

Relations that Pass Through: The Nature, the Culture, the Semiotic

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Abstract. This essay analyzes a series of anthropological positions – in particular the ones of Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, Clifford, Appadurai, Latour, Viveiros de Castro, Descola – that deal with the relationship between nature and culture. It highlights the wealth of visions and strategies of these positions as well as their complex and often unnoticed correlations. The essay will show how the doublings of nature and culture, as well as the attempts to find loopholes to this opposition, take on significance in relation to semiotics and how it can inspire new models to think culture. In particular, these anthropological works will give us the opportunity to identify in the semiotic that relational dimension that lies at the bottom of both nature and culture, which crosses the human and the non-human and challenges us as semioticians to rethink the value and form of our own relationalism.

1. Through our twins' gaze¹

Our definitions of culture are part of the puzzle game they would like to explain or even solve. By saying culture or evoking cultures, discussing the value of culture in general or the status of a culture in particular, even writing against culture, advocating the idea that cultures do not exist and that the very concept of culture must be overcome, we are always inventing (but if you prefer, positioning, establishing) ourselves in relation to some idea of culture full of meaning and value.

For this reason, we cannot stop returning to the theme of the relationship between semiotics and culture. Here, however, I would like to do it in an oblique, allusive way. Not only for reasons of space and time but also for fidelity to the idea that we truly know each other only through the other. Or even better, only by feeling and discovering oneself, one's presence, in the moment of transformative contact with the otherness².

The otherness that I am going to consider is a complex one, a sort of twin of Semiotics: Cultural Anthropology.

This twinning involves peculiar and complementary problems of difference and recognition that cannot be explored here³. What is certain is that it would be suspicious to put anthropology under analysis if

¹ Thanks to Paolo Demuru for reading and commenting the first versions of this article; to Mariana Luz Pessoa de Barros and Verónica Estay Stange for inviting me to contribute to the number of *Estudos Semióticos* dedicated to the topic “A semiótica e a cultura” (vol. 17, n. 2, 2021) where a first Italian version of this article appeared; to Gianfranco Marrone and Roberta Bartoletti for inviting me to present and discuss my point of view on this topic with all the participants at the roundtable “Semiotica e sociologia. Sulla via del multinaturalismo”, organized by the International Semiotic Center of Urbino (September 9, 2021); to Nick Harkness, that offered me the best possible conditions to rethink and discuss part of the contents of this paper during my period as associate to the Department of Anthropology of Harvard University (Fall 2021); to Giovanni Dettori for providing useful comments to improve the style and quality of the translation.

² This dynamic is at the heart of *su ballu*, the ritual dance of Sardinia (cf. Sedda 2019a).

³ On the lack of dialogue between semiotics and anthropology in recent decades, cf. Sedda, Padoan (2018).



before or at the same time this same work was not done on semiotics itself. However, having worked elsewhere on a semiotic self-analysis through the lens of nature-culture relation, it seems useful here to run the risk of entering into a relationship with a tribe, a world, an ontology close to us, hoping that in this gesture our twins will seize the opportunity of alliance rather than a cause for war⁴.

Retracing the meanings of the nature-culture relation in the anthropological field can in itself be deadly, given the amount of definitions and ideas that should be addressed. We will therefore attempt a synthetic path, as motivated as possible, between exemplary positions that have this fundamental relation at their core. We will try to bring out the wealth of visions and strategies developed in the attempt to manage it. We will also show how this treatment of the subject relates to disciplinary positions and links to more general socio-political issues. But above all, we would like to show how it offers us the opportunity to think of the semiotic as a relational dimension that lies at the bottom of both nature and culture, which crosses the human and the non-human, which challenges us as semioticians to rethink value and form of our own relationalism.

2. Duplications

Our work on the reciprocal definitions of nature and culture will develop through the projection of a diachrony on synchrony: in fact, we will trace the extreme limits of a path that as a whole allows itself to be grasped in its systemic features, that is to say as a field of positions.

In the differential tension between the anthropology that Lévi-Strauss proposed in the sixties and that connected to various figures of the American anthropological scene between the seventies and nineties (Geertz, Clifford, Abu-Lughod, Appadurai, Sahlins) one can see a peculiar terrain game: a significant inversion that leads from a doubling of nature to a doubling of culture.

The reflections and the authors that we will see later (Latour, Viveiros de Castro, Descola) will appear instead committed, each in their own way, to seek out loopholes in this field. We will get to all that.

2.1 Natural duplications

In the introduction to the second edition of *The elementary structures of kinship*, dated 1966, Lévi-Strauss returns to the theme of the nature-culture relation by staging what we will define a model of transnaturalness, that is to say, a translational doubling of nature and of the natural, which deeply involves and revolutionizes the status of culture within the Levi-Straussian anthropological project.

Let's say right away that the effects of this doubling are not affected by the fact that already in the first edition of his very important volume, right on the first page of the chapter "Nature and culture" that opens the book, Lévi-Strauss clearly underlines the logical and methodological value of such opposition:

[...] this distinction between nature and society ["'Nature' and 'culture' seem preferable to us today", Lévi-Strauss writes in a note added in 1966], while of no acceptable historical significance, does contain a logic, fully justifying its use by modern sociology as a methodological tool (Lévi-Strauss 1967 [1947], p. 3).

This apparent caution, in fact, is actually flawed by at least two factors. The first is that Levi-Straussian discourse treats the opposition between nature and culture as a distinction that is more ontological than methodological. The famous association between *nature* and all that is constant, universal, spontaneous

⁴ We have developed an analysis of semiotic positions with respect to the theme of nature/culture relationship (in particular of Peirce, Saussure, Greimas, Eco, Lotman) in Sedda (2015a).



and *culture* with all that presents itself under the guise of the norm, the convention, the relative (Lévi-Strauss 1967 [1947], pp. 8-9), takes away all methodological mobility from the category to the point of putting it in plaster and leaving the phenomenon of incest as the only exception to this meta-historical condition. Paraphrasing Eco (1968, pp. 290-291) it could be said that Lévi-Strauss's structuralism starts with the best operational intentions but ends up producing new ontological consequences⁵.

The second factor is even more disruptive and decisive for us. This is the framework within which the nature-culture opposition is inserted. In an attempt to reaffirm the non-ontological status of the opposition, Lévi-Strauss puts us in front of a sort of myth of origins, which he magnificently and powerfully recounts:

[...] The contrast of nature and culture would be neither a primeval fact, nor a concrete aspect of universal order. Rather it should be seen as an artificial creation of culture, a protective rampart thrown up around it because it only felt able to assert its existence and uniqueness by destroying all the links that lead back to its original association with the other manifestations of life. [...] Ultimately we shall perhaps discover that the interrelationship between nature and culture does not favor culture to the extent of being hierarchically superimposed on nature and irreducible to it. Rather it takes the form of a synthetic duplication of mechanism already in existence but which the animal kingdom shows only in disjointed form and dispersed variously among its members – a duplication, moreover, permitted by the emergence of certain cerebral structures which themselves belong to nature (Lévi-Strauss 1967[1947], pp. xxix-xxx)⁶.

Far beyond a pure and simple mobilization for a methodological purpose, there would therefore be, behind the opposition between nature and culture, a great founding myth that speaks of the underestimation of natural origin, one could say chthonic origin, by culture: as cultural beings, unable or unwilling to recognize our belonging to nature, we humans would therefore be devoted to a continuous, unconscious, tragic, incestuous relationship with it.

