Things/Signs, Languages/Communication, Culture and the Costs of Consciousness: on Bottom-Up Construction of Cultural Values and New Humanism[1]

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This transdisciplinary study (involving humanities, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy) contrasts the reductionist ideological "top-down" focus on the construction of our cultural "world" with the meandering technical "bottom-up" approach, searching for forgotten or usually omitted aspects in current studies of culture. The discovery goes from the cultural "thing theory" to semiotics, to communication, and to the emergence of human language from the biosemiotic and zoosemiotic processes of communication, in order to examine the impact of these processes on human culture and cultural theories. Finally, based on "heretical ideas" of Jan Patočka and Martin Heidegger, some philosophical implications for the new humanism and for humanities are outlined.

1. Introduction

Social construction of cultural values in humanistic studies has been viewed usually in the "top-down" manner; adopting, more or less consciously, a determined ideological position, adverse social stereotypes and other readily identified defects are solemnly unveiled, denounced, and condemned. Depending on the ideology espoused, anything and everything can be exalted or debunked. "Politically correct" critics accuse the "right wing" writers, and vice versa. As onlookers and "political beings," since the invention of politics in Athens, we can follow the game, participate on one side or the other, or guard our bets. Occasionally, we may notice that the game is rigged and that political interests on either side vastly overweigh the strengths of their arguments. That social life is, and has always been, far more complex than meets the modern or postmodern eye.

The pressures created by tradition, by the situation of our profession, by the peer group of people we are working with, may push us to certain options. So, we read in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Cohen et al., 2001):

> There might be two competing histories that today's critical perspectives wrestle with here. The first is that which finds a 'death of theory' to have preceded the re-politicization of critical interests and [the second is] a supposed 'return' to history, to all variety of identity politics, and to divergent definitions of cultural studies. (xiv)

The repetition of the word 'politics' shows us that the postmodern "politics light," not surprisingly, is part of both branches of the so-called "post-theory" (more on that "theory" in Volek, 2009). It seems that in literature — "literature" is never enough; that in culture — "culture" is never enough.

This apparent *lack* has been with us since the very beginnings of our civilization and of criticism as a profession, counting back to the Greeks. It is stated with amusing poignancy in the dialogue *Ion* by Plato: It tells the story of an up-and-coming star critic, specialist in Homer (not yet that of Simpsons), who just got some prize in cultural studies from Harvard o Yale for his pioneering insights into agriculture and/or ecology in *Odyssey*. In that spoof of a dialogue, Ion is revealed by Socrates that he does not understand anything in literature, nor outside, for that matter; even less in agriculture, of course; and so he vows to get into politics. For some reason (which surely is not *logos*), he feels entitled to a leading role there.

Material Events was published what would now seem as ions ago in humanistic studies, desperately searching in ever shorter cycles for the "new," even if it is progressively something less and less significant. But I think that the quote still describes somewhat adequately the situation we are struggling with today.

My few occasional visits to recent MLA conferences (becoming a cherished meeting place for up-start comedians looking for fresh material) have convinced me that we would have to include some new branches to the above quoted "forking" of critical interests in literary studies, although all deriving into *thematic* criticism, that lowest mode of critical discourse revived and celebrated by "cultural studies": at least, (one) political ecology and (two) political "animal rights studies." I am fascinated by these new ventures of my fellow readers of fiction, scanning through age-old narratives and poetry for politically correct or incorrect answers. I wish them good luck; I hope no Socrates is in sight for foreseeable future.

There is even some "logic" to these newest offshoots on the long tree of criticism. For example, "animal rights" would seem just a step away from the recent fury about the "subaltern." Heavily romanticized and politicized, the Third-World subalterns, we had known from Spivak, were reduced to silence and marginality, only not just by their original historical circumstances but also by their self-appointed exegetes in today's First World. The trouble was that sometimes, against all odds, the subalterns managed to speak up, only to reveal that they were misread and misrepresented, again. This problem of missed- or mis-representation has little chance to arise with animals, except when some, in protest, mangle their hapless trainers. Much less could this occur in literature: *Moby Dick* cannot tear up in his awesome jaws even some of his most deserved readers.

