A Semiotic Theory of Media Experience

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1   From media semiotics to theory and analysis of media experience

This paper outlines a general theory and a method of analysis of *media experiences*. This term indicates those particular living and lived experiences we go through every time the horizon of our attention receives sensory materials provided by media devices: watching television, reading a comic book or playing a video game are among the many types of media experiences.[1]

The media experience theory derives from a radical revision of semiotics and pragmatics of film and media.[2] This revision is motivated by a detachment of textual semiotics from real and actual experiences that different forms of media are providing today; indeed, it is possible to identify three basic assumptions of media semiotics which reveal such a detachment. First, media semiotics continues to defend the text as its main object of study: on the contrary, media practices are essentially de-textualised; furthermore, the text appears today as a simple "effect of sense" produced by cultural conventions within media experiences. Secondly, media semiotics adopts a cognitive approach and considers media experience as primarily rational; even when it perceives the importance of sensitive, emotional, affective and practical aspects of media experience, semiotics fails to integrate these aspects with the rational ones. On the contrary, real experiences of media consumption constantly intersects cognitive processes with

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[1] For a complete exposition of the theory and the method of analysis of media experiences I'll sketch out here, see Eugeni.

[2] Many introductions to semiotic media studies are Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis; Casetti, *Theories of cinema*; Bignell; Danesi; Thwaites, Lloyd, and Warwick; Branston and Stafford.

non-cognitive ones. Thirdly, the epistemology that underlies media semiotics conceives the subject of theory and analysis as separate from the phenomena being observed: the subject is located in a meta-dimension and detached from the textual phenomena analyzed. This position seems difficult to justify in a world of scientific networks and shared knowledge in which media scholars are directly involved in the phenomena they are studying.

The media experience theory challenges all these three assumptions. First, its object of study is not the text, but the design of the experience conveyed by sensory materials which are provided by media devices. Secondly, the theory considers media experience as a complex phenomenon in which sensory, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, relational and practical flows are activated at the same time and mutually determined. Finally, the theory argues that the subject of media theory and analysis possesses a kind of situated knowledge and is located within the system that observes; indeed, the practice of media analysis is a reflective and methodologically equipped extension of the ordinary media experience.

The aim of this radical recast of media semiotics is to provide media studies with a theory capable of analyzing the actual and specific projects of experience that the different media convey. It thus intends to bridge the gap between media theory and practices of production and consumption. Moreover, the theory aims to deconstruct the claims of naturalness and transparency of media experiences, and highlight their designed and highly artificial nature. In this respect, the theory of media experience intentionally retrieves the critical nature of the original semiotics.

The next section is devoted to outlining the general framework of the theory of media experience, i.e. the «experiential turn» which has involved the field of humanities for nearly twenty years now. Section 3 describes the fundamentals of the theory and the model of media experience which the theory attains. Finally, Section 4 considers the method of media experiences analysis deriving from the theory, and highlights the particular epistemological choice that it implies.

2 *A general framework: the 'experiential turn' in the humanities and in their dialogue with the hard sciences*

The shift from media semiotics to the theory of media experience is part of a broader movement that has been involving the humanities and influencing their dialogue with the hard sciences for nearly twenty years. I will refer to this movement as an "experiential turn." I will identify four disciplinary areas within which we can detect the experiential turn; moreover, I will try to collate, within each of them, some useful hints for a theory of media experience.

2.1 The experiential turn in cognitive neuroscience and philosophy of mind

The first area is represented by the *new cognitive neuroscience* .[3] The recovery of a phenomenological approach allowed the cognitive scientists to overcome the classical computational framework: therefore, since the mid-eighties of the twentieth century, the debate has adopted a new kind of model inspired by experiential dynamics. Furthermore, this new approach has opened a dialogue between neurologists, cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind, around key themes such as consciousness, perception, and empathy.

The neuro-cognitive reflection highlights three aspects of the experience in particular. First of all, the experience is *plural, complex and dynamic*: it is based on multiple and simultaneous streams not coordinated by central units, but auto–organized in different networks and auto-synchronized. Secondly, the experience implies an *embodied mind*; indeed, the subject of the experience is an *organism* in which bodily and mental data are intimately connected. Thirdly, the experience described by the cognitive neuroscience is *relational and interpersonal,* as evidenced by the key role of the mechanisms of comprehension based on embodied simulation and empathic mimicry.

