

Is a “Deleuzian Semiotics” Possible?

Deleuze, Guattari and the Definition of Semiotics in *Mille Plateaux*

Nicolò Fazioni

Abstract. This article aims to define the concept of semiotics within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought, with particular reference to *A Thousand Plateaus* and their theorization of regimes of signs. The objective is not so much a historiographical reconstruction as it is an analysis of the foundational and epistemological dimensions that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to semiotics and, more broadly, to the understanding of signs. Furthermore, this theme leads us to the core of their critique of structuralism and of a perspective that privileges verbal language over other types of signs, along a trajectory that brings into play Saussure and Peirce, Greimas and Lacan, Spinoza and Proust, culminating in Hjelmslev.

1. Introduction

The presence of semiotics, of its conceptual operators and its authors, within Deleuze’s philosophical creation is a theme that recurs with particular frequency both in the secondary literature and in the reflections of semioticians themselves. What repercussions might the reception of Deleuze’s discourse have for the epistemological framework of semiotics? Paolo Fabbri (1997) has left us several invitations to think of the Deleuzian operation as a “theory of signs and events,” capable of linking together Hjelmslevian glossematics and Spinozian expressivity. Semiotics, as is typical of the Deleuzian procedure, should not be understood as a disciplinary field (authors, concepts, epistemological boundaries) but as a problematic field, a set of lines of force and tension connected to the production of sense *tout court*, and to the plurality of subjectivation effects that depend upon it. The semiotic, more than semiotics, is ultimately a *logique du sens* destined to become a (in reality, a multiplicity of) *machine du sens* as conceived by Guattari (1972, 1977, 1989, 1992). To set the semiotic once more in motion as a field of intensities, definitively breaking the ancillary relation that binds it to Saussurean structural linguistics and, through it, to the millennial anthropocentric and verbocentric tradition of Western metaphysics – to the Aristotelian gesture whereby the *Logos*, the defining qualification of the human, is a linguistically articulated discourse, that is, a distinct voice through which the first forms of communication and society are formed¹. The semiotic constitutes a complex domain that intersects and activates different dimensions (psychoanalysis, cinema, the arts, economy, politics...). Its presence is often traced to the, moreover, fundamental encounter with Guattari, that is, to the explicit thematization of this category, yet its roots extend back to the theory of signs developed in *Proust et les signes* (Deleuze 1964) and in *Logic of Sense* as the articulation of bodies and signs (Deleuze 1969). Semiotics represents a new formulation of a problem – the problem of sense (not meaning or designation) – which does not concern language alone but the concatenation of signs and bodies, functions, and matter. Semiotics activates a series of problematic nodes, serving as transdisciplinary operators of fundamental importance for the objectives of Deleuzian thought. There are numerous Deleuzian concepts that demonstrate an intrinsically semiotic nature or reveal semiotic consequences and effects – placing the disciplinary apparatuses of the philosophy of language and the theory of signification under tension. Latour (1991) employs a number of Deleuzian conceptual tools in order to rethink the dynamics of collective enunciation within Actor – Network Theory and the hybridization of human and non-human actors. The idea of the rhizome, with its flows and becomings, loses its ontological status and becomes part of a descriptive methodology that

¹ Fazioni (2025).

focuses more closely on the individual nodes that compose it, on points of friction and stability, and on the fragility of mediation points. As in Deleuze, semiosis is not shaped by dualistic elements (essentialism, referentialism) or by deep structures, but exclusively by relations, mechanisms of translation, and local connections. Collective enunciation, conceived as a network of delegations, puts into practice Deleuzian anti-subjectivism as an antidote to, or a way of overcoming, the psychological residues that remain in Benveniste's position (1966). This results in a modal act that "makes others speak," activating a network of articulations, mediations, spokespersons, and delegations – a true logistics of speech. Deleuzian anti-anthropocentrism (Deleuze 1969) is expressed here through the notion of non-human co-enunciators (laboratories, instruments, machines, texts, numbers). At this point, one of the decisive aspects for any critical reconstruction of the Deleuze – semiotics nexus comes into play, namely Latour's use of the Greimassian and post-Greimassian concept of the *actant* as a foundational element of the hybrid network of enunciation. In other words, without dwelling extensively on historical or conceptual genealogies, Latour (1984, 2005, 2012) points to a possible – if not necessary – convergence between the epistemological framework of actantial semiotics and Deleuze's non-subjectivist theory of enunciation (Paolucci 2020). Beyond the few Deleuzian remarks on Greimas and the explicit critiques directed at structurally oriented semiotic schools, a subtle alliance appears to emerge between these two approaches, each of which is used in relation to the other as a force preventing disciplinary closure. Latour mobilizes the concept of the actant (as a real power rather than a logical form) in order to render collective enunciation (*agencement*) operative. While agency here is literally dispersed within the rhizome, the application of the notion of the actant makes it possible to redistribute it functionally across the unstable nodes of the assemblage. This very concept, to which Deleuze and Guattari attribute particular centrality, expresses the *agencement* of actions and passions, of the plane of bodies and that of signs – another field of inter-possibility and reciprocal encounter/conflict with post-Greimassian semiotics (Landowski 2005; Fontanille 2015). At least four general axes of deleuzian development emerge: (a) the distribution of enunciation; (b) the pathemic component of semiosis; (c) the tensive dynamics (speed, intensity, rhythms, regimes of tension, charges); and (d) images analysis (Dondero 2023). Investigating the semiotic, equally defined, entails traversing the entirety of Deleuze's conceptual trajectory, from the most strictly philosophical themes (the symptom in Nietzsche, expression in Spinoza, Stoic logic...)² to literary and stylistic concerns (the signs in Proust, Carroll's paradoxes, Kafka, critique and clinic)³, as well as engagement with structuralism (Deleuze 1972) and Lacanian psychoanalysis (the unconscious as language, the logic of the signifier)⁴, cinema, and art (Peirce, images). On the one hand, the task is therefore to provide a comprehensive account of Deleuze's reappropriation of semiotics, offering a theoretically and critically relevant reconstruction of it – this essay, with its highly specific textual focus, represents a partial outcome of a broader research project aimed at traversing the entire body of work by Deleuze and Guattari (Fazioni 2025; Fazioni 2025a). On the other hand, our aim is to disengage Deleuze from readings that interpret the overcoming of structuralism as an alignment either with pragmatic theories (Austin, Searle) or with an exclusively interpretive semiotics, often grounded in an unsystematic use of Peirce. Behind the return to a deeply Spinozist Hjelmslev – the theme of expression as the elimination of sign-based dualism – an unexpected terrain opens up for a semiotics of tensors, rhythms, images, bodies, and passions, a terrain fully shared with and co-inhabited by the post-Greimassian tradition (Montanari 2016, 2020, Fazioni 2025). In this context, unable to reconstruct this rhizome in its entirety, we will limit ourselves to a specific task: to define the role of the "semiotic" as a plane of problems and intensities, of regimes and strata, within the famous pages of *Mille Plateaux*, and in particular within the section entitled *Sur quelque régimes de signes*. While fully aware of the limitations of this perspective, and of the necessity to connect these pages to other texts, we contend that this analysis can provide an introductory framework and a basis for further inquiry. It is around this question that the following sections will be organized: a methodological note (par. 2), an analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's critique of linguistic and semiology (par. 3); the issue of immanence between semiotics and philosophy (par. 3); the epistemological field of a "deleuzian semiotics" (par. 4).

