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La morte come frontiera semiotica
Death as a semiotic frontier

Se cerchiamo di individuare il "vero" momento della morte, scopriamo che il confine semiotico tra la vita e la morte dipende dalla cultura considerata. La società certifica la fine del processo biologico attraverso la religione, diritto, medicina, e le rispettive istituzioni. Le controversie politiche sulla morte, l'eutanasia, lo stato vegetativo permanente, il trapianto, sono sempre polemiche su chi ha il potere di decidere il significato connesso alla morte. Per descrivere questo senso, il saggio rappresenta la morte come uno spazio eterotopico che collega topologicamente un sistema di valori con gli spazi topici della vita quotidiana.

If we try to identify the actual moment of the death, we discover that the semiotic frontier between life and death depends on the considered culture. Society certifies the end of the biologic process through religion, law, medicine, and the respective institutions. Political controversies on death, euthanasia, persistent vegetative state, transplantation, are always controversies on who has the power to decide the meaning connected to death. In order to describe it, the essay represents death as an eterotopic space, which topologically connects a system of values with the topic spaces of everyday life.

Parole chiave: semiotica; morte; cultura; biopolitica; eterotopia

Keywords: *semiotics; death; culture; biopolitics; eterotopia*

We are well acquainted with the idea that death is a natural, biologic frontier. Nevertheless, death is a process: we need signs in order to recognize its conclusion. These signs vary throughout the ages and depending on the considered culture. Thus, the boundary between life and death is a semiotic border.

Religion, Law, and medicine are the cultural institutions which codify and certify the end of the process. For example, in the book of Genesis (2,5), we read: ←←Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being→→. This is the reason why, according to Judaism, life ends when one ceases to breathe. The same

criterion is valid for many different cultures. A candle or a mirror held under the nosewas used in order to prove that patient was not breathing.

Concurrently with the advancement in medicine, also the signs used to certify the end of life have changed. Other criteria are the cardiac arrest and, more recently, brain death. According to Defanti (2007), there are several issues with the latter diagnosis. When formulating this concept, the Harvard Medical School mostly referred to ethical principles, specifically to the position of pope Pious XII; nevertheless, there is a catholic minority which denies the concept of brain death; from a legal point of view, the criteria of the diagnosis are

different depending on the country; on the other hand, it seems necessary to recognize brain death in relationship to organ transplantation. Defanti (2009) proposes that Brain death should not be considered as the moment of "biological" death, but as a limit after which prognosis is fatal and the process is irreversible. A perspective which raises further ethical problems.

The discussion regarding the "real" moment of the death is related to the atavistic fear of the premature burial. As early as the XVI century, One may find hundreds of projects of "safety coffins": coffins fitted with alarm systems, often extremely sophisticated, thanks to which persons accidentally buried alive could com-

municate their unpredictable awakening with the outside world. Some of them consist of a simple rope, which connected the coffin with a bell situated in a tower. Naturally, some defences from pigeons and other birds were soon implemented in order to avoid false alarms. In other models, the bell was activated by a balancer resting on the chest of the apparent corpse. Other mechanism include ventilation systems and, in recent times, electronic devices connected to remote computers.

There is a difference between diagnosis instruments and safety coffins: only the latter may be considered a communication system. Nevertheless, both of them denote a signification system: they display the structural fea-

tures that a signification system should have according to Hejlmselv (1953). We can identify an organization of the content plane (dead/uncertain/alive) and a second organization on the expression plane, made by a series of connections which convey the content plane. The two organizations are differential and positional ones, and not necessarily isomorphic. This is what I meant when I wrote that the frontier between life and death is a semiotic border. We can also describe the topology of this boundary.

Jean Michel Foucault (1986) described cemeteries as heterotopic spaces:

> The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the citystate or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery.

According to Foucault, a "crisis heterotopia" is sacred or forbidden place ←←reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.→→. Foucault attributes great importance to the function of these spaces, which represent an "elsewhere" in relation to the ordinary spaces of our social life.