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[3] Many introductions to contemporary cognitive neurosciences and their dialogue with the philosophy of mind are Gazzaniga, Ivry, and Mangun; Baars and Gage; Gallagher and Zahavi. A seminal work is Varela, Thompson, and Rosch. For the epistemological problems involved by this dialogue, see the classical Petitot, Varela, Pachoud, and Roy. On the central problem of consciousness, see Zelazo, Moscovitch and Thompson; Velmans and Schneider; Laureys and Tononi. A theory of consciousness as identified with the living experience has been recently proposed by Noë.

2.2 The experiential turn in sociology and anthropology

A second area openly involved in the experiential turn is that of the *socio-anthropological disciplines.* On the one hand, sociology has recovered the reflections of scholars such as George Simmel and Walter Benjamin; in the early decades of the twentieth century, these thinkers described the transformation of social experience within Modernity and, more radically, investigated the subjective and experiential roots of society - what Simmel called "sociability." - [4] On the other hand, anthropology focused on the relationships between cultures and bodies; in particular, anthropologists analyze today the culturally embedded articulation of sensitivity.[5]

Sociologists and anthropologists have thus highlighted another key aspect of the experience: they outline that experience is *historically situated and culturally embedded;* in other words there is no "experience" in general but rather specific and concrete *forms of experience*. Moreover, cultural determinations attain an even deeper level of the experience, such as the dynamics of senses and sensibility.

2.3 The experiential turn in linguistics and semiotics

A third area involved in the experiential turn is that of *linguistics and semiotics*. As previously explained in section 1, semiotics has great difficulties in shifting from the textual paradigm to the experiential one. Nevertheless, many pressures towards this shift are present within the semiotic and linguistic field. On the one hand, generative Greimasian semiotic has addressed the issue of passions since the late seventies; more recently, such an interest led the scholars to study the topics of body, feelings and experience in its various micro social forms. [6] On the other hand, the interpretative semiotics has increasingly recovered its phenomenological roots; some examples of this attitude are the idea that the bodily experience constitutes the origin of more complex semantic categories, or the new approach to deictic and enunciation as a means of grounding the discourse in the situated, experiential situation. [7]

The most interesting contributions from semiotics to a theory of media experience are the following. On the one hand, experience is not an immediate phenomenon, but in any case it

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[4] See in particular Berman; Kern; Frisby.

[5] See for instance Howes; Le Breton. For many general surveys see Marzano.

[6] See for instance Fontanille; Landowski.

[7] Lakoff and Johnson; Violi; Johnson.

implies an *interpretive activity:* making experiences does not mean tuning in an immediate and "unspeakable" way to the world, but rather to work out a series of sensate configurations. On the other hand, experiences mediated by texts (such as reading a book or looking at a painting) differ from the ordinary ones because they are not only experience of worlds but rather *experiences of discourses:* sensory materials that guide them tend to organize into an autonomous entity with its own consistency - the discourse, indeed. -

2.4   The experiential turn in film studies

A fourth area involved in the experiential turn is that of *film and media studies.* In this area the experiential turn took the form of a renewed interest in the relationship between cinema and the body;[8] two trends have been emerging in this regard. The first approach, influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and more specifically by Gilles Deleuze's works on cinema, starts from the idea that it is the film image to have a body: the photograph / film image, conceived as a material entity, is able to modulate the spectator's sensitivity and emotions; this modulation enables cinematic figures to manifest and to reinvent ordinary forms of shifting from sensible to intelligible. [9] The second approach, influenced by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau - Ponty and its recovery within the cognitive neuroscience (see above), starts from the idea that it is the film viewer to have a body. A theory of the spectator experience as an embodied subject has been emerging for several years – especially in Anglo-Saxon research - as a third way between the "grand theory" and the classical cognitivist film theory: in this case, as Sobchack sums up well, "the major theme [becomes] the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body's essential implication in making 'meaning' out of bodily 'sense.'" (1)[10]

Film theory provides many useful hints for a theory of media experience. In particular, the film experience is seen in both a continuous and a discontinuous relationship with the ordinary

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[8] Elsaesser and Hagener envisage a total rethinking of film theory from this point of view. On the other hand the culturalist approach has considered the movie as the main tool for reconstruction of modern forms of social experience: see Casetti, *The Eye of the Century.*

[9] See among the others Shaviro, Aumont, Bellour, Game.

[10] See also Plantinga and Murray Smith, Grodal, Plantinga, and many entries of Livingston and Plantinga. The idea of media as linked to the "immediate experience" had been anticipated by Warshow.

experience. On one hand, film experience borrows the dynamics of sensibility, perception, emotion, cognition and action that characterize the interaction between the body and the world in real life; on the other hand it relocates these dynamics within a controlled device; moreover, film experience overlaps the world directly perceived with a fictional "world viewed" (Cavell)[11] which is seen and experienced to some extent as the "real" world.

