

Tropes at Play in Latour's Work. A Tensive Semiotic Portrait of Modernity as a Semiosphere

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Abstract. The semiotic interpretation of Bruno Latour's work often focuses on the syntactic models he borrowed from semiotics. In this paper, I shift the attention towards the underlying semantic models of Latour's work. This shift does not claim any philological intentions; its objective is primarily theoretical. My aim is to establish a connection between Lotman's perspective on rhetoricity, which is a fundamental mechanism of meaning-making in the semiosphere, Latour's anthropological and experimental exploration in his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, and the tensive semiotic concept of "enunciative practice". In our view, bridging the gap between these research projects enables semiotics of culture to align itself with contemporary anthropology as a leading human science, providing a more heuristic articulation of Latour's Inquiry.

1. Introduction

When mentioning Latour's intellectual debt to semiotics, commentators has mainly focused on syntactic models such as actantiality, narrativity (Høstaker 2005; Peverini 2019) and enunciation (D'Armenio 2017; Dondero 2017; Couégnas, Fontanille 2017; Paolucci 2010, 2020; Peverini 2019).

There is, however, a persistent, consistent, but rarely noticed (Paolucci 2010; Marrone 2010; Bertrand 2017; Tassinari 2017) semantics dimension to Bruno Latour's work. This dimension matches a common idea of cultural (Lotman 1980, Eco 1984) and discursive semiotics (Groupe μ 1970; Latour, Fabbri 1977; Greimas 1976; Greimas & Landowski 1979), even though Latour itself never quotes semioticians under this respect. I am referring to the idea that cultures and discourses not only produce distinctive rhetorics, but constitute themselves through rhetoric mechanisms and specific topologies of tropes. Lotman (2021, 2022) distinguishes these levels referring to them, respectively, as "rhetoric" and "rhetoricity".

The objective of this work is to present a semiotic reading of Latour's *Politics of nature* (1999) and *Inquiry into modes of existence* (2012) focusing on their semantic dimension. In particular, I will try to sketch a portrait of modernity as a semiosphere, joining Lotman's perspective on "rhetoricity" and tropes with one of the most promising suggestions of tensive semiotics, "enunciative practice". From this, I expect two results: 1) outlining some strategic moves Latour suggests to a semiotics of cultures thorough his inquiry into "modernity"; 2) identifying how semiotics can improve the enterprise of an anthropology of modernity, in particular through an extended conception of enunciative practices applied to interdiscursivity. Our intent is to prolong and clarify a dialogue between semiotics and Bruno Latour about his project of anthropology of modernity, whose terms have been set by the publication of the dossier "Projects and Programs: Semiotics and Anthropology of Moderns" in *Actes sémiotiques* n. 120/2017.

In order to develop our argument, firstly, I'll remind Lotman's ideas on rhetoricity and tropes. This will recall and clarify how rhetoricity is fundamental mechanism of translation between semantic domains, which is constitutive of the semiosphere. Secondly, building on a previous work, I'll show how Lotman's ideas apply to *We Have Never Been Modern*, *Politics of Nature* and the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, sketching a portrait of what Latour calls "Modernity" as a semiosphere. In particular, in *Politics of Nature*



some tropisms are showed to be constitutive of modernity, while in the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* they play an important methodological and metalinguistic role through the opposition between “contrasts” and “amalgams”. Thirdly, I will show how the theoretical model of enunciative praxis, as a tool specifically designed to regulate tensions between different semantic fields, can be a crucial tool for a semiotic of cultural informed by the questioning of Latour’s *Inquiry*. We are referring, in particular, to a research orientation of semiotic of culture that, picking up the idea of a semiosphere as constituted by the tensions between different “modes of existence”, or better yet different “types of discourse”, take the study of tropisms and rhetoricity in culture as its main angle. Finally, I will conclude through some general remarks on what our reasoning led us to believe the most fruitful way to interpret the relation between contemporary semiotics and anthropology of modernity, suggesting what we hope to be a heuristic approach to semiotic reading of Latour’s work.

2. Rhetoricity and Culture: a semiotic perspective

Before identifying a common ground between Latour and Lotman, a premise is necessary. In fact, this parallel isn’t self-evident. As we know, Latour, along with Descola, heavily criticized the epistemological stance seeing the world as a natural backdrop of non-human entities on which sparkle the diversity of human cultures. According to him, Western thought is both mono-naturalist and multiculturalist. Now, the lotmanian conception of “semiosphere” is not unambiguous about this. There are several examples in Lotman’s text suggesting that the term semiosphere is in fact equivalent to the concept of “culture” as opposed to “nature”. As we know, Lotman’s modelling of culture as “semiosphere” is directly moulded by Verdansky’s concept of biosphere, which may be considered very close to the classical concept of Nature. While the biosphere concerns and unify the physical world, the semiosphere concerns the world of meanings as a continuum, marked by “homogeneity” and “individuality” (Lotman 2022, pp. 29-30), as a non-organic development of the noosphere. Therefore, Lotman seems to reproduces the idea of a unique, “natural” biosphere standing at the backdrop of the semiosphere, the latter being somehow conceived as the latest development of the former; even when conceding that a plurality of semiospheres exist and dialogue between themselves, it always presupposes that this dialogue takes places against the backdrop of another “natural”, “unique”, “homogeneous”, already existing system¹. Furthermore, the identification of the concept of “semiosphere” with the classic concept of “culture” is suggested in some occasions, as for the following: “Every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘my’ internal space and ‘their’ external space. How this binary division is interpreted depends on the typology of the culture concerned” (Lotman 1999, p. 21). Under these premises, the modern “mononaturalist vs multiculturalist” conception of the world (Latour 1999, Descola 2004) from which contemporary anthropology wish to depart may be considered to be assumed by Lotman.