If, as it is common to say in contemporary anthropology, we take Lévi-Strauss's long passage seriously, what we must see in it is a synthetic form of transnaturalness. With this term, we do not mean the relationship between different natures as they are differently defined by different cultures and discourses. We are rather referring to that double movement through which culture emerges from the natural, as its translation that generates a "second nature", articulated and capable of reflexive synthesis, which however at the moment of its self-definition refuses to recognize the bonds and debts that it has towards what now appears as a "first nature". By defining and recognizing itself as a culture, this new "natural" order expels nature out of itself. Culture would therefore be a nature that has (deliberately) forgotten that it is such. Or to use another image, a daughter who has divorced her mother.

In this sense, transnaturalness turns out to be both the relation of complex filiation between these two natures, and the relation that they establish with the definition of nature (the different definitions of nature) that culture (any specific culture) *artificially produces to define itself inasmuch culture*.

Of course, this model is based on a primariness of the natural datum that is not entirely peaceful, as we will see when dealing with the work of Marshall Sahlins (§2.2). The fact is that starting from this assumption, Lévi-Strauss in *Wild Thought*, in dialogue with Sartre and Rousseau, affirms that it would

⁵ For a different position, more benevolent with respect to the ambivalences of Lévi-Strauss's thought and with particular reference to the treatment of the relation between nature and culture, cf. Derrida (1967). We leave out here to discuss whether this ontologization is not an outcome implied *by any theory*. We talked about it in Sedda (2017) reflecting on our own relationalism.

⁶ This "emergentist" idea will return, via Bateson (1979), with different results and implications also in Kohn (2013): here, in fact, rather than reducing the human to a natural that assumes the features of objectivity, it will be a question of reopening the human to build a common ground with the non-human, a ground made of mutual connections and confusions. Cf. § 4.3.



be not enough “to have absorbed particular humanities into a general humanity” but it is necessary to move toward “reintegrating culture into nature, and finally life into the set of its physico-chemical conditions” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 281).

Now it is true that the whole discourse is part of an attempt to bring the human sciences closer to the exact sciences. And it is equally true that this idea of “reduction” is followed, in Lévi-Strauss argumentation, by the powerful image of a dynamic that changes the connotations of the terrain in which humanity and life are reintegrated, to the point of being able to upset the hierarchy of levels at stake⁷. However, there remains the idea of a culture that returns, must return, towards nature. It becomes clear that the apex of culture, and of the reflection of culture on itself, lies in knowing how to finally think of oneself *as nature*. The result is the image of an anthropology which, through this doubling, appears transnatural rather than cultural. Finally, through an Apollonian discourse, marked by agnostic scientism, something Dionysian transpires: the mind immediately goes to Nietzsche and his idea of the Dionysian spell, that moment when nature “rejoices again in her festival of reconciliation with her prodigal son, man” (Nietzsche 1876).

Lévi-Strauss admits it in his own way: “I thus accept the epithet of aesthete insofar as I believe that the final goal of the human sciences is not to constitute man, but to dissolve him” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 281)⁸.

Behind the scientific and scientist mask, anthropology reveals itself as an ecstatic rite.

2.2 Cultural duplications

A few years after the new edition of *Structural Anthropology*, an epoch-making volume is published in the United States. It is Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1972). Its content is at the same time a form of approaching and moving away from Lévi-Strauss.

It is an approach to the extent that the concept of culture at the center of Geertz’s work has to do with the dynamics of the production of meaning and communication:

The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (1972, p. 5).

Beyond the evident differences with Lévi-Strauss it seems to be possible to discern a family resemblance precisely in the common focus on the question of meaning and even more in the fact that, shortly after the definition reported, Geertz specifies the idea of a *web of meanings* speaking more precisely of “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures”; a hierarchy of structures without which the substances of the world (such as the tics, the winks, the false winks, the parodies of the winks, the rehearsals of the parodies of the winks, which he is bringing for example) would not exist (Geertz 1972, p. 7).⁹

⁷ “The idea of some general humanity that is the result of ethnographic reduction will no longer have any relation to the one we formerly held. And on the day we achieve an understanding of life as a function of inert matter, it will be to discover that matter itself possesses properties quite different from those we had attributed to it previously. It will not do, then, to classify levels of reduction as higher or lower, since we should, on the contrary, expect that, as an effect of reduction, the level taken to be higher will communicate something of its richness retroactively to the lower level with which it has been identified” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 282).

⁸ Compare the famous passage that concludes Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966), which is here anticipated.

⁹ This idea of a hierarchical structuring of culture, more a statement of principle than an extensively practiced method, will in any case be at the center of criticisms that in part still persist. For a resolutely contrary point of view, see Abu-Lughod, who extends the question to culture as a whole: “Culture operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy” (Abu-Lughod 1991, pp. 137-138). It is



One could speak of a landing on structuralism. Admitted and not granted that this is what we are dealing with, we should nevertheless speak of a *structuralism without method*, which offers very refined analyzes thanks to Geertz's ability to weave conceptual plots through icastic examples and a writing that is nothing short of brilliant. It is no coincidence that James Clifford (1988, p. 38, 41), analyzing Geertz's ethnographic authority will define his idea of culture as an "assemblage of texts." A definition that could also apply to Clifford's method, based like that of Geertz on the metacomment of small and great exemplary cases.

As previously mentioned, there is, however, at least at the level of self-representation and at least in relation to the idea of an anthropology that has meaning as its central object, a closeness between Lévi-Strauss and Geertz. However, the distance is enormous, particularly if we consider Geertz's starting point. Where, as we have seen, in Lévi-Strauss it is the opposition between nature and culture, as well as the "reduction" of the second to the first, that is at the center of the discourse, in Geertz the starting point is entirely *within* the space of culture: in his case, it is a question of opposing a new definition of culture to an old definition of culture.

More precisely, the starting point evoked is the definition of culture given by Edward Burnett Tylor in the 1871 volume *Primitive culture*:

Culture, taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor 1871, p. 1).

A hundred years later, when Clifford Geertz sets out to define the concept of culture in a new way, it is with respect to this definition and the confusion it had given rise to that he marks the difference. Here, therefore, we do not start from an opposition between nature and culture, which will later turn out to be an opposition between "first nature" and a "second nature", between a Nature 1 and Nature 2 so to speak¹⁰: here, to the core, there is the opposition between culture as a set of substances and culture as a set of forms¹¹.

If Lévi-Strauss's had been a double leap backwards, towards re-naturalization, Geertz's is a double leap forward, towards full culturalization. It remains to be seen which of the two is mortal, whether they are both or not. The fact is that in *The Interpretation of Cultures* the theme of the relation between nature and culture, methodologically or ontologically understood, appears (almost) absent¹². What we are

interesting to note that Geertz, arguing that cultures are stratified hierarchies, implies that they open to complex, contradictory positions; Abu-Lughod, on the other hand, sees cultures and their structures as tools for the production of hierarchies, that is, the operators of a closure of positions and possibilities. In the distance between Geertz and Abu-Lughod it seems to glimpse a sway that will also be in the treatment of structures in Greimas (1966, 1970). For a critique of the criticism of Abu-Lughod and others cf. Sahlins (2000). In other respects, the anti-hierarchical prejudice will also cross the work of Latour and Viveiros de Castro (cf. Sedda 2018).