² Deleuze (1962, 1968, 1969); Hardt (1993).

³ Deleuze, Guattari (1975).

⁴ Lacan (1966, 1973); Milner (2008).

2. (Anti-) Methodological Note

Before entering into the core of the text, it should be noted that Deleuze and Guattari's references to structural linguistics and to the semiotic tradition connected to it do not constitute an attempt at historical or philological reconstruction. In several passages, the two authors explicitly distinguish between *semiotics* and *semiology*. Nevertheless, the main idea attributed to signifying semiotics – namely, the chain of referrals from one signifier to another and the reference to interpretosis – seems to reverse this distinction, effectively identifying Peirce's unlimited semiosis and interpretive semiotics rather than structural models (Fabbri 1998). It should be specified that Deleuze and Guattari reread the cornerstones of Saussurean semiotics through their profound reworking within the framework of so-called “French structuralism,” and in particular through the conceptual corpus of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Lacan (Deleuze 1972). Lacan, in particular, plays a decisive role in the redefinition of the sign as a Markovian and differential chain, in which the signifier prevails over the signified and syntactic mechanisms prevail over semantic ones. We also owe to the French psychoanalyst an important reception of Peircean terminology (Lacan 2006), often mobilized to reconfigure the definition of the sign function (“a sign is something that represents something else to another sign”). Here we encounter a first semantic stratigraphy that overlays Saussure and Peirce, a stratigraphy that must have been well known and central within the entire French post-structuralist milieu, given the proximity that Guattari (and Deleuze himself) maintained with the Lacanian environment. Barthes himself, through his influence on the semiology of images and cinema (Metz), overturned the foundational relation between semiotics and linguistics. Another source of potential misunderstanding in bringing Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy into dialogue with disciplinary semiotics lies in the – strategic – shift from the signifier/signified pair to the expression/content pair. The former is in fact deployed polemically even against authors who believed they had fully moved beyond it, in order to show that the signifier is not a descriptive category but a pragmatic modality, a dispositif for the capture of sense. The latter pair is reactivated, through and beyond Hjelmslev, in the direction of the Spinozist problem of expression as an immanent plane in which what is expressed is never different from that which expresses it. In other words, Deleuze's notion of expression is hardly comparable to the term “expression” as used in the main semiotic texts, since it is a problematic concept of ontological provenance that tends to turn the sign into a non-dualistic mechanism (Duns Scotus, Spinoza, Leibniz) – a form of impact, force, and tension. There are certainly shifts, oscillations, and perhaps even imprecisions in the Deleuzian–Guattarian reconstruction; yet their aim is by no means to provide a hermeneutic framework of the various semiotic traditions. Rather, their goal is to probe the limits and potentials of different semiotic regimes, even at the cost of producing short circuits among the authors they cite – or perhaps precisely in order to produce such short circuits.

3. Linguistics, Semiotics, and Semiology

In *Mille Plateaux*, we can recognize a first positive definition of the semiotic field unfolds, albeit within the context of a predominantly negative definitional procedure aimed at highlighting what should not be understood as semiotics (the flattening of semiotics into a single type of sign regime, the *signifiant*, or its complete dependence on linguistics) and the limits of such a perspective. This *pars destruens* takes shape in the first of the planes mentioned, certainly one of the most famous and debated, considered by interpreters as the central locus of the overcoming of structuralism⁵. The explosive critique by Deleuze and Guattari demonstrates how the linguistic paradigm, albeit in different and articulated ways, underpins both the theories of structure⁶ and the *signifiant* of continental origin (Saussure, Barthes, Jakobson, Benveniste), the *semiology* (Deleuze 1985), and the American syntactic-grammatical operation (Chomsky 1957). We will not delve here into the aspects – though important and interesting – of the

⁵ The relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism is, in fact, far more nuanced and articulated than it appears from this textual passage. As Viveiros de Castro (2014) points out, the latter should be understood as a development and transformation of the former, rather than as a simple rupture.