There is, however, a more consistent and fruitful interpretation of the concept of semiosphere. As Lotman himself states clearly, a semiosphere can be defined “as the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of different languages, and not as the sum of existing languages; in a sense, the semiosphere has an existence prior to these languages... [...] Outside the semiosphere, there can be neither communication nor language” (Lotman 1999, p. 10). As Fontanille notices, in this sense the semiosphere cannot be considered as coextensive to culture”, but rather “the condition of possibility of ‘languages’ (semiotic expressions)”. In regard to that, culture is just the “sum” of a certain number of these languages, which explains why it functions primarily, for Lotman, as a historical reference horizon and as a reservoir of objects for analysis, i.e. as a corpus”. Finally, according to Fontanille, this is why

¹ For a similar understanding of the concept of semiosphere, see Sedda (2006, 2012).



In Lotman's conception, there is no biosphere on the one hand and culture-semiosphere on the other, but rather two scientific models defined in mirror image of each other, both of which are the condition of existence and explanation of what they model: the biosphere for everything that concerns living organisms and their evolution, the semiosphere for everything that concerns languages (Fontanille 2015, p. 23).

In order to draw our parallel, we will agree to this to agree from the start with Latour's idea that a "cultural order", or a "semiosphere", defines *simultaneously* humans and non-humans assemblages (Latour 1991), which do not belong to two different systems, one, the natural, preceding logically or chronologically the other, the cultural(s). These assemblages tend to expand by translating within them what lies, yet undefined and undetermined, outside them. This allows to identify the semiosphere with a concept Latour holds dear: the concept of collective. As Latour precise in *Politics of nature's* "Glossary", "the term refers not to an already-established unit but to a procedure for collecting associations of humans and non-humans" (Latour 1999, eng. ed., p. 238). If we concede that, the parallel between Lotman and Latour is immediately invited by a common questioning. This questioning, which we consider to drive both lotmanian project of semiotic of culture and, as we will develop further, Latourian inquiry into modernity, could be formulated as follow : "how do semiospheres, or cultures, expand by integrating new semiotic entities?"

In Lotman's perspective, rhetoric presents structural features that shed light on this process and provide some answer to this question. He observes, for instance, that rhetorical effects arise from the "juxtaposition of objects and concepts that outside the rhetorical situation are not passable of juxtaposition" (Lotman 2021, p. 109). This juxtaposition causes the appearance of tropes:

A pair of mutually incongruous signifying elements, between which a relationship of adequacy is established within a context, forms a semantic trope. In this sense, tropes are not an external ornament, some way applied to the idea from the outside, but constitute the essence of creative thought, and their sphere [...] belongs to creation in general (*ibid.*, p. 83).

So, in Lotman's interpretation, tropes appear when a foundational difference between semantic domains is violated by a specific use of language. This difference puts in communication rhetorical texts or utterances with their cultural backdrop from which they depart: for instance, a reiterated use, a norm, a deeply rooted habit of thought. In fact, this difference defines a "frame of reference". Now, as Lotman says, this mechanism isn't specific to a particular use of language; rather it describes a general process of creation of new meaning. Considering that, it is not surprising that every "frame of reference" is defined by a boundary, which is recognized by Lotman as the regulatory and maybe most defining constituent of the semiosphere:

As in mathematics, where the boundary is called the set of points that belong at the same time to inner and outer space, the semiotic boundary is the sum of the linguistic 'filters' of translation. Passing through these, the text is translated into another language (or languages) that lie outside the semiosphere (Lotman 2022, p. 30).

Now, when two semantic domains are put into contact by the infringement of a frame of reference, they do not remain intact. As Lotman says, they establish "an adaptive relation" within a given context. They transform mutually, seeking a new form of semantic stability: by adjusting to each other, or by establishing a dominance of one of the two over the other. This is what tropes do: they articulate semantic domains by differentiating a normative backdrop from a textual or discursive use.