¹⁰ However, a sort of implicit "triangulation" should be noted, given that Lévi-Strauss (1958) also opens *Structural Anthropology* with a comparison with Tylor.

¹¹ Here we use the distinction between substance and form inherent in Hjelmslev's (1961) semiotics.

¹² A hint is found in the essay on the relationship between the concept of culture and the evolution of the mind in which, however, pulling the strings of reasoning, Geertz (1973, p. 83) seems to anticipate the idea that we will find in Sahlins of a culture that has shaped the biological-natural datum. From here too, from this vigorous culturalism, it follows the fact that in the chapter dedicated to re-discussing what at the time was known as *The Savage Thought*, despite Geertz citing the Lévi-Straussian passage on the reduction of culture to nature that we have placed at the center of the previous paragraph, he does not notice it or does not face directly the hypothesis: for him everything is explained culturally, so much so that the work of Lévi-Strauss is in fact read as a reappearance in new guise of the French Enlightenment tradition and of a hypertrophic Reason, ordering and moralistic at the same time (Geertz 1973, p. 346; and more in general the chapter entitled *The Cerebral Savage*).



witnessing is rather a doubling of the culture, or if you prefer a sketch of stratification. Letting ourselves be guided by the parallel between these two giants of the study of cultures, it could be said that where in Lévi-Strauss it was a question of bringing culture back to its natural matrix, in Geertz it is a question of tracing cultural objects to their semiotic matrix.

We have come to see a maximum of distance. Putting it into a temporal perspective gives us a way to dampen this effect of radical distancing. In the first place, we must in fact consider that it will be precisely the reference to semiotics, which Geertz introduces, that will become the catwalk for trying to overcome the abyss between natural and cultural: a fact supported by the Levi-Straussian idea of a substantial co-inherence between nature and culture, which makes it possible to think that the structural treatment of culture is therefore also valid for nature. We will get there (§4.2). Secondly, we must note that once the way had been opened, at least implicitly, for a divorce of culture from the realm of the natural, Geertz's position itself could appear not very radical, still too close to naturalism.

To realize this, it is necessary to turn to the criticism that the aforementioned James Clifford will advance to the conception of culture, proper to interpretative anthropology. In his essay on ethnographic authority, taken up in another epochal book, *The Predicament of culture*, he will in fact consider interpretative anthropology and his idea of culture still indebted to functionalism and this precisely because Clifford finds in it a residue of organicism (Clifford 1988, p. 273). Clifford thus briefly outlines the distance between a conception of culture marked by a naturalist (or naturalizing) residue and his search for a new position: “we should attempt to think of cultures not as organically unified or traditionally continuous but rather as negotiated, present processes” (Clifford 1988, p. 273)¹³.

It is as if for Clifford it was a question of cutting this invisible, residual umbilical cord that still connects the cultural with the natural. As if only by severing any continuity between the two domains – including the one that even lurks behind the most explicit and advanced culturalist arguments – could the “soul” of culture be grasped: that semiotic dimension that will end up being used, or evoked, even when after some time it will be a question of rediscovering the links between the two domains (§4).

Returning to Clifford, it is no coincidence that precisely where he tries to make this cut it is the same idea, the same term of culture that pays the price:

It may be true that the culture concept has served its time. Perhaps, following Foucault, it should be replaced by a vision of powerful discursive formations globally and strategically deployed. Such entities would at least no longer be closely tied to notions of organic unity, traditional continuity, and the enduring grounds of language and locale. But however, the culture concept is finally transcended, it should, I think, be replaced by some set of relations that preserves the concept's differential and relativist function and that avoids the positing of cosmopolitan essences and human common denominators (Clifford 1988, pp. 274-275).

Well before Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) criticized Clifford and Marcus' book *Writing Cultures* (1986, eds.), openly proposing to write *against* culture, Clifford himself paved the way for an overcoming of the concept of culture. The point is that once the scalp of culture is obtained, what remains, which emerges or reveals itself, is not something natural, like Levi-Straussian nature or some cognitive neural network, but a pure *relationalism*. To establish that what matters, what anthropology studies, are sets of relations, aims to produce a double effect: to eliminate the organic residues that the reference to culture still carries with it; to abandon the idea that culture in general and cultures in their singularity are objects, substances, essences. It is no coincidence that Abu-Lughod will put the concept of *positionality* at the center of her proposal.

¹³ However, it must be said that when Clifford (1988, p. 41) will speak of the Geertzian conception of culture as an “assemblage of texts” will say that these are seen as “loosely and sometimes contradictorally [sic!] united”. In fact, therefore, a not so organic organicism would result. See also Clifford (1988, p. 273) discussing the Geertzian metaphor of culture as an octopus.



As we know, through the examples of feminism and halfies, the author invokes a more radical *opposition* to the concept of culture and with it a clearer anti-essentialism. Hence the need to enhance an inextricably located positionality situated at the intersection of systems of differences, defined precisely by its being *between* systems of unfathomable differences. As if to rediscover a *meta-relationality*, the relation between relations, and thus relieve the self from any naturalistic (and culturalistic!) burden¹⁴. Clifford, returning to the theme in *On the Edges of Anthropology*, will operate a peculiar dislocation of himself. While on the one hand he will affirm a sort of continuity with the non-organicist idea of culture, on the other he will recover the very idea of culture:

[...] any socio-cultural ensemble that presents itself to us as a whole is actually a set of historical connections and disconnections. A set of elements have been combined to make a cultural body, which is also a process of disconnection, through actively sustained antagonisms (Clifford 2003, p. 45).

In short, culture is indeed a body, but the body of a cyborg or a political alliance, made up of affirmed or denied differences, a cloud of disconnections and connections in continuous evolution¹⁵. Hence the claim of

a kind of realism, radically semiotic and historicist, broken free from naturalism and thus better able to grasp the complicated, uneven, patched-together continuities of contemporary cultural life. (Clifford 2003, p. 50).

It is worth noticing that this anthropological position, while it reaffirms the caesura with respect to its great other, naturalism, points towards a relation as fundamental as it is slippery: the one between *semiotics* and *historicism*. This dichotomy can be exploited – and has actually been exploited in the vulgate of a certain anthropology – to introduce a division between texts and contexts, or even more trivially between words and life, codes and experience, corroborating the idea that semiotics is limited to the former whereas anthropology would open to the latter. Instead, coming back to this relation can represent a challenge to widen the field of relationality, to develop a methodology and a sensitivity to face the problem of historical inertia, of the memory of every process, of the diachronic relationality that every semiotic formation rearticulates¹⁶.

Clifford is more proximate to this second position. Tackling the relation between semiotics and historicism he affirms what he calls *anti-anti-essentialism*: not a return to essentialism but a complex position that aims to take identity politics seriously. Indeed, if anti-essentialism had developed in connection with the sensitivity for *cultural hybridity* characteristic of Western modernity and of an increasingly globalized world, anti-anti-essentialism emerges in connection with the need to deal with *culturalism* (Sahlins 1993, 2000): the end of the millennium sees the emergence of a transnational discourse on culture, mobilized in different forms and with different outcomes, not least by those peoples that early twentieth century anthropology had all too quickly given to dead or dying. Peoples who now, through the (re)definition of their own culture, also prompted by the anthropological discourse on them,

¹⁴ In our opinion, the point is to grasp the relation between positionality and essentialization, the latter understood as a product of history (Sedda 2012, pp. 133-143).