⁶ Vizzardelli, Panattoni (2026).

critique of linguistics in general and its main schools: there are excellent studies on this anti-semiology⁷ to which we refer, focusing instead on the search for a positive definition of the semiotic. In extreme summary, the main pillars of structural semiology are dismantled in the analysis of the various postulates: a) language as an informative system (significance, representational, denotative, referential function) and communicative (subjectivity as the core of language) gives way to a primarily pragmatic dimension where no linguistic aspect exists that is not intrinsically linked to socio-political presuppositions; b) the statement is not defined by its representational value but by the regime of power and signification that makes it exist; c) the statement should not be reduced to the *signifiant*, nor enunciation to subjectivity; d) a statement should be read as a “watchword,” a transformation of a speech act into a pragmatic, illocutive form of enunciation; e) there is no individual enunciation but only a collective concatenation of enunciation; f) content and expression are not rigid planes but variables of concatenation, corresponding to meaning and *signifiant* only as a formal abstraction; g) instead of a rigid system of constants, the study of a language should privilege the understanding of variations, tensors, differential forces, and style (as language within language). Against the foundational power of Saussure’s *langue* and Benveniste’s theory of subjective enunciation, Deleuze and Guattari deploy the theories of Bakhtin and Ducrot; against Chomsky’s grammar, Labov’s sociolinguistics, or, again, Kafka’s literature as stylistic production of a *minor language*, of an internal variation of language (Deleuze, Guattari 1975). *Linguistics versus stylistics, writing, literature* (Deleuze 1993): one of the most interesting traits of Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-semiology, to which we have to return in a future work. On the one hand, Ducrot (1984), even more than Austin (1962) or Searle (1969), allows our authors to introduce the *illocutionary* dimension of language: an enunciation does not merely describe or represent, but concretely produces a modification in the state of affairs and the relationships between them. From this emerges the idea of the statement as a watchword, a semiotic and social device simultaneously capable of imposing real change (Anscombe, Ducrot 1983). Moreover, Ducrot highlights the polyphonic, choral, plural dimension of enunciation, which is never the property of a single subject: it always contains multiple voices (as in the free indirect discourse discussed by Deleuze and Guattari), articulates them, and puts them into play precisely because it is always situated within a specific social nexus. This produces a theory of enunciative positions that fragments and differentiates enunciation (speaker, implicit enunciator, other voices...), immediately multiplying the subjective and identity functions described, for example, in Benveniste’s theory (1966). Here the *subject is a semiotic multiplicity*. On the other hand, Bakhtin (1929, 1975). For this author, language is never a homogeneous system realized by universal constants. Rather, it is a flow of tensions, conflicts, and inventions that gives rise to a plurality of linguistic styles and registers working a language from within (*heteroglossia*). Each statement is always connected to other statements, including pre-existing ones, and to possible responses (*dialogism*). Language is not a structure but a field of forces. Exactly as in Kafka’s literature, where the major language (the code) is torn apart by the increasing intensity of the experiments and performances of a minor language – in this, the operation outlined continues the thread of *Logique du sens*, strongly inspired by Blanchot (1955) and his theory of language and writing as the definitive rupture of the Western metaphysical paradigm. A semiotics that is not open to the pragmatic dimension, to the multiplicity of voices and forces, to the work of minor languages, and to the production of variable differences, can only end up as linguistics – or, for our authors, as a metaphysics of language that immobilizes all becoming, homogenizes all difference, continues to reproduce dualistic schemes, and promotes socio-cultural standards to which one must conform. If this is semiotics – elsewhere defined precisely as semiology – then Deleuze’s position is evidently anti-semiotic. In the subsequent plane, however, we find a broader, more complex, definition of the semiotic field:

On appelle régime de signes toute formalisation d’expression spécifique, au moins dans le cas où l’expression est linguistique. Un régime de signes constitue une sémiotique. Mais il semble difficile de considérer les sémiotiques en elles-mêmes: en effet, il y a toujours une forme de contenu, à la fois inséparable et indépendante de la forme d’expression; et les deux formes renvoient à des agencements qui ne sont pas principalement linguistiques. L’ou ne peut attacher aucun privilège particulier à la

⁷ Cantone (2024); Genosko (1998).



forme ou au régime du 'signifiant'. Si l'on appelle sémiologie la sémiotique signifiante, la sémiologie n'est qu'un régime de signes parmi d'autres, et pas le plus important (ivi, p. 140).

Here, Deleuze and Guattari resume the discussion apparently interrupted in the famous text *Proust et les signes* on the concept of the sign and the relationship between different types of signs. A semiotics is, in fact, nothing other than a regime of signs: note carefully the grammatical form used in the text when writing "une sémiotique." There is no "the" semiotics as a discipline; there is only one semiotics among many possible within the plane or problematic field of sense. A semiotics is, therefore, a regime of signs and not, as in semiological perspectives, a linguistic regime. The concatenations linking, without opposing, the plane of expression and that of content, do not concern only linguistic elements but also social, political, cultural, economic, and real aspects (those the authors call "bodies" with reference to the Stoics). This means there are multiple regimes of signs, that is, multiple ways of organizing, shaping, visualizing, and relating signs: each of these corresponds to a type of semiotics, which is to say that the latter is a form of pragmatic discourse that produces and disciplines signs rather than merely defining and cataloging them⁸. The semiotic is political⁹. The first semiotic type is the one already familiar, namely that which arises and is founded within structural linguistics, given the name of *semiotique signifiante*:

Le régime signifiant du signe (le signe signifiant) a une formule générale simple : le signe renvoie au signe, et ne renvoie qu'au signe à l'infini. C'est pourquoi l'on peut même, à la limite, se passer de la notion de signe, puisqu'on ne retient pas principalement son rapport à un état de choses qu'il désigne, ni à une entité qu'il signifie, mais seulement le rapport formel du signe avec le signe en tant qu'il définit une chaîne dite signifiante. L'illimité de la signifiante a remplacé le signe. Quand on suppose que la dénotation (ici, l'ensemble de la désignation et de la signification) fait déjà partie de la connotation, on est en plein dans ce régime signifiant du signe (Deleuze, Guattari 1980, p. 141).