In this perspective, rhetoric "figurative" meanings are not mere ornaments, while "literal meanings" do not identify with brute reality. Rather, figurative meanings are just singularities, while literal meanings



are the habits on the backdrop of which singularities arise. Of course, the iteration of a singularity, as Lotman observes, “acts as an impulse for the formulation of a new regularity” (*ibid.*, p. 83). For instance,

In a culture in which rhetorical saturation has become tradition and entered into the inertia of the reader’s expectation, the trope is part of the neutral background of language and ceases to be perceived as a rhetorically active unit. Against this backdrop, [a] ‘minus-rhetoric’ [can emerge.] subjectively [it will be] perceived as a juxtaposition of reality and simplicity, [and it will be] the mirror reflection of rhetoric includ[ing] its aesthetic opponent in its own semiotic-cultural code (*ibid.*, p. 106).

These meaning-making mechanisms cover the level of a meta-rhetoric that Lotman, among others, calls “rhetoricity”. What rhetoricity describes are operations of translation of semantic features from a domain to another, following the “boundary” that structures the semiosphere. From the regulation provided by the boundary depends the rhetoricity mechanisms, the rejuvenating or deteriorating of the properties defining the internal structure of a cultural system.

3. Rhetoricity, tropes and the crisis of modernity

It is striking how the epistemological and political crisis of modernity Bruno Latour diagnosed in *We Have Never Been Modern* and, especially, in *Politics of Nature*, fits in these Lotmanian terms.

According to *Politics of Nature*, the backdrop divide between nature and culture comes with a set of opposite features. In the naturalist cosmology of modernity, the domain of nature assembles, for instance, externality, necessity, singularity, universality, objectivity, rationality. In turn, the domain of society assembles freedom, internality, plurality, particularity, subjectivity, passion. Everything seems to oppose the domains, but the classificatory power of this division resides precisely in its instability, that is the ability of a domain “to determine in various ways the values of the other” (Paolucci 2010). Modernity deals continuously with expansion, that is the consideration of new semiotic entities whose plane of content is undetermined and unstable.

The Covid pandemics, the Ukraine War, climate change are the easiest and closest exempla of the irruption of undetermined events of which the Global Western (or Westernized) World tried to make sense. Consistently with its modern, naturalist setting, its first reflex has been to naturalise them. Pandemics is caused by the lethality of a virus against which modern Science developed vaccines, after long periods of lockdowns in many countries. The Ukraine War is caused by international geopolitical forces. Global warming is caused by specific gas particles. Naturalisation gives a phenomena a controllable universality that doesn’t have to be discussed by political assemblies. It makes it a “fact”. If the entity resists, which means that it breaks this isotopy, showing irregular responses to scientific forecasts, it can be culturalised. It can be said its variations depend on human cultures and characters, and that human values can’t be silenced by Science. The Covid danger is therefore interpreted as a masked desire of the States to repress civil liberties. The Ukraine War is solely the doing of a single, greedy, paranoid and irresponsible character, the Russian President Vladimir Putin. And, finally, climate change is considered to be caused essentially by bad habits of costumers. This is the main rhetoric of modernity: it divides in two irreconcilable repertoires, the semantic domains from which we can derive our sense-making activities. Latour calls it the rhetoric of “fist pounding table”. “It’s a fact! You can’t argue with it”; or, conversely, “These are our values! You have to take into accounts our viewpoints!”. And so on.

Of course, if we look at this mechanism systematically, it’s clear that modernity does both things at the same time. But it isn’t obvious to put to question the naturalist division because, as Latour demonstrates in a phenomenal annex to chapter one of *Politics of Nature*, modernity disposes of a whole arsenal of tropes to manage semantic instability. This annex is called “The instability of the notion of nature”,



notably absent from the English version. There, Latour describes eight tropes, classified in three categories depending on whether they lean towards one of the two domains, towards their distinction, or towards their reunion.

The tropes leaning towards one of the two domains are “emancipation” and “conquest”. Within the trope of “emancipation”, a domain remarks its perimeter and asserts its superiority by negation of dysphoric features attributed to the other domain. Freedom in society is negated by the causal determinism of nature, while natural truths are negated by artificiality of society. When this trope is successfully performed, we will obtain two “extreme forms of reciprocal disdain” (Latour 1999, p. 53). Controversies between “city life” and “countryside” often take this form. On the other hand, the militant trope of “conquest” is typical of ecology. Within this trope, a domain expands its perimeter and asserts its superiority by imposing its features over the other. This trope is highly normative. Naturalization states that society should be, or is, more like nature than most think; conversely, culturalization states that nature have, or should take more the shape of society.

The tropes leaning towards the distinction between domains are “mirror”, “dialectics” and “Relation of forces”. Mirror states the total impossibility of a pole being touched from the other. What humans can say about nature is a pure reflection of social categories in scientific disguise; conversely, what they can say about themselves is a pure reflection of natural needs in political disguise. This trope cast upon the distinction between the domain the values of veridiction, with its truth, secrets, lies and appearances. Dialectics is subtler and places the distinction between nature and culture within the domain themselves: nature, at his core, has always been freely socialised, while society, at his core, is a prosthesis for natural necessities. Finally, relation of forces bases the distinction and its reversibility on the dichotomy strong/weak: once vengeful mother, now nature is at human’s mercy.