¹⁵ “The word culture is deeply tied up with organic notions of growth, life, death – bodies that persist through time. [...] When I think of a cultural body as an articulated body, it doesn’t look like an organic body. It looks more like a monster, sometimes, or perhaps a cyborg or perhaps a political alliance, a coalition in which certain elements of a population have connected with other elements, but with the possibility – which is always there in articulation – of disarticulation” (Clifford 2003, pp. 46-47).

¹⁶ On the relation between historical inertia and semiotic systems we find assonant passages in Hall (2006) and Eco (1975). On the relation between semiotics, memory, processuality, see Lotman and Uspenskij (1973) and Lotman (1993). We dealt with this topic in Sedda (2007, 2012, 2022).



affirm their existence and fight for political-cultural recognition. In short, when culture was declared dead by anthropology, people showed themselves ready to die for it and in its name.

The idea of an *ontological self-determination of peoples* proposed by Viveiros de Castro is also inserted here. However, a profound difference remains between Clifford and Viveiros de Castro. For the American anthropologist this *return* to culture as a claim of a past, present and future history is still a hybrid fruit, a deliberate belief (Clifford 2013). In the view of the Brazilian anthropologist, as well as in that of Descola, this process seems to move more clearly towards the identification of ontologies that are worlds in their own right, implicit and self-consistent cosmologies, or to outline great transhistorical schemes of structuration of identities.

We are in the tension between processes and models. A tension that will return in Viveiros de Castro (2009, pp. 102-103) precisely in the moment of his connection between the double semiotics of Wagner's invention-convention and the asymmetric rhizome-tree relation of Deleuze and Guattari. In the case of Clifford (2003, p. 119) this tension appears instead in the distinction between pragmatic identities and ideological identities. Although between abysmal differences in the treatment and in the role that processes and models have in the two authors, what persists is this tendency to a split within the cultural field, consequent to the semiotic reflection on it.

This dynamic, which we have outlined starting from Geertz, comes to explicit affirmation in Arjun Appadurai's introduction to *Modernity at Large*, another influential volume in the debate on the transformations of the concept of culture. Starting from a reflection on the cultural dimensions of globalization, the Indian-American anthropologist states:

Culture, unmarked, can continue to be used to refer to the plethora of differences that characterize the world today, differences at various levels, with various valences, and with greater and lesser degrees of social consequences. I propose, however, that we restrict the term *culture* as a marked term to the subset of these differences that has been mobilized to articulate the boundary of difference. As a boundary-maintenance question, culture then becomes a matter of group identity as constituted by some differences between others (Appadurai 1996, p. 13).

The outcome of this reasoning is to postulate a distinction between Culture 1 and Culture 2:

Culture 1, constituting a virtually open-ended archive of differences is consciously shaped into Culture 2, that subset of these differences that constitutes the diacritics of group identity (Appadurai 1996, p. 30).

The detachment from the naturalist doubling of Lévi-Strauss begun with Geertz reaches a full reversal through the culturalist doubling of Appadurai. There is, however, a taut thread, not so subtle, that goes from Lévi-Strauss via Clifford to Appadurai: it is Ferdinand de Saussure, placed as a reference for the doubling mentioned above and an occasion for an unexpected self-criticism.

If *culture* as a noun seems to carry associations with some sort of substance in ways that appear to conceal more than they reveal, *cultural* the adjective moves one into the realm of differences, contrasts and comparisons that is more helpful. This adjectival sense of culture, which builds on the context-sensitive, contrast-centered heart of Saussurean linguistics, seems to me one of the virtues of structuralism that we have tended to forget in our haste to attack it for its ahistorical, formal, binary, mentalist, and textualist associations (Appadurai 1996, p. 28).

Leaving temporarily aside the implications of this basic connection between two apparently so radically different reversals, here and now it is worth considering a last author, who has never hidden his debt to structuralism.

Marshall Sahlins brought the overturning of the naturalist point of view right into its land. By developing



a critique of the idea of *human nature*, he has in fact contested the idea that this can be other than culture. To do this, the American anthropologist starts from paleontological data that would demonstrate that certain genetic changes decisive for our evolution occurred *after* the ability of hominids to implement forms of symbolic-cultural activity. Here is his reasoning:

Culture is older than *Homo Sapiens*, many times older, and culture was a fundamental condition of the species' biological development. Evidence of culture on the human line goes back about three million years; whereas the current human form is but a few hundred thousand years old. Or else, to follow the influential human biologist Richard Klein, anatomically modern man is only 50,000 years old and flourished particularly in the late Stone Age (Upper Paleolithic), which would make culture sixty times older than the species as we know us (Sahlins 2008, p. 104).

There would therefore have been a cultural history that decisively shaped our biological-natural history. In other words, it would have been culture that decisively changed our nature:

[...] The critical point is that for some three million years humans evolved biologically under cultural selection. We have been fashioned body and soul for cultural existence (Sahlins 2008, p. 104).

Here we would find ourselves in front of an extreme doubling of the cultural: culture would be the “nature” most proper to man and what in man is considered “nature” – the body and the brain, for example – would, in turn, be shaped from culture.

This symbolic encompassment of the body, of its needs and drives, was the significant effect of the long history of cultural selection out of which emerged *Homo Sapiens*. Respectable biological opinion now has it that the human brain is a social organ: that it evolved in the Pleistocene under the “pressure” of maintaining a relatively extensive, complex, and solidary set of social relationships – which in all probability included kinds of non-human persons (Sahlins 2008, p. 106).

With Sahlins we are therefore pushing towards the crest of a radically culturalist vision, whereby not only culture includes within itself the definition of what nature is, but also what we generally consider nature would in fact be a “second culture.” If that of Lévi-Strauss could be defined as a *transnaturalist* position, given that nature crossed culture and saw it as a translation of itself, that of Sahlins could be considered as a *transculturalist* position, here in fact it is culture that crosses nature, which it thus appears to be the result of its translation.

In the first case, it was a question of dissolving man by bringing him back to material life, captured in his chemical-physical roots, while in the second it was a question of bringing the body, with its brain and its drives, back to its cultural roots. Behind these masterly and provocative reductions stands the shadow of the *untranslatable*: all translations, even the best, the most daring, produce residues waiting to be translated otherwise.

3. Loopholes

While a part of anthropology, pushed by the theme of cultural hybridity, divorced nature to the point of doubling the concept of culture, another part, pushed by another type of hybrids, those between humans and non-humans, sought ways of escape from the nature-culture dichotomy. We will try to quickly analyze and compare some of these loopholes that had surely the merit to reopen the debate on the relation between nature and culture.



3.1 Pluralizations

The first of these loopholes, in chronological order, is the rereading of the nature/culture relation proposed in *We Have Never Been Modern* by Bruno Latour (1991).

According to Latour, the relation of division and mutual extraneousness between the two domains – symbolized by the bar that separates nature/culture – is not essential nor given: it is the product of a specific ontology, the Western one, or even better the one of the Moderns. The relativization of this apparently universal opposition – and apparently homologous to that between nature and society, non-humans and humans – would lead to note that it is the product of a purification process: this process separates the two domains at a meta-descriptive level precisely to allow that in practice they are even more deeply intertwined and freely hybridized. This *dualist* ontology (or ideology?) of the Moderns would, in its triumphal path, conceal the fact that there are other ontologies, in particular the *monist* one of the premoderns, in which the self-description of a hybrid cosmos would produce, conversely, a limitation of the practical expansion of hybridization: “By saturating the mixes of divine, human and natural elements with concepts, the premoderns limit the practical expansion of these mixes”, so much so that “it is the impossibility of changing the social order without modifying the natural order – and vice versa – that has obliged the premodern to exercise the greatest prudence” (Latour 1991, p. 42; see also pp. 139-140).