Books don't feast on their "consumers," although there are some enticing possibilities the other way around; but they can eat up peoples' brains, effects that certain *hidalgo* from La Mancha could readily attest to. That was, of course, fun in the 17th century, at the dawn of modern times. The 20th century has given us a plethora of rather dark examples, not only of individuals, but of the "intellectual class" as a whole (the most diverse *trahisons des clercs*, going right up to today) and indeed of the whole nations. Slavoj Žižek has noted somewhere that "behind every genocide there is a poet."

Returning to our animals, we know that they can communicate among themselves, sympathize with each other, even with us; they can act up, true, but they cannot talk back. Even if they would try, which they do, there is no protocol to ascertain that they do not want to hire the attorney XY to represent them in the court of law. Their literary chaperons are safe for now.

These abrupt changes of interest are, of course, rather a norm than an exception. Viktor Shklovsky (1971), following on his concept of *'ostranenie'* (defamiliarization), has argued that literature (literary and cultural studies included) is *nomadic* by nature: when one pasture is grazed up, the flock moves to another one. In our times this is called "doing research at the cutting edge of the field." The trouble is that, occasionally, already the first discoverer leaves others without sufficient grass to chew on (the copyrighted lots are becoming smaller and smaller). As a consequence, hot topics are abandoned overnight without having reached any real solution, and also without any solution in sight for the emerging ones. Serious effort at understanding usually comes when the interest has already moved away.

I said I wished luck to those shifting endeavors. I understand that they can teach us something about our changing culture and about our own, many times, conflicting professional and social values; but I am not sure that this is all we need to care about.

2. Things, communication, languages, culture

A "bottom-up" look might offer itself as an alternative strategy. But what might it be? I think that it would be less straightforward than the ideological method. It would try to grasp into its purview more of the diffuse and complicating realities left out by the top-down approach. As a consequence, it would have to be less an application than a discovery, leading through a series of odd fields. However, in the end, we might come to face the same tasks and problems, only formulated differently. Yet we would have perhaps learnt on the way something more or something different. Unconventional semiotics of things and communication before and after language will be our guiding threads towards rethinking our humanity and culture.

2.1 The "thing theory": thing as a cultural symbol
The "thing theory," brainchild of Bill Brown (2001), inspired by the high-flying philosophy of Martin Heidegger, has claimed its place on the academic sun some years ago as an expansion and miniaturization of the studies of "material culture." As such, it has moved between the British "cultural materialism," coming

from the quite orthodox Marxism of Raymond Williams, and the much "softer" New Historicism, the U.S. version of the "reception aesthetics" seasoned with the Foucaultian "politics light."

The gaze of the "thing theory" may focus on some "specialty" things represented in literature (say the automata, popularized by E. T. A. Hofmann), on the "furnishings" in and of the novels (of which Balzac is accused as the main initial culprit, due to his search for "reality effects" for his unending variations of "human comedy" melodramas, leading over time to the "furniture and nothing else" in the reader punishing French *nouveau roman*), or it may study the "cultural significance" of iconic things at large, typical for the *chronotope* of a culture of certain time and locale.

In all these retail versions, the "thing theory" continues to share the habitual limitations of the sociological focus. Leaving aside the crass Marxist sociology, reaching absurd levels in some opportunistic acolytes laboring under Stalinism, these limitations are apparent even in all "softer" sociological approaches, from the "genetic structuralism" of Lucien Goldmann to the Prague and the Constance "aesthetics of reception" and to their derivatives in contemporary "cultural studies." As the "reconstructed" Harold Bloom aptly summed up their "original sin," they all turn cultural artifacts into "footnotes of history." Cultural texts are viewed not only as "passive reflections," but, in addition, in the so-called "Critical Theory" of the Frankfurt School, they are also suspect of manipulation by mass media and by powers to be.

The so-called "deconstruction" has enriched this distrust with yet another turn: whether they want it or not, texts themselves are declared as deceptive. Paul de Man's own existence of a successful impostor leading double social life has been usefully conceptualized into a suspicion of *the text as an impostor*, also leading double textual life: pretending to say something, and saying something else should one scratch the surface. All this in line with Nathalie Sarraute's suspicion regarding "the suspect times" (*l'ère du soupçon*), directed to unsuspecting readers.

De Man's own version of deconstruction appears to be a rhetorical domestication of Derrida's poetic ride at and around the margins of philosophy (and only some such version could have spread like brushfire through the intellectually dry *milieu*). Derrida's own deconstructive work, substantially more radical, moves *between the absurd and nonsense,* and the text in him will disappear completely (Volek, 2006). The philosopher repeats, with disarming innocence, de Man's assertion that a deconstructionist does not need a specific text for his exercise; "whatever happens in [him], it happens between him and his own text" (Cohen et al., 2001:358).