3   A theory of media experience

In this section I outline a theory and a model of media experience; indeed, I gather the hints which have emerged in the previous section and arrange them into a coherent form. To begin with, I will describe the dynamics and articulation of experience in general, then I will identify the specific features of media experience and finally I will sketch a model of media experience.

3.1   The basic features of the experience

The experience is the subjective and conscious (or bearable to consciousness) correlate of the interaction between the subject and the world - including his / her relationships with other subjects -. As a subjective phenomenon, experience is a first person occurrence. As a conscious (or bearable to consciousness) phenomenon, experience is both living and lived: living experience *(Erlebnis)* produces lived experience *(Erfahrung)* through an act of reflexive and conscious reworking of experiential data; in turn, lived experience *(Erfahrung)* contributes to determine the living one (*Erlebnis).*

There are three features that define the experience and its subject. First, the subject of experience is *embodied, situated and culturally embedded:* the experience is carried out by an organism (i.e. an intricate complex of mind and body) placed in a contingent situation and resulting from a complex cultural training. Second, the subject of experience is *engaged in an ongoing, unfolding activity of interpretation:* he / she constantly arranges his / her available resources (both perceptual and memorials) into meaningful configurations, and re-uses such

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[11] Cavell's "heideggeriam" work (as well as the more phenomenological approach by Schefer) should be re-read today as experiential theories of film spectatorship.

configurations as resources for further interpretations. As a consequence, the activity of interpretation takes the form of *a spiral:* the subject always recovers previous configurations to modify and to connect them to each other in order to produce further configurations. Third, the subject of experience is a *complex and dynamic* one, dipped into multiple and simultaneous streams of resources that he / she has to manage through its interpretive activity. The subject's identity itself is not conceivable neither as a central organizing unit existing a priori, nor as a static role, but rather as a dynamic production emerging from the management of the interpretive processes.

3.2   The articulation of the experience

The work of interpretation and the configurations that it produces, therefore, lie at the heart of the experience. More specifically, three layers of interpretative configurations are observable.

The first layer is the *sensory scanning and qualification of available resources.* The subjects feel many flows of sensations coexisting around them and in themselves; they note these flows in terms of purely sensible qualities, and without a clear and sharp distinction between the inside and the outside of their body.

The second layer is that of *narrative sorting* of the resources. First, the subjects perceive a distinction and a bond between themselves and the environment that surrounds them, on the basis of the proprio - perception of the particular envelope of the skin. Then, they identify a number of entities outside the body, with which to interact from their situated positions: we can say that they *represent a field of intentional objects.* Finally, they monitor both the changes occurring within the field of intentional objects, and the (previous, concurrent or subsequent) changes occurring in their own body, and likewise the bonds between the first and the second series of transformations. Such transformations are logged in *situational maps* that are constantly updated, allowing a controlled management of the interaction between subjects and environment.

The third layer is the *relational tuning.* The subjects feel that within the field of intentional objects there are many entities able to and in the act of performing a kind of experience similar to their. Then, they tries to explore this inner experience of other entities - especially by interpreting their bodily signals and by simulating their mental states (i.e. by mixing inference and consonance practices) - ; in this way they come back to their own ongoing experience and

become conscious of their own current mental states. Finally, the subjects assess if their mental states are in or out of tune with the other's and tries to implement any alignment.

The arrangement of three layers, from top to bottom, expresses their logical sequence: the resources found in qualitative terms (first layer) are sorted into fields of intentional objects (second layer), within which other subjects of experience are perceived (third layer). However, the *spiral* dynamics of interpretation (see above) implies a constant feedback and synchronization between the three layers; as a consequence, they are co-present and mutually determining.

3.3 The media experience

As stated in the introduction, the media experience is the particular kind of experience that the subjects have every time their horizon of attention receives sensory materials (such as moving or still images; words, sounds, noises; graphic elements, pictures and so on) provided by media devices. On the one hand, media experience is a continuous extension of ordinary experience, and sometimes they are interwoven (you can hear or listen to music while doing other things). Therefore, everything I have said about experience in general also applies to media experience; in particular, media experience is also articulated in the three layers of sensory scanning, narrative sorting and relational tuning. On the other hand, however, media experience is different from the ordinary one in some respects.