The references are, indirectly, Lacan with his refined rereading of the Saussurean sign, through the inversion between *signifié* and *signifiant*, which acquires a decisive role in the definition of the barred subject – captured or spoken by language. The unconscious structured like a language, pivot of Lacan's return to Freud, unfolds through a logic of the *signifiant*, composed of metonymies and metaphors, an indefinite sliding from one *signifiant* to another, the foundation of a structure or discourse (Lacan 1991). Language is founded on itself in a reference from one sign to another (infinite *signifiante*), typical of the *chaînes signifiantes* of the structuralists, with respect to which the position of Deleuze in the 1960s was certainly different: Lacan's *lettre volée*, Lévi-Strauss' empty cell, and the differential component of Saussure's definition of the sign were anti-dialectical forces (Deleuze 1968) and foundational elements of the logic of sense (Deleuze 1969). Even at that time, Deleuze's adherence to structural logic was fraught with problems and rested on a clear distinction between creative impulses and the risk of their formalistic solidification; now, it is precisely this risk that has become reality, particularly within the meshes of Lacanian psychoanalysis, among all the names of structuralism, certainly the most complicated to summon, the most refined and complex. It should be noted that the term "*lettre*" – a real element, object X, central to Lacan's reception in the 1968-69 texts and in the essay on structuralism – has now been entirely replaced by the term *signifiant*, a symbolic, i.e., linguistic element to which Lacan himself attributed the function of subjecting, castrating, and subordinating the subject (Lacan speaks of the power of the *signifiant* and, explicitly, of *signifiant-Maître S1*)¹⁰. This is not merely a lexical shift but marks the transition from one reading of Lacan (the *lettre*, the *objet a*, the real, *jouissance*, the sign as trait-mark, repetition as an anti-dialectical process, *tyché*, *sinthome*, literature, the absence of the sexual relation) to another, perhaps closer to the institutionalization of Lacanianism (the *signifiant*, the symbolic, Heideggerian Language, desire as lack, phallic power, the Name-of-the-Father, Oedipus and the family novel of the neurotic, Hegelian intersubjectivity). As Deleuze and Guattari note, referring to Peirce, in this regime the sign is reduced solely to the dimension of the symbol, with its intrinsic dualism – "*aliquid*

⁸ Godoy (2009).

⁹ Guattari (1977).

¹⁰ In his Greimasian theory of discourses (Lacan 1991). For a non reductive view of Lacanian thought see Bonazzi (2009).

stat pro aliquo” (Thomas, *De veritate*: q. 1, a. 1). Metaphor functions as a connecting element between the series of meaning and the *signifiant*, giving rise to an interpretive stance called *interpretosis*, which characterizes both psychoanalysis (the symptom is a sign that must be recognized and “resolved”) and semiology (everything is sense, there is always something behind something else) – as in the semiology of cinema by Metz (1971).

Il y a encore un autre aspect: le régime signifiant ne se trouve pas seulement devant la tâche d’organiser en cercles les signes émis de toutes parts; il doit sans cesse assurer l’expansion des cercles ou de la spirale, refournir du signifiant au centre pour vaincre l’entropie propre au système (Deleuze, Guattari 1980, p. 143)¹¹.

The circle – a Hegelian term – of linguistic signs highlights the role of the *signifiant* (S1 for Lacan) as an element of domination and subjection: the authors speak of a despotic *signifiant* and its interpreters – priests, psychoanalysts, statesmen. The centralization of power, inaugurated by Louis XIV in France at the dawn of the modern state, is co-essential to the development of the logic of the *signifiant*:

Du centre de signifiante, du Signifiant en personne, il y a peu à dire, car il est pure abstraction non moins que principe pur, c’est-à-dire rien. Manque ou excès, peu importe. C’est la même chose de dire que le signe renvoie au signe à l’infini, ou que l’ensemble infini des signes renvoie à un signifiant majeur (ivi, p. 144).

In conclusion, this regime, which does not correspond to the totality of the semiotic but simply to a mode of occupying and hegemonizing it, produces a vision of enunciation as a univocal linguistic force and of the subject as the product of the subjugating force of the *signifiant*. Beyond this, Deleuze and Guattari identify other types of semiotics: *pre-signifiant*, *post-signifiant*, *a-signifiant*, and *counter-signifiant*. The first is typical of tribal societies and the magical approach – preceding the Western scientific discourse, the *sujet de la science* referred to by Lacan (1966) regarding the Cartesian turn. Here there is no centralizing logic, but a plural diffusion of different signs, never reduced to the purely arbitrary dimension of the symbol: there would not even exist a single substance of expression – the verbal language of *semiotiques signifiantes* – but a multiplicity of different substances (natural, corporeal, visual...) that conspire together, implicating one another:

Pour autant qu’on fait quand même abstraction du contenu dans une perspective étroitement sémiotique, c’est au profit d’un pluralisme ou d’une polyvocité des formes d’expression, qui conjurent toute prise de pouvoir par le signifiant, et qui conservent des formes expressives propres au contenu lui-même: ainsi des formes de corporéité, de gestualité, de rythme, de danse, de rite coexistent dans l’hétérogène avec la forme vocale (ivi, p. 147).