In a symmetrical and inverse version of the sociological approach, some "straw" figure of stereotypic hegemonic "social values" is posited, and the text (any text) is then declared as "subversive" of those values. The hero critic then marches on to the next imposture and the next "subversive" text. Yet the text itself remains here as helpless against these summary "executions-interpretations" as in the former "artifacts-reflections" of social values.

In contrast to this, a good reading (now one of the almost forgotten artisanal arts) teases out of the texts their overt or covert complexities, whatever they might be. As we all learn now and then, well read texts tend to defy even the most impressive theories. It just may be that this is why the so-called "cultural studies" avoid the most complex in the studies of culture; but the wager on the "cheap" can bring only cheap victories. These "light" and "laughable" humanities make all humanities an easy casualty in the emerging trend of "professionalization" (read: degrees achieved quicker, therefore cheaper, and with as little wasteful education as possible).

In my old *Metaestructuralismo* (Volek, 1985), starting from the malleable semantic qualities of texts in different and ever changing contexts of "reception," I argued for textual agency, for their active role in our conversation with them; after all, they come to us as organized and more or less coherent entities, creating somewhat self-sustaining contexts. If it were not so, we could not dismiss poor readings (although we can learn something even from them). The equivocal concept of "misreading" (Bloom's own questionable "dip" into deconstruction), if it means anything, conveys solely that there are no absolute readings; absolutely not that all readings are equal or equally off mark. But who reads Spanish?

Heidegger uses (and abuses) the highly pliable qualities of German to knit an impressive philosophical fable in which he contrasts the *thing* and the *object* (*das Ding* and *der Gegenstand*). He focuses on simple things

such as a jar, starting with its slow emerging on the potter's wheel, from his shaping of empty space into a vessel, subsequently becoming a vessel holding liquid, and then pouring out wine to quench the thirst of mortals or offering libation to gods. The mythical "fourfold," traceable back to the Indo-European mythology, emerges as a folding into one of earth and sky, divinities and mortals, now *dwelling together all at once* (Heidegger, 1971:173). Thus, the jar comes near to us not as an object on an ever shrinking planet but as a *thing belonging to our world*.

In Heidegger, a *thing* becomes a complex *cultural symbol,* enmeshed in culture and imagination, in our way of life and communication. It belongs to us as much as we belong to it, yet without merging with us, but coming in into the "gap" within the hyphenated "dif-ference" (Heidegger, 1971:202; in German, he plays with *Unter-Schied*; see Heidegger, 1985:22). The thing as cultural symbol is not simply "different" from us, much less in-different to us: it cuts through "difference."

In Heidegger's potter's hands language creates fantastic figures, recovers arcane meanings, and even overflows the boundaries of German into *zaum,* into a kind of "transrational" symbolic language emerging on the margins of language. *Zaum* was the sacred gibberish in some religious sects and also an exquisite playful and poetic raw material in Carroll, Morgenstern and Khlebnikov. The Russian Formalists marched under this banner and put it into the very center of poetic creation. For Heidegger, things *thing* our world, and our world *worlds* the things that surround us in it. It does not matter if the jar is physically close to us or is far away, or if it is just an idea of a jar. Language teases out the symbolic "thingness" of the things named, calls things out "into their thinging" as things-symbols in our culture (Heidegger, 1971:199).

Contrary to that, an object can be close to us physically, yet it will remain outside of our world. It is the negation of the thing, its annihilation. We can look at the object, study it scientifically or even destroy it (Heidegger mentions the atomic bomb as the ultimate example of modern dehumanized science and technology); but, according to this "weaver of words," as the ancient Indo-Europeans called their poets, an object does not *tell us* anything, does not mean anything to us, to our world. Tourists crisscross the planet and find, photograph, and catalogue objects, objects, and more objects. The most curious or exotic object is still no-thing to us.