As can be seen, the two ontologies, the monist and the dualist, behave like the monoplane and the biplane languages postulated by Hjelmslev (1961). In the first case, the point-by-point isomorphism of the two forms leads them to merge and function as if they were a single semiotic which, while breaking down the distinction between the two domains, making the signs maximally effective, nevertheless freezes the free re-articulation of the forms of expression and content that support the sign manifestation. Unlike pre-modern monism, in the case of modern dualism, the difference in the articulation of one form (in function of expression) with respect to the other (in function of content) opens up to experimentation with new correlations that constantly modify both forms. In this case, what arises as arbitrary and conventional, as the result of a space of conflicts that can also be described as a dispute between different hypotheses between syntagmatic associations and paradigmatic oppositions of elements (Latour 2000), is more or less quickly assumed and perceived as motivated, according to the scheme that from the *factish*, leads to the *fact* and then to the *fetish* (Latour 1996, Fabbri 1998).

In monism, precisely because the cosmos is thought of as a single hybrid plane, whose components are welded punctually, or are perhaps even indistinguishable, it is practically impossible to intervene without creating disorder and exposing the collective to the risk of an uncontrolled transformation¹⁷. In dualism, precisely because the two domains are thought of as separate, one can experiment with more freedom and tranquility the coupling and welding between some of their components, however paying the cost of underestimating the mixing work that makes one’s form of life so dynamic, to the point of ideologically and paradoxically opposing the very idea of mixing.

As one can guess, there is not in the abstract a privilege of one with respect to the other model, but two different ways of articulating *relations within a series* and *relations between two series*. From this point of view, Latour suggests, *a priori* we are all always positioned in a space of mediation which is the space from which – through the production of *utterances* – we (re)distribute domains and (re)articulate webs that will

¹⁷ Think of the paradox of Amazonian perspectivism. This postulates in principle many world-realities that insist where Western naturalism would see a single reality. However, in practice, when one assumes a point of view – and one cannot but assume that one and no more than one at a time (apart from shamans, if we have understood Viveiros de Castro) – what one sees is a precise world, devoid of relativity, in which the relations are fixed (§3.2). Perhaps even more fixed than those of a Hjelmslevian traffic light, which, subjected to the Mediterranean reality, would see yellow begin to oscillate very arbitrarily between the meaning “slows down!” and its very opposite “accelerates!”.



form our specific “collective”, its being, its factish essences, its specific forms of symbolic efficacy¹⁸. In other words, the collectives are all *nature-cultures*:

[...] Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than Nature does. [...] There are only nature-cultures, and these offer [to anthropology] the only possible basis for comparison (Latour 1991, p. 104)

As we can see, at this stage of his thought, for Latour it is not a question of overcoming the reference to nature and culture but of *pluralizing its results*. Latour aims to emphasize their factish quality, minor and in lowercase. At the same time, following his work, it is important to recognize that the dualist ontology can be accompanied at least by a monist in which the two dimensions are inseparable, just as underlined by the hyphen – nature-culture – which replaces the peremptory dividing bar between Nature/Culture. A move of no small importance because if on the one hand, it dismantles the dichotomous and universalizing claims of the Moderns, on the other hand, it raises again – once again but in a new way – the nature-culture¹⁹ couple to a status of universal fundamental for the understanding of collectives: in short, it seems to say Latour, the point is not that others do not have nature, it is that they do not have only one and above all, they do not separate it so clearly, as we do, from what we call culture.

3.2 Multiplications

A second position that we want to take into consideration when dealing with the loopholes from the opposition between nature and culture is that expressed in several interventions by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998a), in particular in his essay on *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*. Here the Brazilian anthropologist, abstracting from the specific case study, makes a series of joint moves. Starting from the common sense embodied in the expression “Culture vs Nature”, Viveiros de Castro, first of all, overturns the semantic values classically (or from a Western point of view) associated with it, showing how for the Amerindian conception “culture or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular” (Viveiros de Castro 1998a, p. 470); secondly, and consequently, he pluralizes the idea of nature within a single collective, theorizing the *multinaturalism* of Amerindian thought.

As can be seen, Viveiro de Castro’s first assumption exploits (unwittingly?) the missing slot in the Hjelmslevian typology that we have seen to be active in the distinction between monism and dualism. In fact, the category given/constructed would be associated in a systematic way with the category culture/nature in Amerindian thought (“culture is the given and nature the constructed”, Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 11). We are thus faced with two different *semisymbolic systems* (A : B = X : Y) in which, while the category of the expression nature/culture remains fixed, the correlated content that can be described through the given/constructed category is reversed.

The second assumption, on the other hand, is based on that possibility of “ontological self-determination” of collectives that Viveiros de Castro will explicitly defend in the essays subsequent to the one on Amerindian perspectivism. In other words, trusting his ethnographic analysis, one should

¹⁸ On *utterances* (or more in general, *semiotic formations*) as a place of continuous rearticulation of worlds, cf. Sedda (2014, 2019b).

¹⁹ It is possible that this paradox is neutralized by the fact that what interests Latour, once the presumptuous Moderns are put back in their place, is the common work of translation, delegation, passage that establishes collectives. It should also be noted that the original dualist opposition is actually that between Nature and Society: the fact that the rethinking of modern dualism leads to the assembly of nature-cultures suggests that for Latour the term culture is less flawed than that of society.



take seriously the fact that for the Amazonian populations the realistic idea of a single natural referent assumed and translated by multiple cultural meanings is not valid, but that the real is structured through a single meaning and multiple referents (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 4). Or to put it in its first formulation: “all beings [that populate the Amerindian cosmos] see (‘represent’) the world in the same way – what changes is the world that they see” (Viveiros de Castro 1998a, p. 477).

In other words, humans and non-humans (animals, plants, divinities) would share the same culture, the same “humanity”, but not the same natures because of the different corporealities and the different affects through which these natures take shape: for to take up an example that has become famous, where men (through their humanity) see blood, jaguars (for that same humanity otherwise embodied) see manioc beer. If we wanted to advance a more prosaic example, that of the human being and the fly, it could be said that the common belonging to the living does not prevent but opens the two bodies to a different form of vision which implies the inhabiting of two distinct worlds in which time flows differently. However, this does not mean that the two beings and their respective worlds do not meet, sometimes abruptly or annoyingly. In short, the worlds proper to each body intersect without being homologous. Now, it should be noted that all this does not invalidate the use of the Nature/Culture relation: it rather legitimates to play with it, to re-evaluate its methodological rather than substantial value. It is thanks to this move that the Brazilian anthropologist, without excluding the possibility of misunderstanding it, can think of the otherness of the other:

the categories of Nature and Culture do not have the same content or the same status as the analogous Western categories: they do not designate ontological provinces but point to relational contexts, to mobile perspectives, that is, to points of view (Viveiros de Castro 1998b, p. 430, our translation)²⁰.