First, in the case of media experience, the subject constitutes *not just one, but three fields of intentional objects*. The first field is the *world seen directly* (which I will call "direct world"), which is also found in ordinary experience. The second field of intentional objects is given by sensory materials provided by media devices, which create a particular object that we call the text or "discourse". Finally, the third field of intentional objects is the *world perceived indirectly* ("indirect world"), whose nature is diegetic or fictional and in which the subject has access through the discursive materials.

We can examine at this point the relationships between the three layers of experience in general and the three fields of intentional objects constituted within the media experience. The layer of the sensory scanning logically precedes the establishment of the fields of intentional objects: therefore, this first layer touches but does not cross the three fields of intentional objects. On the contrary, both the layer of the narrative sorting and that of relational tuning

cross the three fields of intentional objects. As a consequence, we can identify *seven joints that articulate media experience:*

A) *The sensory scanning and the qualitative notation* of the materials gathered from the environment (including direct and "natural" elements; media devices in their materiality; sensory materials provided by media devices).

B) *The narrative sorting of the indirect world* and the construction of situational maps: these maps allow the media viewers to "feel" what's happening in the indirect world and to gain a living experience of it.

C) *The narrative sorting of the discourse*: the viewers give a sense to the presence of sensory materials provided by media devices by articulating them in (a) a flow of ongoing discursive production, (b) a plot unfolding and re-working the story line and (c) a format with a material extension into the space and time.

D) *The narrative sorting of the direct world*: the viewers detect the relationships between their own situated activity and the situations they notice in the indirect world: these relationships can be of continuity (in the case of factual media experience) or discontinuity (in the case of fictional media experience), with many intermediate solutions (like for instance the different forms of "mise en abyme" of media devices in fictional experiences).

E) *The relational tuning with the subjects of the indirect world*: the viewers feel the mental state of the subjects detected within the indirect world (the "characters"), and shares their living memories, affections, knowledge, and plans of action with them.

F) *The relational tuning with the subjects of discourse*: the viewers feel the presence of an ongoing activity of "writing", recognizes the style of "speaking" subjects, and establishes a relation of trust and confidence (or distrust and lack of confidence) with them.

G) *The relational tuning with the subjects of the direct world*: the viewers feel that the relationships of sharing and trust / confidence they have just experienced, can be translated into their own world, in the dealings with other viewers (for instance in social network discussions, fandom events, etc.); media experience becomes the living experience of the spring of social bonds (Simmels' "sociability").

We can summarize our model of the media experience in the following graphic form:

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Sensory Scanning

Narrative Sorting

Relational Tuning

Indirect World

Discourse

Direct World

A B C D E F G
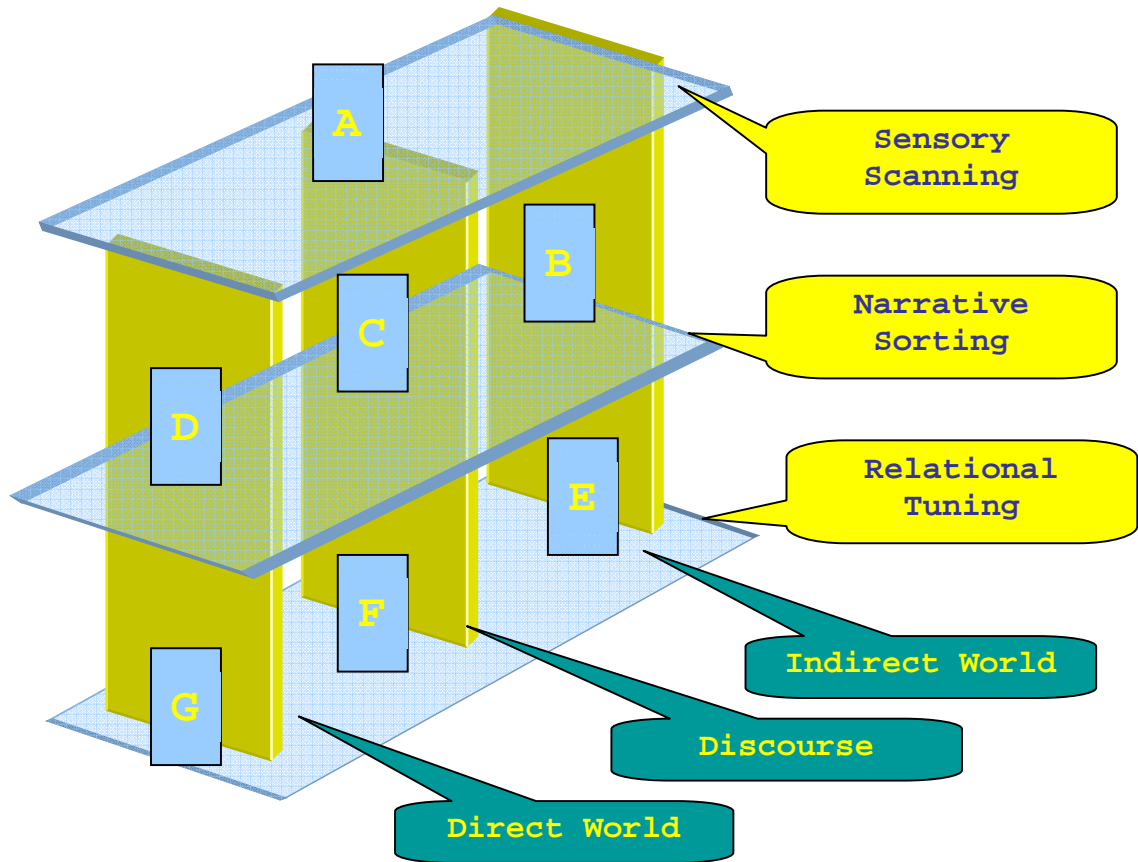
4   *A method for analyzing media experience*