There are tropes, however, that lean towards the resolution of the contrast. Reductionism inherits from the concept of *scala naturae*, where the nature/culture continuum is hierarchically organised in pyramids of level of complexity. Metascience, or science of complexity, encompasses all through the concept of system and meta-system. Some passages from Lotman’s flirt with both of them: the organicist influence from Vernadskij is closer to the former, while the works inspired by cybernetics are closer to the latter. And finally spiritualism encompasses all generalizing human spirituality to all beings.

The trickiest ones are the latter, who tend to neutralize the division between nature and culture, and to posit a third, superior order encompassing them. For instance, the trope of reductionism, to which “carbon compensation” belongs, establishes a complete translatability between nature and culture, while potentializing, but not eliminating, the ontological difference that divides them. The same goes with the spiritualizing trope. The latter borrows an interiority typically humans, and spread it over ecosystems and societies considered as flux of energy we should maintain in balance.

Such a proliferation of tropes reveals both strengths and weaknesses of modernity. On one hand, it shows that our semiosphere is very resourceful. In effect, it can absorb an impressive variety of situations within a cosmology based solely on the division in two ontological domains, playing in many different ways the frontier between them. On the other hand, it also shows that each domain can hardly account for any phenomena by itself: every “natural fact” has to transcend in some way in the cultural domain of values, and viceversa. This forces the collective in a chaining of tropes that lead towards rhetorical saturation and, therefore, to the loss of meaningful differences.

This situation has structural reasons, but also contingent ones. The reader may have noticed that both tropisms belong to ecological discourses, which related in turn to the subject of ecological crisis. Therefore, the raise of ecological issues seems to present a lot of undesirable new events whose origin and management isn’t easy to determine within modernism. In the subsequent rhetorical saturation they provoke, ecological issues reveal the crisis of modernity to produce new meanings and make room – and make sense – for changes. In order to go beyond this crisis – which is, above all, a dramatical semiotic crisis – Latour proposes to unpack the values modernity normally assigned to the natural



domain of “facts” and to the cultural domain of “values”. This is not the place to develop this argument, for which I refer to *Politics of nature* chapter 3 and to the work of Gianfranco Marrone (2010). Here, I just want to point out what this rearticulation leads to: a questioning of the privilege of politics and science in defining the semantic constitution of modernity’s component. This questioning calls for a reconsideration of other forms of knowledge existing in our semiosphere, like religion, law, moral, economy, psychiatry. As Latour argues, every form of modern knowledge should participate, at every stage, in the establishing process through which modernity expand involving new entities. This is about a new protocol for public sense-making in a rejuvenated form of politics that, in its pluralism, ceases to oppose Politics to Science as separate ontological domains.

4. Two meta-tropes: “contrast” and “amalgam”

This remark leads directly to our third part. In fact, it also bridges chapter 4 of *Politics of Nature* with the whole project of an anthropology of modernity synthesised in *The Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. This book is an ambitious mapping of the skills dwelling in modern’s semiosphere. As explained in chapter one of the *Inquiry*, these skills are the basis for organizing the heterogenous documents that modernity presents to the anthropologist as an object of study. Here they are, the famous “modes of existence”. Resembling classic divisions of knowledge, such as politics, law, religion, psyche, economy, science, fiction, they are presented in the number of fifteen, and each of them is meant to contribute with their own way to “furnish” of meaning the modern world.

I think it’s important to underscore the similarities of this approach with the project of sociosemiotics as first proposed by Greimas. Latour explains that each “mode of existence” is in fact a semiotic, with its own modes of enunciation, system of veridiction and values. As in greimassian sociosemiotics, each semiotic can be considered as a “competence” through which actors describe the world and themselves, thus establishing their identity as “semiotic groups”. As Couégnas and Fontanille put it

in a general semiotic perspective, modes of existence are actantial scenes, deployed around fundamental “existential predicates” (reproduction, reference, belief, technique etc.). Analysis of the predicate in actantial terms allows us to characterize its specificity: the predicate is defined in its entirety by the set of roles it deploys around itself, and by the set of relations contracted between the actants. The intrinsic semioticity of Latour’s device, and the organon status once attributed to semiotics, lies at least as much in the role played by actantiality as in the use of concepts pertaining to enunciation (Couégnas, Fontanille 2017).

The methodological point of the *Inquiry* is perfectly compatible with structural semiotics epistemological stance and questioning: once overcome the ontological privilege of the opposition “facts vs values”, established by modernity auto-description, how, from an immanent point of view, each semiotic group contribute to the meaning-making process of the semiosphere through its own semiotic skills?