In other words, for the Viveiros de Castro of the Amerindian perspectivism “the distinction between Nature and Culture must be subjected to critique, but not in order to reach the conclusion that such a thing does not exist (there are already too many things which do not exist)” (Viveiros de Castro 1998a, p. 470). Quite the opposite. The Nature/Culture opposition would not only exist but would also be universal: “As matrix and condition for the existence of ethnocentrism [what elsewhere Viveiros de Castro (2004) defines “common sense”], the nature/culture opposition appears to be a universal of social apperception” (Viveiros de Castro 1998a, p. 475).

We will see shortly (§3.3) how another Levi-Straussian anthropologist, such as Philippe Descola, takes a diametrically opposite position with respect to this claim of universality to the opposition between nature and culture.

First, however, it is worth noting how behind the apparent continuity between Viveiros de Castro and Lévi-Strauss there is yet another reversal. Viveiros de Castro places Lévi-Strauss as a tutelary deity in the discovery of Amazonian perspectivism, in particular by raising as an emblem a passage by Lévi-Strauss in *Race and History* relating to the encounter between the indigenous people of the Antilles and the Spanish conquistadors: where the former wanted to verify the statute of the body of the latter, the latter wanted to verify the status of the soul of the former (Viveiros de Castro 2009).

However, considering the analysis of the Amerindian myth proposed by Viveiros de Castro in *Cannibal Metaphysics* and working from it, everything is possible except the reduction of the human to nature, to the non-human, imagined by Lévi-Strauss in *Wild Thought*²¹: The only worthy reduction, according to the Amerindian myth, is exactly the opposite, that of nature to the common humanity that all living

²⁰ This passage is not present in Viveiros de Castro (1998a).

²¹ “[...] dialectical reason is not, for me, *something other than* analytical reason, and on which the absolute originality of a human order would be founded, but *something additional within* analytic reason: the necessary condition for it to dare to undertake the resolution of the human into the non-human” (Lévi-Strauss 1962, pp. 280-281).



beings share before that, as in an Amazonian babel, men, spirits and animals end up in separate worlds that can communicate only through equivocal homonyms²².

The point, it will be understood, is not to note that Lévi-Strauss, wanting to recognize in the “wild thought” the same way of advancing the sciences, crushes it on Western naturalism and betrays its possibilities, its intimate ontology; the point is to notice how once again we find ourselves in an interesting space of inversion of points of view, full of revealing and creative misunderstandings. For example, one could notice how both, following the thrust of mythical thought, point towards a “reduction”, that is to say, they crush everything on the same level, whether this is called “nature” or “culture”.

3.3 Passings

Philippe Descola, like Latour and Viveiros de Castro, aims to openly rethink the relation between nature and culture. Yet both in its assumptions and in its outcomes Descola’s position marks important differences with respect to Latour and Viveiros de Castro’s ones, as well as with respect to the relationalist point of view that we have so far seen at the center of the scene. The French anthropologist, developing the works of Strathern, Wagner and Latour, argues in fact in a peremptory and opposite way to Viveiros de Castro:

[...] the opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be. Not only does it make no sense to anyone except the Moderns, but moreover it appeared only at a late date in the course of the development of Western thought itself, in which its consequences made a singularly forceful impact on the manner in which anthropology has envisaged both its object and its methods (Descola 2005, p. XVIII).

The whole first part of the work of the French anthropologist is therefore an attempt to show the *non-pertinence* of the opposition between nature and culture and even more of the modern postulate, in the Latourian sense, of the division between the two domains that the opposition would indicate. Explicit is in this sense one of the final lines of the first part of the volume *Beyond Nature and Culture*:

[...] ethnology derives constant inspiration from an opposition [Nature/Culture; nonhumans/humans] that most of the peoples it describes and interprets do perfectly well without. What primarily interests me are the deforming effects of this perspective on ethnology, for it is here that its creation of illusions is the most pernicious. A sociologist of the sciences may well incur Latour’s criticism if he believes that humans and nonhumans exist in separate domains, but nevertheless he will remain faithful to one dimension of his object. In contrast, an ethnologist who thinks that the Makuna and the Chewong believe in such a dichotomy would be betraying the thought of those he studied (Descola 2005, p. 87).

We have come to the point, as is evident. But before we go into it, let’s specify a few things. The first is that what is at stake is not dualism as a concept, category, and general methodology: “Dualism is not an evil in itself” and all the evils of the world cannot be attributed to it (Descola 2005, p. 80). Not only that, as Descola already states in a preparatory work for *Beyond Nature and Culture*, binary oppositions “are widely used by all peoples in many situations and it is not so much their form that must be questioned, as the universality of their content” (Descola 2001/2, p. 53, our translation).

The point is, in short, that there are (there would be) dualisms more universal than others, more capable of accountability for the different realities produced by collectives and more suitable to act as a scaffolding for a “general grammar of cosmologies” (Descola 2005, p. 109). This better dualism would

²² By making Viveiros de Castro dialogue with cultural and structural semiotics, we have developed the distinction between *synonymic translations* and *homonymic translations*, in Sedda (2018).



be that between *interiority* and *physicality*. Dualism is a bit disconcerting so much so that Descola himself says, speaking to the “we”:

It may well be surprising to find this dualism of the person, which has become somewhat discredited these days, acquiring a universality that I earlier denied to the dualism of nature and culture. Yet [...] there is no lack of empirical arguments to justify this preference, in particular the fact that consciousness of a distinction between the interiority and the physicality of the self seems to be an innate aptitude that is borne out by all lexicons, whereas terminological equivalents of the pair constituted by nature and culture are hard to find outside European languages and do not appear to have experimentally demonstrable cognitive bases (Descola 2005, p. 121).

Now, more than cognitivist justifications (Descola 2005, Chap. 4) to attract us on the path of Descola could be the fact that behind such a substantial opposition – elsewhere the anthropologist will speak of “soul” and “body”, “morality” and “physicality” (Descola 2005, p. 139) – one could enucleate more abstract categories that in part Descola himself allows glimpse when he speaks of a distinction, an indexical consciousness, of “self” and “not self”, which immediately translates into linguistic indexes “I”/“You” (forgetting however to refer to the third person or to the impersonal) (Descola 2005, pp. 118-119). Overall, his work suggests that the interiority/physicality couple can be translated into something more formal category, like englobed/englobing, internal/external, personal/impersonal, and perhaps in some ways also one’s own/others’ own or Me-flesh/Self-body, all categories well known by structural and cultural semiotics, for example, that of Benveniste (1966), Lotman (1985), Fontanille (2004).

Although Descola proposes to escape the dichotomy between the privilege of terms over relations or vice versa, the impression nevertheless remains that in his great work what dominates is a “substantialist” attitude that privileges the data of *terms* over the constitutive force of *relations*: “A relationship thus adds a further dimension to the primary terms set out by identification”. And relations, in general, are seen not as constitutive semiotic features but “as the external links between beings and things” (Descola 2005, p. 113). A statement that is not by chance accompanied by a distancing from structuralism, interactionism and, more generally and more vaguely, from the “excesses of earlier anthropological approaches” (Descola 2005, p. 113).

This positioning is paired with a historical perspective explained in the already mentioned preparatory work to *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Descola in fact starts from the “crumbling of our cosmology” in which nature “covered by preterition an ontological space defined by the absence of humanity” (Descola 2001/2, p. 44, our translation). Now, this fact of Western common sense is being completely undermined by the growing awareness of the effects of human activity on the environment. The ultimate consequence of the generalized anthropization of the world is, therefore, according to Descola, that “its existence [of nature] as an autonomous entity is now only a philosophical fiction” (Descola 2001/2, p. 44, our translation). Radical affirmation but not so much if we think back to the position of Sahlins analyzed above (§2.2), according to which it is precisely culture that has constituted *ab-origine* our biology, our world.