If we consider Foucault's definition of heterotopic spaces, we discover that he can distin-

Fig. 1. Semiotic square representing the system of the content plane expressed in heterotopic spaces.
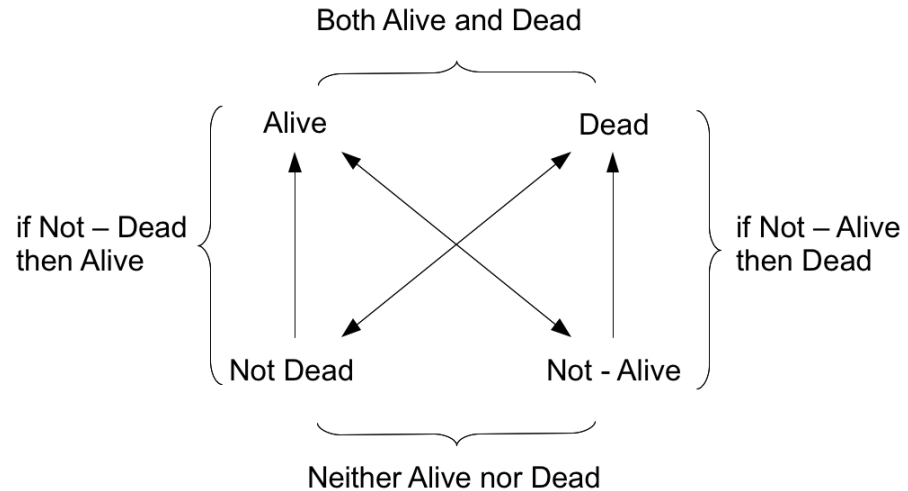
guish them from ordinary spaces on account of their connections:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.

Heterotopia differs from utopias, which are unreal spaces. Nevertheless, some utopias are "enacted" in heterotopic spaces: they represent their meaning. They are the content plane, and the real heterotopic space conveys them by articulating it in the space – a mechanism described by Deleuze (2006:27).

Now, in my opinion, Foucault's heterotopias could be further analyzed and classified by considering their topological connections. Furthermore, they link them to semantic relations. From this point of view, Safety coffins are heterotopic spaces not only because of their connections with the ordinary space of everyday life, but also because these topologic connections represents relations on the content plane (dead/uncertain/alive).

It is interesting to question what does truly represent the "uncertain" value in the category. In a previous work regarding the Eluana Englaro case – Galofaro (2009b) – one may interpret it in two different ways: as a complex term, resulting by a superposition of the positive values ("both alive and dead"), and a neutral term ("neither alive nor dead"). It is possible to represent this semantic system as in figure 1.

Basing on the semiotic square, one may recognize the semiotic system of secure coffins ("if not dead, then alive") and the fear of not being really dead, which is part of its significance. Recently, advances in medicine and technology have resulted in a specular fear: the one of not being really alive. This is what take place in the persistent vegetative state.

First of all, let me say that, at least from a bio-

logical point of view, persons in a persistent vegetative state are alive. They breathe and their heart beats, and – with the appropriate care – these people can survive for years without the support of a machine. Their condition is the uninentional consequence of intensive-care medicine: nowadays these techniques can halt the processes which lead to death. But, even if the biological functions are stable, the brain is seriously injured, and patients don't show any sign of consciousness. After a year, the probability of recovering it are minimal. The controversy, which encompasses philosophy, theology, law, politics, can be formulated in semantic terms: given the semiotic square which we traced above, where should such cases be placed?

In the case of Terri Schiavo, a dispute arose between her husband, determined to respect her wish to halt every cure in this sort of cases, and her parents, who opposed the resolution. In order to prove that Terri was conscious, her parents filmed her for six hours, then extracted five short videos, a few seconds each. In the video we can see her parents and the paramedics stimulating Terri. At the same time, she emits guttural sounds and moves. The question is: was she communicating? Were her acts voluntary?

The videos result from a selection and combination process which is the base of cinematographic language. The effect is what Metz (1973) calls "semantic induction". Essentially, it is a case of post hoc ergo propter hoc: we interpret what temporally precedes an event as its cause. Furthermore, we once more face a problem of connections between different semantic spaces: the space of ordinary life, and Terri's inner space: her will, feelings, and consciousness. Terri's "mind" becomes an heterotopia of crisis. The possibility of communicating with Terri depends on the question regarding her behaviour: is it meaningful? Can we attribute a meaning to it?

As a matter of fact, scientists don't. Ever since Hippocrates', doctors developed a method which attempts to exclude all the possible causes of a certain sign in order to identify a

unambiguous relation between the two – see Galofaro (2007). In the case of a persistent vegetative state, doctors exclude the hypothesis of the voluntariness by observing the patients, then by stimulating it, then utilizing instruments with a higher resolution power, such as the electroencephalograph. Doctors don't connect the expression plane (the space of Terri's body) with a content plane, in terms of conscious life, whereas according to Terri's parents every spasm is a smile.

The political problem arises when media use the semiotic system we described. Signification systems can always be used by communication systems. Hence, videos, photographs, every textual constructions and interpretation spreads thanks to the internet, newspapers, television. Naturally, in such cases, it is not true that the majority of the public is right. That

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