There is another critical difference between ordinary and media experience: the latter is a kind of experience pre-established from the outside and by subjects "others" than those who live it; moreover, media experience is not unique and personal, but repeatable by different subjects and then serialized. In short, media experience is a kind of projected experience, and media can be defined as *devices which implement an experiential design*.[12]

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[12] We should add that this project takes into account cultural backgrounds "standard": in case of a different cultural habitat (e.g. media products viewed at a distance in time and / or space from the context of their production) his results are modified compared to original intentions.

Hence, we can conceive an analysis program that aims to reconstruct the projects guiding the various media experiences. This program seeks to understand how the seven joints of media experience (see above) are handled individually, and how they are mutually related within the experiential design conveyed and implemented by the media. Moreover, if we assume the idea that very often media experience projects tend to hide their artificial nature and to disguise their real purposes, we can catch the *critical* importance of such an analysis program.

However, the purpose of analyzing media experience designs collides with an obstacle. Given the traditional methods of scientific analysis, it is not possible to analyze media experience designs "live", i.e. in their concrete, actual, "from the first person perspective" progress. Indeed, the unique ability to observe them would be after the event (for example, through doing interviews and questionnaires with the audience's members) and from the outside (for example, by the method of participant observation, or through analysis of the viewer's brain imaging). Not even the method of textual semiotic analysis can be used, because the discourse does not exist a priori but is constituted within the experience itself; indeed, as argued by Ricoeur, textual semiotic analysis intervenes *après coup,* to formalize an already completed and revised experience, but without any likelihood of grasping the ongoing process of media experience and its designed dynamics.

To overcome this impasse, a relevant epistemological turn should be given. The analyst can no longer be thought and represented on the outside (in both space and time) of the analyzed system: *he is the system itself.* Indeed, the same analysis practice is set up as an experience; this experience of analysis is not detached from the project – driven medium experience, but rather *a reflexive extension of it.* In other words, the possibility of the analysis practice depends on the spiral dynamics of interpretation which is the core of experience (see above).

However, what we have just said does not suggest that the analysis of media experiences constitutes a kind of "introspective" practice. The analyst works in principle like a "hard" scientist striving to make a controlled production of the process he's inquiring about in order to observe its development in an analytical way and according to certain protocols, and to clarify the causative relationships between its parts. The difference with the hard sciences is that in the case of media experience process it is not physical but mental. It follows that in such an experiment, the analyst is both the inquiring and the inquired subject. The work of the analyst has in this sense a trend "on chiasmus": he shifts continuously from the course of

interpretive processes "in first person" to a detached observation and a description of those processes "in third person"; indeed, the practice of analysis involves a constant oscillation between operations of comprehension and explanation (Ricoeur).[13]

In conclusion, the analyst of media experience designs is completely involved in the analysis with his / her body and his / her mind. In this respect, the analyst's work is an "art of doing" (De Certeau) and requires, like some techniques of meditation or martial arts, a discipline acquired by training.

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[13] In this regulated production and observation of media experience, the analyst must also take account of different cultural backgrounds than their own, in order to predict and calculate media experience different from what he would do as a subject " naive " (for example, he / she must be able to suggest how to structure the vision of a media product from a target other than that to which he belongs: see above, note 12).

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