The other consequence is that the object that is opposed to culture (and its imperfect equivalents: humanity and society), is no longer nature but precisely the *environment*. This change of object actually underlies a *change of relation*. If in the *anthropocentric* vision the two domains were separated in the *anthropocenic* one, the environment becomes instead an encompassing term. This change in cosmology not only seems to bring the West closer to the cosmologies of gatherers and hunters described by Ingold (2000) but obviously reopens the discourse on the contribution to the challenges of contemporaneity by those other ontologies that our naturalist ontology would have – until yesterday, to paraphrase Diamond (2013) – obscured.

Net of these futurological implications – will humanity become all Amerindian to save itself, as claimed by Viveiros de Castro? – it seems important to note the distance of Descola compared to Clifford and



Appadurai, on the one hand, and compared to Latour and Viveiros de Castro, on the other. Regarding the former, the difference concerns the question of *cultural hybridism*. According to Descola, “functional hybrids” exist only in myth or fiction (Descola 2005, p. 392): there is an “ontological resistance” with respect to the “movement of transposition” of a term from one relation to another (Descola 2005, p. 388). With reference to Latour and Viveiros de Castro the difference concerns the very idea of *ontology*: while in the first two the ontologies tend to open the cultural space, to multiply worlds, to generate ontological alternatives, in the case of Descola the ontologies refer to patterns of relations that unify the practices, generate homogeneity within the different collectives, overcome time, create stability and resistance to change. The same cultural diversity of surface that strikes and gives pleasure, says at one point the French anthropologist, “is no more than ornamentation” (Descola 2005, p. 390).

The combined effect of these two attitudes means that the fascinating combinatorial game that helps circumscribe the shape of the different ontologies refers to a more classic ontologism: as if the structures identified were to some extent innate or *a priori*. For this reason, if we consider the distancing from structuralism and the constant reiterating of the logical priority of terms over relations, it could be said that Descola offers us *structures without structuralism* and *relations without relationalism*.²³

But the most surprising thing is not this, since as Greimas already pointed out (in Ricoeur, Greimas 2000, p. 85) the retrieval of abstract, universal forms of structuring always tickles a metaphysical temptation²⁴, just as relationalism generates its own ontologism²⁵. The really surprising thing for an author who proposed to go beyond the opposition between nature and culture that so deeply characterizes the naturalism of Western collectives is that his theory has at its heart the prevalence of terms over relations, which is exactly one of the characterizing traits that he attributes to naturalism (Descola 2005, p. 236)²⁶.

In short, it is not so easy to free ourselves and our discourses from nature and naturalism.

4. Raisings

We believe that the path taken so far, albeit in its partiality and limitation, can stimulate useful reflections both on the relationship between semiotics and culture and on the relationship between nature, culture and semiotics. In this final part of the essay, we will then try to draw some considerations, among the many possible ones, not in the form of conclusions but of raisings toward further developments that remain to be done.

4.1 Nature/Culture: divergences and misunderstandings

A great misunderstanding lurks in the folds of this story that we have quickly retraced. Semiotics has in fact drawn from Lévi-Strauss the opposition nature/culture to use it as a semantic category, that is, as an opposition between values attributed locally, within specific forms of life and discursive practices, to different events and phenomena. All this without forgetting that, according to the development of the Saussurian value operated by Greimasian structuralism (Greimas 1970; Greimas, Courtès 1979) it is

²³ However, it should be immediately noted a paradox, that is also a further form of overturning, that we will better underline later: Descola affirms in practice the relationalism that he denies in theory (see §4.3).

²⁴ Our point of view on this is in Sedda (2012, pp. 33-37; 2015b, pp. 675-677).

²⁵ We developed this argument in Sedda (2017, 2018). It seems to us that some arguments of Ingold (2018) also go in this direction.

²⁶ The reversal – the idea that “relations count for more than terms” – is valid, according to Descola, for animism.



possible to derive differential semantic positions not only of oppositional kind but also contradictory, complementary, complex, and neutral ones.

If we look at how the same nature-culture opposition is treated in anthropology it is evident that nature and culture, and especially their caesura, appear as parts of the world – just remember Viveiros de Castro saying that “the categories of Nature and Culture do not have [in Amazonia] the same content [than in the Western world]” or Descola that criticizes as fiction the modern idea of nature as a separate realm of the world – and are then to be considered categories of the expression. As more or less confused and universal domains of social apperception, nature and culture are treated as something that is “out there”, to which content is related in a more or less fixed or mobile way depending on the different anthropological schools. Crushing the plane of expression on the sensitive dimension, which can only happen at a certain price²⁷, one could say that nature and culture in semiotics are elements or traits of the content while in anthropology they are elements of expression. Even when in anthropology the opposition nature and culture is explicitly thought of as a category, and therefore seems to indicate differences in semantic content, it refers to ontological regions, to contents that are actually referents. Or, if you prefer, to referents treated as contents²⁸.

How, then, is this imperceptible but not indifferent divergence possible?

A first possibility lies in the ambivalence with which Lévi-Strauss treated the nature-culture opposition. In Derrida’s words

[...] from the outset of his researches, and from his first book (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*) on, Lévi-Strauss simultaneously has experienced the necessity of utilizing this opposition and the impossibility of accepting it”, preserving “as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes” (Derrida 1967, pp. 283-284).

So, semiotics would have taken the nature-culture opposition as a method of articulating semantic universes, while anthropology would have built its reflection around the rejection of the truth value of this same opposition. Semiotics and anthropology would therefore have divided what Lévi-Strauss, according to Derrida, would have tried to hold together. A division with paradoxical and important consequences. In the case of anthropology, the criticism of the truth value of opposition has, by presupposition, established nature and culture in the ontological field. In the case of semiotics, treatment as a pure tool has stripped, perhaps excessively, the opposition between nature and culture of its historical and socio-political implications.

A second possibility lies in the different ways the two disciplines have in treating these categories. While post-Saussurian structural semiotics, strengthened by Hjelmslev’s contribution, thinks of texts, languages, and the world, as hierarchically stratified systems of differences, anthropology, including post-structuralist ones, tends to identify differences as connections, networks, rhizomes in a flat space.

In both cases, it should be said *mainly*. Although operating through categories on both levels of expression and content has made it more difficult to think of superficial chains, structural semiotics is certainly not unaware of the syntagmatic aspects of the generation of meaning²⁹. For its part, anthropology, even when it seems to oppose any idea of hierarchy, does not cease to exploit, mobilize or build hierarchical differences. A semiotics of culture that focuses on the plurality of forms of translation – understood as ways of apperception and establishing of meaning – can mend the rift

²⁷ In relation to the crushing of the expression on the *sensible* and of the content on the *conceptual* that is produced by taking to the extreme – and making divorce – the pragmatist and structural semiotic logics, we have reflected in Sedda (2020, pp. 57-62).

²⁸ A possible way out of this impasse can be found in our view in Greimas’ (1970) concept of the “natural world” (cf. Sedda 2017).