In other words, for Deleuze and Guattari, there is no language of the body or body as language, but a corporeal sign regime; not a corporeal-passionate enunciating subject but a mode of enunciation that is neither individual nor conscious, which occurs and counter-occurs through bodies, gestures, rhythms, and movements¹². This is the a-scientific value of tribal semiotics with their pluralist valorization of expressive substances – corporeal, gestural, tactile, rhythmic-musical, kinetic:

Quand elle est présignifiante, l’anthropophagie a précisément ce sens: manger le nom, c’est une sémiographie, qui fait pleinement partie d’une sémiotique, malgré son rapport au contenu (mais rapport expressif). On évitera de penser que c’est par ignorance, par refolement ou forclusion du signifiant qu’une telle sémiotique fonctionne (ivi, p. 148).

Pre-signifiant semiotics do not depend on the foreclosure of the *signifiant* – an explicit reference to Freud’s *Verwerfung*, reread by Lacan as the exclusion of a *signifiant* (the *Nom-du-père*) from the symbolic register

¹¹ See Deleuze (1985, p. 44).

¹² Zilberberg (1993, 2001).

corresponding to the plane of law, the linguistic code, but also kinship and regulation of desire. Not a repressed content (*Verdrängung*), thus present in the unconscious and internal to the language plane, capable of reappearing as symptom. But an excluded, absent *signifiant*, not integrated into the symbolic, as occurs in psychosis, in which what is outside language returns in the form of hallucinations, delusions, voices – as intrusions of the real. A pre-*signifiant* semiotics certainly deals with delirium and madness, but not in the Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic sense. Hypothesizing a *signifiant*, even if foreclosed, would correspond to the search for a new foundation (*cogito, Ich denke, self-consciousness*), less evident but always operative as a mechanism of subjectivation. It would mean connecting all forms of enunciation to a single central element. Consequently, psychosis is seen as a failure of the symbolic system, more sophisticated than classical Freud, yet still unable to valorize the positive aspects of schizophrenic phenomena. In place of negation, affirmation – here returns the great battle between Nietzsche and Hegel theorized by Deleuze (1962, 1968). In place of lack, desiring production – all references to existentialism fall away. In place of structure, the Guattarian machines¹³. *L'Anti-Œdipe* (Deleuze, Guattari 1972) had already introduced the schizoanalytic vision of psychosis, while Deleuze's writings on literature focus on demonstrating the tight nexus between the clinic and criticism, revealing a constellation of themes (symptom, madness, writing, minor language) as properly semiotic. Psychosis is the production of new forms of enunciation, not a defect of a univocal form. There exist other semiotics, other semiotic machines to which psychosis can give access, capable of avoiding "l'abstraction universalisante, l'érection du signifiant, l'uniformisation formelle et substantielle de l'énonciation, la circularité des énoncés, avec leurs corrélats, appareil d'Etat, installation du despote" (Deleuze, Guattari 1980, p. 148). This is followed by a new regime "qu'on appellera contresignifiante (notamment celle des terribles nomades éleveurs et guerriers, par différence avec les nomades chasseurs qui faisaient partie de la précédente" (Ibid.). It is a nomadic semiotics, unbound from any center or circle. It corresponds to the war machine opposed to the State. The signs do not organize a seizure of power, nor create a centralized geography, but help to navigate in open space, trace a dynamic cartography, and co-opt mobile forces. At a strictly semiotic level, there is no single form of enunciation or subjectivation, nor a structured chain of connected *signifiants*. Certainly, signs exist, even codes and forms of enunciation, but these multiply, differentiate, and resist dominant devices. It follows that there is no counter-*signifiant* semiotics that is not linked to a *signifiant* semiotics, which in some way helps it to define itself, develop, and reterritorialize. Looking at contemporary examples, one could think of hacker practices, the initial cryptocurrency project and all non-monetary forms of economy, certain sub-urban cultures, or, to cite more banal examples, new forms of post-orality and post-digital writing in opposition to major languages¹⁴. Post-*signifiant* semiotics are closely tied to *signifiant* semiotics, consolidating and reinforcing their identity and dominance. The *chaîne signifiante*, the only remaining form of multiplicity and difference, disappears, giving way to the manifest affirmation of a single *Signifiant*, as occurs in highly bureaucratic, party-based systems – there is an inevitable polemical undertone concerning the fallout of Marxism, and particularly French Maoism à la Badiou (1988). There is a kind of internalization of law and power, a passionate acceptance of it.

Nous cherchons donc à distinguer un régime de signes despotique, signifiant et paranoïaque, et un régime autoritaire, postsignifiant, subjectif ou passionnel. Assurément l'autoritaire n'est pas la même chose que le despotique, le passionnel n'est pas la même chose que le paranoïaque, le subjectif pas la même chose que le signifiant (ivi, p. 152).

A sign or a cluster of signs breaks the differential link typical of the chains taken up – via Peirce – by Lacan. This generates the authoritarianism of the isolated sign, which operates beyond any differential link (even despotism remains a differential link), and produces obedience, self-conviction, and passion. The sign is personalized, and enunciation is directly associated with the subject who utters it, whereas in *signifiant* semiotics, the subject was neither present nor easily identifiable, but "hidden," referred from

¹³ Zourabichvili (2003).

