political meaning, by Lovink (2019) – may seem far from the narcissistic one, but it is not. In “Culture of the selfie” (2017), Peraica reflects on the many readings of the myth of Narcissus and she underlines that Narcissus doesn’t seem to recognize himself in his image reflected on the water, because the image is other from him, and that the only one who knows who he is and what he is doing is the nymph Eco, who loves him and is watching everything from outside. In other words, the myth of Narcissus can be also read as a tale on self-identity where the image of oneself and the glance of others play a big role. This can be interesting in a socio-semiotic perspective. After considering some interpretations that have been given of the myth of Narcissus to understand the selfie culture (McLuhan, 1964; Foucault, 1983 and 1988; Bal, 2004), the selfies of politicians and common people in the age of coronavirus will be analysed, with the aim of showing what these images mean not only for who makes them, but for who watches them and have to build a common interpretation of what they communicate.

Key-words. Face; Selfies; Narcissus; Myths; Narcissism.

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By Means of Memes: Deconstructing the Myth of Online Virality.

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Abstract. Virality is an umbrella term mainstream media, professionals in marketing business and even communication scholars apply to a wide range of Internet phenomena that spread online “like wildfire”, “in an uncontrolled fashion” etc. The metaphorical image of contagion is powerful and effective, which granted great success to the notion, but assigns users a passive role echoing the old “hypodermic needle” model and, moreover, is heuristically pointless; applying this category to a given phenomenon does not help us understand it. Still, today, the success of a piece of media or content is exactly achieving the status of “viral”: something everybody is talking about, all the time, at the same time, even though ephemerally; a digital update of Warhol’s 15 minutes of fame. At closer scrutiny, things spread online not thanks to uncontrolled *replication* but rather an articulate set of *appropriation* and *manipulation* practices. Semiotically speaking, communication is not merely an *exchange* of information but rather a translational *ecology* wherein phatic and identity values play a key role, capable to make pragmatics overcome semantics (Leone talks of an “aesthetic drift” in contemporary communication); in other words, it is not so relevant *what* we are saying, but *how* and *to whom*. Studying Internet memes, the most popular macro-typology among so-called viral contents, may help clarify the whole thing. Mainly circulating as captioned pictures and videos, memes are featured by icastic, synthetic qualities and easiness to be modified and personalized. From the one hand, they feature a striking, “whimsical” element (according to Shifman), a *punctum* (in Barthes’ terminology; e.g. exaggerated facial expressions in emoticons, emojis, *rage face* comics, Facebook reactions, meme icons etc.). On the other hand, they feature modular “serial syntagms” (in Geninasca’s terms), being “rickety” (in Eco’s). Memes can be created according to three main “radicals” (to take up Frye’s terminology), which outline both a chronological and a syntactic-pragmatic typology (a digital update of Lévi-Strauss’ bricolage and Genette’s hypertextuality): *sharing*, *remixing*, and *remaking*.

Coming out from the subcultural guts of the Internet (pre-dating the Web-era; emoticons were invented in 1982 on Usenet, a precursor of forums), such a conceptual, visual, and cultural form has become an established, institutionalized and widespread form of communication even in mainstream culture. In sociolinguistic terms, memes are stylistic practices around which communities of practices congeal, wherein members challenge each other as regards their both encyclopaedic and textual competences, mainly for humour, playful, parody, and satire purposes. In recent years, however, memetic communication has de-generated (has gone outside its original borders as a textual genre), becoming a kind of meta-macrodiscursive palimpsest; an infrastructure upon which many other discourses are being implemented (e.g. art, politics, religion etc.), including the outcomes of the so-called post-truth *Zeitgeist* (conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, misinformation, fake news etc.).

The paper aims at addressing how Internet memes as a cultural form are capable to translate contemporary culture into spreadable tokens and how such a growing form of literacy is affecting the way we communicate everyday over the social media; in other words, it is argued that memes are capable to both mirroring and shaping our contemporary imagery and imaginary (more than often in a subtle, surprising fashion).

Key-words: Cultural Templates; Internet Memes; Internet Ontologies; Online Virality; Semiotics.

Bionote. Gabriele Marino (1985) graduated in Communication Studies from the University of Palermo and holds a Ph.D. in Semiotics from the University of Turin. He has been working with universities, research institutes, and private companies mainly dealing with music, social media, design, and digital marketing. His publications include: the essay about music criticism 'Britney canta Manson e altri capolavori' ('Britney sings Manson and other masterpieces'; Crac, 2011) and the monographic issue of the international journal of semiotics "Lexia" dedicated to online 'Virality' (No. 25-26, 2017, co-edited with Mattia Thibault).

Atlas and Ganesha: Old Myths Nowadays.

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Abstract. Atlas for charging the world over its cervical and Ganesha for having elephant semblances in the superior part of its body, are two controversial myths from Greek and Indian cultures. Both of them involved their faces as principal motors of archetypical positions in the semiotic of space, between the circumnavigation and assumption, heaviness and lightness. Revisiting their origins and their iconographies, this presentation proposes a symmetry of history and contemporaneity looking for the construction of a panoramic cartography, a re-signification of old myths and their repercussion nowadays. Sensorial-motorial and neurophysiological criteria's, together with intercultural physiognomy interpretation and artificial experiences, build together the analysis that will be supported by theoretical semiotics texts, old materials from international archives, ethnographical emic research and artist's innovative production.