²⁹ Indeed, it was Greimas’ reevaluation of the syntagmatic that caused Lévi-Strauss to break his intellectual relations with the Lithuanian semiotician.



between disciplines that have *signification* (and its emergence *through and in relation*) at their heart. Realizing the presence of this tear and the need for its mending is the first way to act on it.

4.2 The semiotic, beyond nature and culture

If we go back to the path taken it is evident that, by treating time as a smooth space and the positions taken by the various protagonists of anthropological discourse as compact entities, we have built sign-objects, positivity. To do this we have also evoked their chaining with other entities that populate the discursive and social space: scientism, decolonization, attention to hybrids, culturalism, the climate crisis, the search for ways and worlds of life that can reconcile us with the environment and the living. On closer examination, or from another point of view, all these entities reveal themselves as pure positions, more or less contingent resultants of intersections of differences, of forms of correlation between sets of negative relations. Grasping them as positions can change their identity, just as grasping them as signs can highlight other differences.

A fragment of the intricate game of definitions, in negative and positive, that structures the forms of identification becomes evident precisely in the identity transformations of contemporary anthropology: anti-essentialism and anti-anti-essentialism, relationalism and ontologism. Imperfect translations of a field, historical and stratified, in motion.

In our journey, we have seen the idea of culture not only continuously redefined but sometimes used as an object with which to define anthropology itself: so much so that while people and groups began to claim their own culture, in different forms and with different goals, the concept of culture in anthropological discourse became suspicious, evanescent, equivocal. In our opinion, this is an interesting dynamic: in fact, we are faced with a disciplinary discourse that rejects the formation of a metalanguage and yet distances itself from the language of the subjects it studies, just when they seize the key concept that that same discipline has helped to legitimize and circulate. Guilt or snobbery? Methodological prudence or anxiety about theoretical innovation? Illusory critical distance or need to undermine the continuous crystallization of common sense? The fact is that anthropologists themselves have had to redefine their discipline: *philosophy with the people inside*. This self-definition is an explicit way to distinguish anthropology from abstract speculation but also an implicit way, perhaps even unconscious and involuntary, of affirming the need for a rediscovered chain with those people who do not stop claiming a culture.

On the other hand, it should be noted that in the duplication game that we have traced the demon of hierarchy lurks. The doubling of nature and culture, both in a historical-diachronic or systemic-synchronic sense, reveals the possibility and the need to identify the plurality of levels, plans and fields that while correlating in a certainly imperfect and constantly incomplete way strip the space of signification. If we take seriously, *all together*, the positions of Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins, Geertz, Clifford, Appadurai, we will see how *at least* three levels are at stake: that of Nature 1 (non-cultural nature), the one in which Nature 2 (culturalized nature) and culture 1 (naturalized culture) intersect, Culture 2 (non-natural culture, the culture that thinks itself). One might ask, however, whether the definition of a Nature 1 is unlikely to be affected by the fact that it is conceived and designed from culture: is it not always a “nature” read and translated through the many languages of culture (not just the verbal ones!) with their multiple ways of grasping and organizing relations? But if this is still a limit, will it not be necessary to think of another layer, a more natural nature, a real “outside”, at the risk of building an abyss of levels? Or will it not be precisely the pluralization of languages, the recognition of them to and in the living, to save us from the temptation to build an absolute outside that separate nature and culture? We are clearly faced with a dynamic that gives the vertigo. A dynamic that is even more dizzying if we think about the refraction of this game between nature and culture within and through the proliferation of worlds and



world projects³⁰. The multiple semiospheres that we inhabit in fact mobilize in many forms the relationship between culture and nature precisely to be able to constitute themselves. The very negation of the nature-culture relationship, the overcoming of the dichotomy, the declaration of its irrelevance or non-existence, is itself part of this self-constitutive dynamic.

And on the other hand, doesn't the same example of Lévi-Strauss show us how Culture 2, the culture that thinks its differences, can elevate Nature to the highest hierarchical level? And isn't ontological self-determination, precisely as a claim to self-determination, a potentially higher meta-level, a hierarchically superior creed, compared to the other ways in which we have so far self-described culture and cultures? And the other discourses that aim to overcome culture by proposing in its place to think and speak of collectives, aren't they operating a spin between the ability to create new self-definitions to be placed at the higher cultural meta-level, as a function of a unified self-consciousness of ourselves and the living, and the projection of these same definitions towards the promiscuous depths of natural-cultural, human-nonhuman, hybrids? But is not this ubiquity of the ontological homologous to the capacity, which we have glimpsed and to which we will return in closing, of the semiotic to stand sideways, to cross and suture the split between nature and culture? If this were the case, *semiotics would be the ontological open and pluralized indefinitely; while an ontology would be a semiotic defined and assumed as true*. Without going into detail, it seems to us that we can say that the semiotic, the space of relations, presents itself as a kind of bellows whose levels thin or move away, squeeze on one, pluralize or tensed at most tend to disappear until they appear smooth; a bellows that has many verses and that can be handled creatively, in which the above can easily become the below or end up at the edge, where the space can fold and the extremes can almost touch each other like in a bandoneon. And this image, which would like to capture the continuous redefinition of hierarchies and diagrams of value that unfolds starting from the semiotic formations that we produce, is still simplified and simplifying with respect to the actual semiotic dynamics. Certainly, still too compact compared to the anxiety of openness, discrepancy, and indeterminacy that shines behind the thought of the assemblages of contemporaneity.

4.3 Relations that pass through

How to open the bellows then? How to dismantle it, or make it explode into a thousand pieces, without it losing its effectiveness, without it stopping to move the air of signification, reviving the fire of life and the music of the senses? We must look at the relations that compose, cross and exceed it (there is always something, outside or inside what we are analyzing, that exceeds).

The path taken so far, despite the diversity of positions and ways of their treatment, shows us that relations are at the center of the semio-anthropological gaze. And this in some way happens even in a work like Descola's: the French anthropologist affirms in practice, through the relational construction of his ontologies by means of the projection on a matrix of the interiority/physicality opposition, what he seems to deny in theory, when he affirms the priority of terms over relations (§3.3). The point is that if we can go beyond the separation of nature and culture, it is exactly because *this opposition is only a possible relation among others*. A relation that is certainly special and powerful – no matter if universal or particular – but that *still falls within the space of the semiotic*, providing it with a level of analysis or a mobile hypothesis of hierarchy.

The semiotic, as a weave of relations in the ongoing evolution, exceeds both nature and culture, penetrates into the matter, into the living, becoming the key to its analysis. It is to relationality – and to the signification that is its correlate – that many contemporary anthropological works are addressed, albeit with different nuances and implications. Works such as those of Barad (2007), Henare, Holbraad, Wastell (2007), Kohn

³⁰ “[...] divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds” (Tsing 2015, p. 22).



(2013, pp. 16, 83-86), and Tsing (2015, pp. 33, 40) which, inspired among others by Stengers (2003) and Strathern (1995, 2020, pp. 138, 208), seek to bring the study of signification and anthropology beyond the human: or even better, that try to capture relations that *pass through* humans, matter, mushrooms, forests, traditional rites, daily practices, capitalism and much more, generating meaning(s).

Anthropology seems to indicate to us that what crosses and unites the human and the non-human, what correlates, confuses, and rearticulates natures and cultures, is the semiotic as a relational weave. At the same time, semiotics can offer cultural anthropology methodological tools and theoretical visions in constant evolution to think about the quality and variety of these relations that cross and constitute us, as humans and as parts of multiple, living, meaningful realities.



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