Here, we will not discuss the modeling proposed by Bruno Latour, with its fifteen modes of existence, which are fifteen semiotic skills constituting modernity’s semiosphere “from the inside”. Instead, our interest lies in the method proposed by Latour to achieve such an ambitious feat. His strategy is laid out at the beginning of the book, where Latour identifies the first obstacle to his effort of synthesizing and structuring the ethnographic documentation one may collect to describe the strange people that call themselves “modern”. This obstacle lies in a rhetorical saturation that, as Latour demonstrates, marks an epistemic crisis going far beyond nature and culture, science and politics, and therefore, far beyond the ecological crisis. The problem is that in modernity, each semiotic group is a victim of its own tropism: modernity constantly violates the semantic boarder it presupposes as absolute, which lead to always *acting rhetorically while pretending to be literally, and acting literally while pretending to be rhetoric.*



This has also something to do with the role of experts and expertise in modern semiosphere². The tendency to establish normative divides between domains of expertise (religion, law, politics, science, and so on), each of them supposed to be perfectly autonomous, homogeneous, pure, and mutually exclusive, naturally and continuously leads to questioning their borders. Climate change, as we already mentioned, is a striking example: if it does cause “natural” disasters and extreme events, and “nature” is undoubtedly the domain of science, how is it possible to make sense of its “anthropic” origin and link it to cultural, political, and economical choices? Neither culturalization nor naturalization are satisfying options, but they are just the latest and most evident ones. Let’s take law, for instance. Latour plays with a fictional testimonial by a litigant who just won his trial: “This trial [...] ended with my opponent being sentenced to expenses, and yet I’m still unable to ‘mourn,’ as they say, the crime he committed against me [...] justice has been done, and yet I feel that nothing is really over for me” (Latour 2012, p. 63). What is this totally non-judicial satisfaction in properly judicial matters? How tempting, and yet problematic, would it be to ask for mourning from a judicial decision? Can the expressions “domain of law,” “domain of nature,” or “domain of politics” bear any meaning? Everything goes as if a domain, any domain, by its very constitution, leads to the temptation to interpret the other domains through their own values, roles, and ways of making sense of “reality.” This is why the second chapter of the *Inquiry* is entirely dedicated to a long indictment against the concept of the domain (Latour 2012, pp. 40-58). As Latour recognises, the concept of “domain” or “disciplinary field” had great strategic value in the constitution of fields of knowledge, because it was mobilised to identify their distinctive, founding and fundamental characteristics. The disciplinary identity of law, for example, was reinforced by researchers who wanted to gain a distinctive identity through the search (or postulate) of a “grundnorm”; that of politics through the idea, among others, of research on “power”; that of science through the idea of “rationality”; that of the social through the concept, for example, of “representation”. In short, a “disciplinary field” has an isotopic function: it identifies redundancies in certain elements of a cultural practice that are then established as differentiating connotations. For this reason, it constitutes a cognitive battleground whose perimeter is marked by certain presiding concepts. In effect, these distinctive serve the purpose of preserving the specificities of domain of knowledge, while also preserving the exclusive competence of the field of specialized spokespersons, qualified to grasp and define “the essential features”, the “primary qualities” of the field. However, the marking of these perimeters also presents certain difficulties. First of all, the limits they place on the field of the observable. When we look at the constitution of a field of knowledge, we notice within it “hybrid” phenomena, i.e. allotopes with respect to the traits chosen as relevant within the dominant isotopy. In law, in science, in politics, in the social, not everything is connoted by ‘logical-normative foundations’, ‘rationality’, ‘power’ or ‘representations’ respectively. Let us take the example of the scientific laboratory from the pioneering work of the sociology of science (Latour, Woolgar 1979; Latour 1989; Callon, Latour, ed., 1991). Within it, there are many elements connoted as “science” by common sense: pipettes, notebooks, white coats; although our attention will be mainly drawn, confirming the modern idea of ‘Science’, to mathematical formulae, the simulacrum par excellence of ‘rationality’. Now, conducting a careful ethnographic observation, we would note that the laboratory is often frequented by lawyers offering their expertise for a patent, by industrialists interested in acquiring ownership, by politicians promising research grants. If we were to trust the representation of culture provided by the ‘disciplinary domains’, we would have to consider these elements as irrelevant interferences to the properly scientific. Yet, there they are, and apparently, they are essential: scientists themselves must cleverly compose with their presence if they want the laboratory to remain open and functioning, keeping up with the core of its business, namely the production of scientific writings (Latour, Fabbri 1977; Latour 1988).

² On this, we refer to Marrone and Migliore (2021), and the comment by Tassinari (2022).