¹⁴ Consider, for instance, the way in which social media and digital messaging platforms operate as semiotic machines within which orality shapes distinctive modes of writing and gives rise to new forms of use.

one sign to another, as in the famous definition “un signifiant, c’est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifié” (Lacan 1966, p. 819). Finally, we arrive at *a-significant semiotics*, in which signs are neither carriers of a hidden meaning to be interpreted nor referred to any kind of subject, but constitute a rhizome of concatenations and purely pragmatic operations. Think of DNA, or certain algorithmic formulations, which have no meaning in the classical sense and do not depend on an enunciative subjectivity. They are signs, collective, impersonal, a-conscious enunciations. Signs are not reducible to the regime of signification, in which a *signifiant* expresses a meaning, reveals content to be interpreted or represented. This is only one configuration of the semiotic world, beyond which we find signs that are not reducible to any meaningful function nor express content to be deciphered and understood. They presuppose no interpreter, no human subject. They do not represent an idea or purely psychological dimension nor do they refer to or denote a referent. Signs do something directly; they are operative forces, sets of connections relating heterogeneous flows, linguistic, but also social, economic, and biological. The analysis of the diagram constitutes one of the semiotically richest elements, also foregrounding a rereading (or rewriting) of Peirce and Hjelmslev that cannot be adequately reconstructed here (we therefore refer the reader to Dondero 2023 and Fazioni, Montanari, Zanelli 2025). Structuralism, as well as the so-called “signifying and post-signifying semiotics,” are not clearly delimited historical labels, but rather a network of diffuse and heterogeneous positions that, genealogically, express certain shared symptomatological traits – common configurations or states of forces.

4. The Issue of Immanence: from Hjelmslev to the Great Absent

The principle of immanence (Deleuze, Guattari 1991; Agamben 1996; Panattoni, Ronchi 2019) intersects the philosophical path with the properly semiotic one: in the former case, it appears as a break with mythical thought and transcendence in order to found a rational theoretical attitude (Spinoza¹⁵ against miraculous thinking); in the latter, it takes the form of a methodological–normative axiom indicating that the analysis of language must disregard any element external to language itself (Hjelmslev 1948, 1975). In the first part of *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Hjelmslev foregrounds the principle of immanence as a scientific criterion according to which language must be analyzed and described exclusively on the basis of relations and systems of dependencies internal to language, without recourse to the external world (referentialism), individual psychology, or social phenomena. This is not a metaphysical criterion that denies empirical reality, but rather an epistemic norm that specifies the perimeter within which a semiotic system can be made explicit.

In its point of departure linguistic theory was established as immanent, with constancy, system, and internal function as its sole aims, to the apparent cost of fluctuation and nuance, life and concrete physical and phenomenological reality. A temporary restriction of the field of vision was the price that had to be paid to elicit from language itself its secret. But precisely through that immanent point of view and by virtue of it, language itself returns the price that it demanded. In a higher sense than in linguistics till now, language has again become a key-position in knowledge. Instead of hindering transcendence, immanence has given it a new and better basis; immanence and transcendence are joined in a higher unity on the basis of immanence (ivi, p. 127).

Immanence thus appears here as a kind of experimental condition designed to sterilize the field from variability (uses, linguistic substance) in order to grasp, in the first instance, the structure and constants that constitute language. Glossematics proposes an immanent, formal, and scientific linguistics, which does not mean that it ignores variations of use, but rather that it defers them to a subsequent and secondary foundational level. Also Greimas rejects both a rigid structuralism in which the system pre-exists the process and a naïve empiricism according to which only the latter exists. Both exist, logically, only insofar as they are immanent and co-existent. Although Deleuze and Guattari rarely refer explicitly to Greimas (the great absent), we may nonetheless consider the generative model – with its levels of depth and pertinence, and the duality of planes (expression and content, system and process) – as

¹⁵ Deleuze, Guattari (1991, p. 52).

configuring a complex, hybrid, and sophisticated semiotics. The Deleuze–Guattarian theme of immanence, however, reveals a far more articulated dynamic. In the pages of *Dictionnaire*, Greimas and Courtés explain:

Les différents niveaux de profondeur que l'on peut distinguer sont des articulations de la structure immanente de chacun des deux plans du langage (expression et contenu) pris séparément, et jalonnent leur parcours génératif; la manifestation est, au contraire, une incidence, une interruption et une déviation, qui oblige une instance quelconque de ce parcours à se constituer en un plan des signes (Greimas, Courtés 1979, p. 220).

Immanence is the structure of *sens* in itself, prior to any empirical manifestation, and corresponds to the methodological consideration of the system's virtual articulations before it is actualized in concrete, biplanar signs (Aa.Vv. 2017). There is a co-implication, a monoplanar co-participation of sense that is subsequently translated onto the planes of expression and content. Immanence is not located prior to the process that manifests it, but exactly within it; it does not exist except within it (Fontanille 2014).

Lorsqu'il analyse les structures profondes et veut en rendre compte à l'aide d'un système de représentation quelconque, le linguiste arrête, fixe, à un moment donné, le parcours génératif, et manifeste alors les structures immanentes monoplanes à l'aide d'un enchaînement de signes biplanes (ou de symboles interprétables). De même, la distinction entre le discours abstrait et le discours figuratif peut être établie, compte tenu de l'interruption, suivie de manifestation, du parcours génératif à deux moments distincts du processus de production (Ibid.).