Heidegger's rejection of modern science and technology goes beyond the usual complaints about little practicality of sciences, because these, as we know (say now in genomic research), return to us in many unexpected ways. We can rather hear an echo of Edmund Husserl's critique of modern European science, one that he formulated in midst of the Nazi perversion of sciences in the 1930s (Husserl, 1970). And the dehumanized "object" recalls to us the postwar existentialist mindset, grumbling about the alienation of the world and yet writing long treatises on the impossibility of communication.[3] Yet we could also find a prophecy there, that of a menacing multicultural "un-world" that circles us here and now in the "globalized world": distances cut short, objects brought haphazardly in from everywhere, people converging from most distant places. Multiculturalism indeed looks to some as annihilation of culture, or at least of a certain culture.

Heidegger speaks from the old Europe and from the mid-20th century; what would he say here and now? Would he be one of those apocalyptic intellectuals who try to rescue some "original American spirit" and culture, and defend them against the encroachment by foreign interlopers? Well, I am one of those intruders. And I am not apocalyptic; I believe that wherever there are human beings, there is creativity, and new surprising things and new worlds are emerging all the time.

The problem with us just may be that, many times, we are looking at old pastures, and even try to see the grass grow there, since it was such a bountiful place in the past. Or it may have been a horrible place: Heidegger's Germany, indeed Heidegger himself. We can imagine this exquisite poet of Being as sitting with his back turned to the gate of Auschwitz and dreaming about his sublime "fourfold." Somebody declared that after Auschwitz it would be impossible to write poetry. Yet... poetry continues to be created and life continues to be lived. Perhaps precisely in defiance of what happened. We cannot turn our backs on those times; as humanity we are carrying many heavy loads simultaneously. History obliges us to continually adjust our vision: while we watch old sites of horror, we may miss the new ones raging today elsewhere.

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[3] Derrida's deconstruction will continue in this vein in the new semiotic context of the so-called "différance" (deferring of meaning), which plays in French with Heidegger's wordplay on "dif-ference" – *Unter-Schied*.

Heidegger's philosophical fable opposing things and objects is fascinating; but it is an ideological, indeed a *mythopoetic,* construct. This "cultural metaphysics" presents a cozy and domesticated world and history. As we can see all around us, it is not the whole story.

2.2 The thing as a thing

To Heidegger's *poetic* vision and to the "thing" theory's *ideological,* specifically cultural-political, reading of things and objects, one would have to oppose a *technical,* semiotic, reading.[4] The concept of 'ostension' offers us helping hand here. It comes from the "ostensive definition" in philosophy, that is, from a marginal type of "defining" by pointing one's finger to something. But ostension turns this around: It is not us pointing to something but something calling our attention; it is "us" who are interrogated in all the extent of our humanity. Objects make us re-think them (re-*thing* them?).

Social construction of cultural values is more complex and contradictory than what the assumption of simple stereotypes would allow for (see the hapless concept of "patriarchy," for that matter, now abused in a kind of "poetic justice"). Ostension will lead us beyond human culture and communication, only to return us to a new bounty of realizations and obligations.

The Czech semiotician Ivo Osolsobě, drawing on the theatrical experience, understands ostension as "a type of communication where the reality itself functions as the *message*" (Osolsobě, 1967:7). It is the act of displaying some reality *significantly*, putting its materiality up for our attention, for our cognitive scrutiny and interpretation.[5] Ostension becomes a type —or enclave— of "sign-less" communication. But this communication takes place everywhere around us. Even signs come to us mediated through their materiality, ostensively, and are turned into symbols, enriching their abstract meanings constructed phenomenologically in the code. In this way, ostension acquires a paradoxical status of being *outside* of the realm of *signs* and yet being a *part* of *semiosis* and an omnipresent aspect of any *communication*. However, I invite you to think with me outside the box of common theories and assumptions.

On the most fundamental level, the phenomenon of ostension *within the human communication* as has been explored by Osolsobě may be extended to all kinds of basic cognitive contacts of living beings with their environment, with their habitat (Volek, 2007). This contact, the visionary German biologist and semiotician Jakob von Uexküll has asserted, is semiotic in nature: living organisms do not respond to impulses coming from outside in a causal-mechanical way, but do so with their own species specific reactions determined by their organization and biological needs. This contact, repeated over and over again, creates a "one-to-one model each organism forms of its habitat." The environment is thus transformed into a meaningful and useful inhabited universe. A kind of species specific semiotic "bubble," transparent to other species yet real in its own way, is built upon the habitat by the organism living in it (Uexküll, 1982). This semiotic interaction is based upon a kind of "language" destined *not for communication* as we usually understand this concept but for *mapping* of the environment (Sebeok, 1986). Yet semiotic interaction and mapping are a kind of *communication* between the environment and the individual, within the species specific biological constraints.