A theoretical-methodological question arises here: What should we do with this substantial heterogeneity in a type of chaining that we might call, in semiotic terminology, “discursive”? How do scientific references, based on the circulation of documents and proofs exhibited from article to article, from articles to laboratories, from laboratories to instruments, from instruments to researchers, accommodate themselves with all kinds of semiotic acts such as political promises, juridical responsibilities, and economic attachments? This is the foundational question that, since the 80s, has begun to orient the whole research of Latour towards a coherent program of anthropology that is clearly deployed in the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. According to Latour, this should be the real key for a brand new anthropological theory and inquiry, as the subtitle of the book says: *An Anthropology of Moderns*. Latour’s answer is that such heterogeneity of types of utterances must be valued and taken into consideration when accounting for knowledge production. As he says, to account for modernity, we should shift from the perspective of “being as being” to the perspective of “being as other”. For instance, to remain within the realm of scientific discourses and grasp its “being,” its “essence,” every unmarked “science” element in the utterances, actors, and practices of the laboratory is an opportunity for an intersection between the forms of scientific discourses and substances which, within other discourses, would be marked forms but which in the scientific discourse behave as “unmarked” substances that are nevertheless constitutive of its manifestation. This can be reformulated in terms of relational structures. In order to model the manifestation of a “connotative macro-semiotic”, “in immanence”, it is inadequate to determine its distinctive value by means of a privative opposition of the type “scientific” vs. “non-scientific”. On the contrary, in the case of science, it seems that its distinctive value is determined in a form of participatory relationship, where the language of science manifests itself in a particular interweaving of the scientific (pipette, white coat, mathematical formula, articles) and the non-scientific (equipment, workspace, patents, politicians, financiers). Here is an interesting indication: in order to lift the sword of Damocles of the “disciplinary domain” and to take up a semiotic cartography of knowledge, we should move from a privative representation of domains, articulated by the opposition A vs. non-A, to the participatory representation of discursive fields, articulated by the opposition A vs. A+non-A (Paolucci 2010; 2020).

But how do we account for the participatory structure of knowledge within modern culture without losing their specificities, which the idea of exclusive disciplinary domains tried to protect after all? How does this participation work in practice? And are all the forms of participation the same?

These questions are crucial. With Latour, we criticized the concept of domain precisely because of the dissatisfaction towards some aspects of knowledge production of Western culture it couldn’t detect. In particular, the notion of “domain” tends to value a purified version of knowledge, at the expenses of other constituents that seem more spurious (for instance, the political, the economic, or the juridical aspects that allow the domain of scientific science to exist). It would be a shame to fall in another form of undifferentiation, that loses all the specificities of phenomena because it supposes that, since there is participation among heterogeneous elements, “everything goes” and no real difference between forms of knowledge is worth accounting.

In order to describe semantic participation of different domains and skills, Latour introduces a typology of meta-tropes he calls “amalgamation” and “interpolation” (cfr. Famy 2017). Amalgamation goes so far as to make one semiotic completely disappear under another, while interpolation consists of judging the ‘grammaticality’ of one semiotic according to the criteria of another. In other words, Latour suggests to do an analysis of discursivity underscoring the plurality of systems emerging at his surface. However, he doesn’t provide any further typologisation of meta-tropes, which render impossible to analyze the kind of overlapping that are fruitfully indicated as the first task of a wide-ranging enquiry into modernity. This, I think, is where semiotics can pick the baton of Latour’s inquiry by extending to the wide range phenomena of rhetoricity envisioned by Lotmanian’s cultural semiotics the tensive semiotic concept of enunciative praxis.



5. Articulating “contrasts”: the enunciative practice

We believe that the concept of enunciative practice is the key to rearticulating the Latourian opposition between “contrast” and “amalgam” in semiotic and operational terms³. This opposition is often considered too general and challenging to use effectively. Specifically, we argue that by reinterpreting this dichotomy through enunciative practice, we can develop a more intricate typology of meta-tropes. This typology can then describe the rhetoricity that constitutes the semiosphere of modernity. This holds significant theoretical importance. On one hand, it demonstrates how semiotics can enrich and clarify the insights of the anthropology of the moderns. This involves mapping the tropes between different types of discourse as a macrosemiotic framework that structures modernity’s semiosphere. On the other hand, by embracing the insights of the *Inquiry into the modes of existence*, semiotics of modern culture can redefine itself as the study of interferences, participation, and mutual definition of values that structure large portions of the Encyclopaedia⁴ as “modes of existence” or, more precisely, as discursive, macrosemiotic fields. Let’s delve into the details.

In tensive semiotics, the idea of enunciative praxis was conceived in order to account for “a general critical fact”, which is central for us: “at every moment of a culture’s evolution and at every point of its diffusion, at least two types of magnitudes cohabit: those generated from the system, and those fixed by use” (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998, p. 129). Now, as we have shown, this “cohabitation” is the foundational problem of the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*: the system of sciences, for instance, comprises scientifically connotated constituents and non-scientifically connotated constituents, which led us to posit the participatory paradigmatic structure of the domains of knowledge of modernity (Science vs non-Science+Science); however, modernity installs a discursive use, a tendency to autodescription, that has a preference to scientifically connotated constituents of science, seen as an exclusive paradigmatic structure (Science vs non-Science). Following Fontanille and Zilberberg, the “use” is defined as a set of tendencies emerging or manifest in a semiotic group, “exists” in an actualised way; the system, on the other hand, is defined as the set of constraints that makes uses possible, and that local uses select by actualising some of them, “exists” only “virtually”.