Manifestation, by contrast, is the interruption of the generative process – the point of arrest at which it is realized as a biplanar sign. This is not a simple phenomenological appearance, but an operation of semiotic selection and reduction: not everything that is immanent is manifested, but everything that is manifested is always a portion of the immanence of meaning. Whereas immanence is the virtual continuity of meaning, manifestation introduces discontinuity. It cuts into immanence, and the outcome of this cut is a fixed form – a text. In *Sémantique structurale*, Greimas (1966) replaces transcendence with manifestation, arguing that both immanence and transcendence must be understood as different modes of existence of signification. Immanence belongs to the metalanguage and is articulated as a stratified organization of depth levels (the generative trajectory), or alternatively as a progressive articulation – from semes to semantemes to lexematic chains on the plane of content, and from phonemes to syllables to the formants of the phonic chain on the plane of expression. This trajectory unfolds from system to process, from the virtual to the actualized or manifested. The modal axis “non-realized → realized” is therefore central to grasping the semiotic distinction between the virtual and the actual. Manifestation coincides with the dynamics of realization, which is itself segmented and hierarchized into different levels of pertinence, whereas immanence corresponds to the mode of virtual existence. Together, virtualization and realization constitute the emergent articulation of meaning and, by extension, of language. If we focus on the *Introduction* to *Du sens* (Greimas 1970), *sens* is defined as a field of virtual conditions for semiotic articulation that have not yet been actualized, as opposed to signification, which is the result of differential organization – of a structural operation that gives form to *sens*. The system, understood as a set of still-virtual relations, is composed of oppositions, correlations, and differences, and functions as a methodological rather than an ontological operator. It is actualized only in and through the process, understood as the enactment of virtual relations now translated into real conditions of discursive manifestation, which are diachronic and situated within texts, signifying practices, and discourses. Through a deliberate conceptual displacement, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, we may argue that the Greimassian model presents significant differences with respect to the classical structure of signifying semiotics. Manifestation is not transcendence, but rather a temporally rhythmic dynamic that expresses the virtual field by working upon immanence (the event of *sens*) through a process of formalization that transforms *sens* into signification. Structural depth is thus translated into a descriptive schema, predominantly methodological in nature, corresponding to the mode of existence of realization (narrative and discursive schemas, textualization). Combinations, oppositions, and structural constants do not constitute an ontological given, but rather the outcome of an epistemic activity through which signification translates and manifests *sens*. None of these elements denies the presence of transformative,

variable, and pragmatic instances, which are instead taken up within the category of *enunciative praxis* and *enunciative reprogramming* (Basso Fossali 2017). Semiotics is thus configured as the science that describes the translation of sens into signification, of immanence into the bi-planarity of the text. In doing so, it co-participates in the stratifying mechanism of manifestation, working on the articulation between expression and content rather than on signifier and signified. From a strictly Greimassian perspective, semiotics does not deal with sens itself, nor can it describe the event of sens, as the philosophy to which Greimas refers in the introduction to *Du sens* seems instead to attempt. The anti-psychological and anti-referentialist principle of immanence – one of the major achievements of structuralism that remains operative even in Deleuze and Guattari – belongs to semiotics through a specific modalization, namely manifestation, which cannot fail to be brought close to the Spinozist–Deleuzian operator of expression. Does semiotics deal with expression¹⁶? Or does it remain bound to immanence, which it neither wishes nor is able to reconstruct descriptively? Semiotics, in fact, does not concern itself with sens but with signification. This allows for a fundamental insight, perhaps already implicit in Hjelmslev but never made so explicit: it is not language that is immanent, but rather sens, of which language is only one mode of manifestation, alongside other signifying forms. Sens is not intelligible solely as language. Sens is not what language enunciates about the world, but the way in which something happens through language as well as through other sign regimes. Here, however, Deleuze and Guattari are more radical in claiming that expression is modulated by a sign regime, of which the linguistic one is only among the most familiar, anthropocentric, and problematic. Sens is also expressed through bodies, machines, technological devices (Greimas, Fontanille 1991, Landowski 2005), and hybrid networks lacking a univocal enunciating subject – whether an individual consciousness or a clearly defined actantial instance. Enunciation is, in fact, collective, multiple, and impersonal (Fabbri 1997). In other words, expression does not coincide with a sign regime or with regimes of signification, but rather with a mode of existence (Latour 2012) and a mode of translation of sens that is actualized within a specific regime of signs. Whereas Greimas's notion of manifestation seems to reduce expression to signification, the Deleuze–Guattari concept of expression grounds signification, but also counter-signification, anti-signification, and a-signification, which in all likelihood constitutes its realized form (one may think here of the diagram). Greimas implicitly conceives the event as an element of the generative process – something that cuts into and stratifies sens in order to render it intelligible (but also actionable and perceivable), to put it into form as a text. An event may here be understood as a transition of state (for instance, a conjunction becoming an opposition) and, as such, can be formally described. Ultimately, there is no event that cannot be formalized, or at least it does not pertain to semiotics to investigate what lies beyond this level, namely sens itself. For Deleuze and Guattari (1991), by contrast, the event is a dynamic of sens, a becoming that traverses states of affairs and enunciations, expressing the virtual plane without interrupting, stabilizing, or formalizing it. It is a process of differentiation, tension, and intensity rather than of endurance, to use the categories of the ecology of sens (Basso Fossali 2017). Manifestation is therefore a form of stabilization of sens that allows us to analyze it in the form of the sign, whereas Deleuze and Guattari's expression is a force that reopens every form of actualization, allowing sens to flow beyond the plane of signs, signification, and descriptive analysis. Expression both undoes and produces; it signifies nothing. In one case, we are dealing with a science of signification, or of the stabilization of sens; in the other, with an ontology of the becoming of sens as an impersonal field of unstable forces. To think sens as event and becoming thus seems to imply the epistemological impossibility of a descriptive practice, that is, of semiotics as a science. Is it possible to conceive of a methodologically rigorous description that analyzes forms of expression prior to those of signification, through the reconstruction of intensities, peaks, thresholds, and tensions, without dissolving into a romantic vitalism? Deleuze and Guattari should not be read in such a naïve way, as if they were advocating a move from the sign to the irrational or the ineffable. We should recall instead that the a-signifying regime operates through extremely concrete pragmatic modalities, often tied to the evolution of sciences and technologies – algorithms, for instance, understood as programs of action. The short circuit between manifestation and expression is productive insofar as it allows us to conceive the cut not

¹⁶ “Qu’est-ce qu’une sémiotique, c’est-à-dire un régime de signes ou une formalisation d’expression ?” (Deleuze, Guattari 1980, p. 174).