Key-words. Semiotic of Body and Space; Myths; Physiognomy; Iconography.

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Faces, Mirrors, and the Riddle of Asymmetry.

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Abstract. Magical, whimsical and enigmatic, mirrors have been a source of fascination to Greek mythology and long a source of curiosity. In contemporary scholarship, mirrors have also been a concern for semioticians, art historians, literary scholars as well as physicists. Mirrors have many dimensions and functions. The mirror is intimately interlocked with the (self)perception of the human face. Without the use of such a device, man would not be able to perceive himself through the sense of sight. Hence, the function of mirrors as device of auto-determination for the human subject. However, mirrors possess defensive and intrusive functions, too. At any rate, mirror reflections pose serious challenges to the interpretation. Particularly challenging is the notion of symmetry and asymmetry, which not only is apparent in the phenomena of mirror reflections but cuts across the history of mankind in a debate that is as fascinating as complex. Asymmetry is found as an organizational matrix within cultures, is found in the difference between the left and right hemisphere of the brain and it is manifested within the human body – the sidedness or laterality of the human face, the anatomical bilateral asymmetry between the two sides. This study will shed light on the riddle of asymmetry and laterality. In order to put these concepts in perspective, it focuses on the the face’s two-sided nature and on mirror reflections.

Key-words. Face; Mirrors; Magic; Semiotics; Myths

Bionote. Remo Gramigna is a Post-Doc at the University of Turin, within the ERC research project FACETS led by Prof. Massimo Leone. His academic research to date has focused on semiotics and culture studies, cognitive theory, and communication studies. He holds a Ph.D. in Semiotics and in the last two years he has been a Research Fellow in Culture and Cognition Studies at the University of Tartu (Estonia). His latest monograph tackled the philosophical problem of the sign in tandem with deceptive forms of communication. His interests include strategies of lying and deception in human interactions, deception in science, distorted communication, manipulation, insincerities, make-believe, fakes and forgeries, masks and disguise. Remo’s most recent article explores the role of prediction in deception. He has published in such journals as *Journal for Communication Studies*, *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, *Lexia*, *Sign Systems Studies*, *DeSignis*, and *Versus*.

Semiotics of a Meta-Myth: The Selfie in the Cinema.

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The selfie is now a semiotic object widely studied from various perspectives: as a text, as a format, as an aesthetic sign, as a practice (see for example Peraica 2017, Leone 2018, Yiu 2018). A semiotics of the selfie must in fact consider all these components, which precisely because of their co-presence individuate the selfie as a myth, or rather a meta-myth, through which experience of reality is realized in a mosaic of faces codified through certain grammars. Still few, however – but it is only a matter of time – are the systematic studies of the selfie in cinema and audiovisual media, as a format (see for example Krautkrämer and Thiele 2018) or as a mythical object. Yet the cinema is also a system of tracing and mapping the imaginary, a testimony of the mythologization of the selfie. For example, the short film *Selfie from Hell* (Ceylan 2015), with today over 21 million views, constitutes one of the first introductions of the selfie in the territory of horror, which is often the laboratory for experimenting with the concerns related to new social actors and objects. Something similar had already happened with *Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014), entirely shot in "selfie" mode with the webcam. *Selfie* (Ferrente 2019), too, demonstrates the testimonial power of the format, capable of capturing also the face of tragedy, while *Selfie* (Aurouet, Bidegain, Fitoussi, Gelblat and Lebasque 2020) ironically reflects on the now incontrovertible presence of this communicative communication in our lives, and *Mon bébé* (Azuelos 2019) does the same with bittersweet tones. Other auteur films such as *Austerlitz* (Loznitsa 2017) reflect on how the selfie has described our ways of appropriating space and memory (see Surace 2019), taking on an ontologically probative dimension, as does the documentary *#Uploading_Holocaust* (Nir and Bornstein 2016). A filmographic galaxy is being created, tracing and simultaneously feeding the meta-myth of the selfie through specific enhancements, aesthetics and semio-ethics.

Key-words. Face; Cinema; Meta-Semiotics; Myth; Selfie.

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Tentacular Faciality. Cthulhu, Medusa, and the Borders of the Semiosphere of the Face.

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Abstract. The starting point of this paper is the semiosphere of the face, understood as a dynamic diagram that organizes in its interior a range of biological and represented faces whose aesthetic and normative acceptability configures a specific plastic cartography (Leone 2019). It is in this semiosphere that faces can be thought of not only as individuals but also as signifiers capable of projecting identity and communication. The aim of the paper is, therefore, to explore a particular topos of this semiosphere, the border, by analyzing two different mythological faces. The face of Cthulhu and the face of Medusa are the tropoi for the analysis of the tentacular borders of the semiosphere of the face. Cthulhu, fictional entity created by H.P. Lovecraft in "The Call of Cthulhu" and published in the magazine *Weird Tales* in 1928, is "a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind". On the other side, the face of Medusa, the certainly well-known Gorgon, is surrounded by venomous living snakes and characterized by a faciality that turned those who beheld her to stone. The turn from the topos of the border of the semiosphere of the face into the tropoi of the tentacular (Haraway 2017) faciality of Cthulhu and Medusa, will enable to describe this semiosphere as a moving in and out cartography limited by feelers, something both for the feeling and the trying.

Key-words. Face; Monstrosity; Myth; Tentacles; Semiotics

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