In addition to the two semiotic modes of existence, namely actuality and virtuality, we must also consider the modes generated by texts, discourses, and practices. On the one hand, texts and discourses *realize* some of the tendencies *actualised* in the uses, configuring themselves as a set of singular utterances more or less conforming to the tendencies in action; on the other hand, by *realizing* only some of these tendencies, texts and discourses *potentialize* others, bringing them back to the virtual mode of existence of the system, as de-selected options or possibilities. The utterances manifested by specific texts and practices therefore “exist”, from a semiotic point of view, in a *realized* mode. But not everything that is actualized is then followed through. The actual science practices for instance, where law, politics and economy meddle, are not entirely realized in the official account of Science modern epistemology provide. Therefore, those forms of expression and content that could instead have been realized, because they were made possible by the system of reference and/or because they were present in the uses, i.e. in the tendencies in place, but were discarded, exist in the *potentialized mode*. The potentialization of the marks of participation in science of politics, law and economy is typical of modern autodescription of science. Now, as Fontanille and Zilberberg note, everything occurs

³ The relevance that enunciative practice take in light of Latour’s work has been recently pointed out by Peverini (2023), remarkably expanding the argument of the previous work (2019).

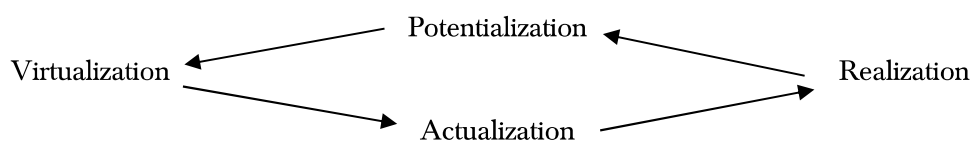
⁴ A similar theoretical perspective is developed by Paolucci (2020), even though the analytical part of its book focuses on the analysis of specific texts rather than on the interdiscursive overlapping of fields of knowledge.



as if discourse were preserving, at each point in the chain, the memory of the operations of which it only manifests on the level of expression the final result [...] in such a way that the figure summoned is endowed with an enunciative depth [...] that provides it with four superimposed degrees of existence: virtual, actual, potential and real (Fontanille et Zilberberg 1998, p. 131).

When we propose such an analysis, we are emphasising the differences between modes of existence, highlighting the contrast between them. This contrast, thus polarised, dissolves, by disambiguating it, the rhetoric effect of the analysed discourse. It obviously establishes another kind of the rhetoricity: that of the analytical discourse of semiotics, which is not discussed here. However, it is interesting to note how semiotic disambiguation operates. The semiotic metadiscourse “brings everything to the foreground”, realising simultaneously, one after the other, those values that in the discourse-object were distributed over several planes of existence (real, virtual, potential, actual). The rhetoric of the discourse-object consists precisely in the preservation of the depth of field, of the thickness we spoke of earlier, where different values are distributed on different “levels of presence” by the modulation of modes of existence. The moment modulation gives way to a sharp divarication between the real and the virtual, as the “meta” discourse of semiotics attempts to do, the effects of rhetoric disappear. Of course, semiotic metadiscourse is not the only type of discourse that attempts to dissolve the effects of rhetoricity by seeking a sharp distinction between the modes of existence of meaning. Many common, “literal” discourses also do so. These are those discourses that respect the established divisions of knowledge, that move, as far as possible (but it is never entirely possible, it is only a more or less dominant tendency), within an ‘isotopic’ sphere, i.e. that culture considers as belonging to a homogeneous semantic field. Rhetoricity, on the other hand, is a more or less controlled rupture of isotopy, bringing into play at least two different types of redundancy.

To distinguish the effect of “literariness”, which tends to homogenise discourses on the same isotopy, from that of rhetoricity, which produces a modulation of the modes of existence of different isotopies in the same discourse, Fontanille and Zilberberg oppose two ways of looking at contrasts between modes of existence: the “atonal”, and the “tonic”. The atonal interpretation only considers the realised isotopy; in this case, “the utterance refers to only one figure at a time” and is thus perceived as literal. This is what happens when we enumerate figures one after the other in semiotic meta-description. In contrast, tonic interpretation maintains the tension between modes of existence. In this case, “the utterance refers to two figures at once, and is then perceived as a trope” (Fontanille et Zilberberg 1998, p. 132). The amalgamation Latour speaks of belongs to this second way of grasping values.