as an interruption, but as a local crystallization in which the process does not come to a halt, but rather becomes fixed in a situated and contingent manner. Every stratum is a node of passage or a real singularity, not a point of stasis. With respect to the plane of immanence, each stratum constitutes a more or less durable coagulation of becoming. No stratum transcends the plane; rather, it channels it locally. Each stratum is both immanent and restrictive. As we know from Deleuze and Guattari (1980), there exist physico-chemical, biological, and allosemiotic strata (languages, signs, institutions, etc.). Every sign system functions as a way of slowing down becoming, of fixing differences, transforming sens into something communicable and administrable. They become forms of relative and reversible solidification. Every semiotics thus becomes a contingent configuration that organizes forces – a technology of arrest and stability. Semiotics itself would no longer be a description of strata but an activity of stratification. Its objective is not merely to understand the strata, but that which traverses them, the process that generates them, and that which withdraws them, opening lines of flight and deterritorialization. In other words, it should concern itself with events and assume a “political” function that does not describe the world but organizes, disorganizes, and dynamically reorganizes it. It probes and creates correlations, behaviors, possibilities, rhythms, and passions. It does not represent; it does not describe. It acts. *Sens* is continuous variation, in a complete inversion of Hjelmslev’s original inspiration for the principle of immanence. Sens is tension between forces according to relational dynamics (strong/weak, fast/slow, etc.). If structural functions exist, such as strata, it is first and foremost because tensile positions exist – crises of sign regimes, peaks of intensity, thresholds, emergences, crises, pathologies – that is, events. We may speak, therefore, of a dynamic rather than formal immanence. Each level becomes a zone of greater or lesser intensity, not a hierarchy of planes. Every arrest is simultaneously a tensional effect (Zilberberg 2006, 2011, 2011a, 2012). The trajectory of tensile semiotics (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998) is an attempt to render the event describable through the intensity curve.

5. Conclusions

Any conclusion must be deferred to a broader examination that addresses the problem of the sign and the symptom, collective enunciation, and the diagram. For the time being, we can only advance a preliminary answer to the question from which we started: “Does a single Deleuzian semiotics exist?” The answer appears clear: it does not. First of all, for Deleuze and Guattari there is no autonomous discipline called “semiotics,” despite the claims of structural or interpretive semiology, which would amount to nothing more than partial sign regimes (semiotics in the plural) through which the dynamic process of sens is organized and stabilized in order to render it intelligible, communicable, and governable. Semiotics are machines for arresting sens, tied to the construction and description of strata. Upon closer inspection, however, Deleuze and Guattari conclude the plateau on semiotics by reminding us that “*Toute sémiotique est mixte*” (ibid.: 169), which seems to imply the existence of a semiotic field that exceeds individual sign regimes and studies the processes of creative translation, transformation, and variation among them: “*Là non plus on ne trouvera pas de sémiologie générale, mais plutôt une transsémiotique*” (ibid.: 170). There is no general semiotics, as in the Echian project (Eco 1975), but only partial semiotics. What we do have, however, is a transsemiotics as a problematic and unstable field composed of forces in tension – a strategic theme that remains largely implicit, assumed but not fully developed in the pages of *Mille Plateaux*. What is this modality that concerns itself with signs and signification as a transient moment in the becoming of sens? This problem also remains open in the pages of *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*, where the authors describe three ways of engaging with the plane of immanence. Science works upon immanence through functions (relations among variables) and predictive instruments that stabilize it, converting it into states of affairs that can be described referentially. Art operates on immanence without conceptualizing or functionalizing it, but through percepts and affects (blocks of sensations) that reproduce a pre-conceptual or pre-signifying sens, intensive and sensible – the signs discussed in the text on Bacon signify nothing; they make one feel, they allow the rhythm of the plane of immanence to transpire. Philosophy bends the plane through the creation of concepts that do not represent immanence but function as events that explicate or articulate it, rendering it thinkable while never being able to describe it fully:

Précisément parce le plan d'immanence est pré-philosophique, et n'opère pas déjà avec des concepts, il implique une sorte d'expérimentation tâtonnante, et son tracé recourt à des moyens peu avouables, peu rationnels ou raisonnables (Deleuze, Guattari 1991, p. 44).

Sens emerges as concept, as a condensation of becoming – philosophy, despite its methodological attentions, thus promotes a “meta” point of view with respect to immanence. By rendering immanence thinkable, it produces a kind of projection that does not reduce sens to sensation or to truth, but that nevertheless risks becoming trapped within a phantasmatic plane or within excessive institutionalization. Is it then possible to conceive of a fourth modality capable of registering, probing, and cartographing the process of sens as becoming – marked by peaks of intensity, tensions among forces, blockages and resumptions – without reducing it to something other than itself (concepts, percepts, references), and without falling into the realm of the unintelligible? Such a transsemiotics would not create concepts, but would follow the movement of sens itself, recording its singular points and showing how each of them constitutes only a moment or a form of contingent stabilization destined to be exceeded by the process of variation. It would not provide scientific descriptions, but surveys and mappings of the processes of stratification and destratification. It would not represent, found, or create sens. It would map it. We would thus be dealing with a practice rather than a science: diagrammatic rather than descriptive, processual rather than structural, intensive rather than categorial. From this perspective, we may embrace a paradox and claim that, even though a Deleuzian semiotics does not exist – or precisely because it does not – it is nonetheless possible to open the field of a post-Deleuzian semiotics in which:

- a) immanence and variation are not opposed;
- b) sens is not reduced either to signification (the structural regime) or to the pathemic dimension (the post-signifying regime), but to a multiplicity of dynamics (assemblage) that include both without being exhausted by them;
- c) becoming can be cartographed through a careful survey of intensities and points of coagulation or stability of sens, in full agreement with ecological and tensive perspectives.

This remains the foundational challenge that semiotics must confront if it is to respond to the problematic nodes revealed by Deleuze and Guattari.

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