This leads us to a typology of contrasts that semiotics can detect. So far we have described four possible operations of enunciative praxis that act on the mode of existence of semiotic forms: the transition from the virtual mode of existence to the actualised mode of existence, which describes the *emergence* of a semiotic form contained in the possibilities of the system and summoned in uses; the transition from the actualised mode of existence to the realised mode of existence, which describes the *appearance* of a form emerged from the tendencies in use within a text or manifest discourse; the transition from the realised mode of existence to the potential mode of existence, which describes the *decline* of a discarded content, opposed to the emergence of a tendency; and, finally, the transition from the potential mode of existence to the virtual mode of existence of the cultural system, describing the *disappearance* of a semiotic form, realised and then discarded from discourse, and finally reposed in collective memory,



for new re-evocations (perhaps carrying with it the new fascinating patina of its previous discard, as in “vintage”; or perhaps losing meaning, becoming desemantised, as happens on commemorative occasions that lose their capacity to evoke the past and end up evoking only the ceremonial of the previous celebration).

As we have said, however, the interest of the category of enunciative praxis comes from the possibility of typologising the contrasts between these operations, which must be considered at least in pairs, as terms of a relation of tensive modulation. Otherwise one falls back into an ‘atonal’, flat interpretation, where the thickness of the discourse, and the rhetoric that derives from it, loses relevance. It makes no sense to analyse a decline in and of itself: it does make sense to analyse it if it occurs concomitantly with another emerging tendency, so that emergence and decline mutually value each other in their gradual unfolding, creating a ‘distortion’, or if it occurs together with the appearance of a form that decisively takes its place, as happens in the ‘fluctuations’ typical of ideological discourses, designed to affirm one value by narcotizing another. Nor does it make sense to merely note the disappearance if it is not correlated with the emergence, more or less timid or disruptive, of a tendency that replaces it, giving rise to a “reshuffling” of the semantic field; or an apparition, which replaces the void by affirming the new, creating a ‘revolutionary’ effect. Each of these passages of modes of existence becomes significant because it takes place against the backdrop of, or forms the background to, another concomitant passage.

	Emergence	Appearance
Decline	Distortion	Fluctuation
Disappearance	Reshuffling	Revolution

This leads us to a possible cartography of meta-tropes that account for the overlapping of discursive fields, providing a heuristic representation of the deep participatory paradigmatic structure (A vs A+non-A) of the modern semiosphere. Let’s consider the example given by Latour regarding Law and Psyches. When someone expresses dissatisfaction with a legal verdict for not providing proper mourning, they experience a fluctuation between the juridical value of fair judgment and the emergence of a different type of valuation, which likely pertains to legitimate psychological needs. However, Law, no longer the focal point of the event, is unable to address this aspect. Recognizing this tropism allows us to avoid a misleading interpretation of both Law and Psychism and improve their symbolic efficacy. On one hand, it enables the detection of the contrast between Justice and Mourning, which are two polarities within the participatory structure. On the other hand, it prevents the interpolation of Mourning into Juridical practice as if Justice were not defined by its local opposition to mourning, but rather by the absence of Justice, a non-Justice. Once this contrast is identified, our dissatisfied litigant can move beyond their judicial victory and tend to their mourning, marking a semiotic revolution in the narrative of their life. Such a revolution should also be detected and translated by journalistic accounts of crime news, avoiding, for instance, the sensationalization of pain. However, in cases involving political responsibilities, the focus of the news can shift from juridical aspects to administrative ones, causing a distortion in the narrative. In this situation as well, there is a risk of the politicization of the process, representing the amalgamation of Law and Politics. Detecting these distortions can help preserve the values that each discursive field contributes to the case, through contrast rather than amalgamation. The modulation and interference of narratives and values constitutive of each type of discourse thus become the core mechanisms of rhetoricity, regulating the exploration of modernity as a semiosphere.



6. Conclusion

I think that this double dimension of rhetoricity – tropes between domains and meta-tropes between semiotic competences – can be a very fruitful direction of research for a contemporary semiotics of culture. Also, I hope this little sketch of Latour's modernity as a semiosphere suggests fruitful lines of work for semiotics of culture which, in turn, can make substantial analytical and theoretical contribution to the inquiry. I would like to conclude by saying that, if Latour's anthropology of modernity nurture semiotics, semiotics can welcome these suggestions by proposing, in turn, some analytical tools taking further the analysis of modernity as a semiosphere.

By bridging some of the terminological and conceptual gaps between semiotics of culture and Latour's work through tensive semiotics, we hope to have shed a new light on these intellectual traditions; a light under which semiotics of culture carve for herself a new protagonism towards the latest anthropological advances that seemed to have stolen its thunder. We couldn't have done that if we had stick to a more traditional semiotic reading of Latour that, by focusing solely on syntactic model, find in Latour only what was already explicitly borrowed from Semiotics. As opposed to this approach, in our reading Semiotics does not simply stand in tow of Latour's work, albeit very important, but repropose, by adjusting them to the scale of interdiscursivity, analytical tools that allow Latour's inquiry dead end to be reopened and operationalised.

In fact, in our opinion, his contribution makes it possible to grasp a greater number of differences than Latour's synthesis succeeds in doing; without thereby renouncing, as has often been done by claiming to find entire cultural configurations in single texts, the ambition of an overall analysis of a cultural configuration, manifested in a complex network of discourses in a relationship of mutual translation.



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