We are extending "communication" here to mean any exchange of information. At least one living organism is needed to initiate it. In this way, we get the first ground of language and communication, so to speak, their "degree zero": a biosemiotic language and communication (Volek, 2007). This "degree zero" level does not vanish from the higher levels of communication; it only disappears from all kinds of limited theories of communication and culture.[6]

We could now argue against Heidegger that his "thing," even if stripped of its original cultural and metaphysical meanings and values, is not *annihilated* in an "object"; it does *not* become *meaningless*, because as an object "standing against us" (*Gegenstand*), it is reexamined cognitively in its material reality, and indeed reinvented and re-appropriated by us as onlookers as a new *thing and symbol*, be it within the

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[4] On the technical, allegedly still "modern," and the ideological, "postmodern," yet quite blurred divide see my "Futures" (Volek, 2009).
[5] While Osolsobě keeps ostension close to reality under cognitive scrutiny, Umberto Eco interprets ostension symbolically, as pointing out something through something; he takes the case of a drunkard, shown off by Salvation Army as a *type* and for diverse moral reasons and responses, and proposes this elementary allegorical performance as a starting point for theater (Eco, 1977).
[6] But this "organic" communicative contact with the world returns with vengeance in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty), in psychoanalysis, and under diverse poetic and mythical guises (archetypes, "humors," etc.).

context it is displayed in or within the purview of some other cultural environment if different from the original.

Some of those reinterpretations may be hilarious (for example, as urban legend has it, foreigners using our *knedlíky* —white dow thinly sliced dumplings— as napkins [how many times do we have to ask natives how to eat some dish or with what cutlery!]; or, the late emperor Haile Selassie, after the concert of classical music in Prague, famously said he loved most the piece… the one… finally, his chaperons figured out that it was the orchestra tuning their instruments before the concert);[7] others are funny yet strikingly functional (we read stories from the museums of modern art where some janitor intuitively mistakes high-priced "artifact" for trash, while art specialists would not dare to recognize that they would be tempted to do the same in her place; or Brazilian Indians, having taken video-camera from poachers, then filming their rituals to send them to and compare with the part of their tribe in the Amazonian jungle they had been separated from for a long time). Examples of these diverse "re-appropriations" could be multiplied.

2.3 Zoosemiotic communication and language(s)
We have begun to tinker with "communication" as a basis of a community and culture. Let's continue. It will help us clear the mess around the concepts of "language" and "communication." Let's think about other ways and means of communication, now taking 'communication' to its "marked," that is specific, meaning as exchange of information among members of one species.

The touch and the taste are limited to an individual; the odor is confined locally and bodily (at least for humans). Even so, scent communicates: each country, each place, and each cuisine leave behind their characteristic smell. The bodily "chemistry," paramount for the communicative bliss of two souls, is seriously studied, calculated and monetized. The pursuit of cultures and perfumes would lead us to some serious adult territory. (Do I smell some "Smell Theory" here?) While fragrances may be wearable, the visual and aural means of communication have the advantage of being usable over longer distances; but in that case their signals *must be coded,* not simply *produced*. We understand that certain level of social organization, interaction and coordination must be in place. The closeness of a community confined to a certain territory (habitat) tends to create, over time, a special "culture" manifested in determined coded behavior and communication.

When an orangutan scratches his chest, it can be something produced instinctively, it can be a symptom (say, of pain), or a message (say "come to groom me") directed to others or to some "significant other" who is "reading" all these levels of his "body language." Yet only the coded messages —or those read as such— belong to "language," here to "body-language," though everything else is also part of communication. (A good actor uses all this gamut of expressions to create his role.)

Language could be defined, then, in the broadest sense, as a socialized coded system of signs and signals of some order used for symbolic communication among the members of a determined community. (We use different language with kids and with pets…)

Visual elements on this zoosemiotic level are limited to gestures, to body-language, to the immediate environment, and to signals visible from a distance. Even so, coding can be complex (Neapolitans are said to have elevated gestures to fine art).

The aural means for communication are produced by mainly the voice. Let's start with something very simple: the capacity of an organism to create voice noise. The next step is to use it intentionally, that is, significantly. The competence/performance divide comes up already here: the potential for and the actual coded use and employment of the voice.

Voice can be shaped into a continuous melody (bird's warble, although we now know that this can be highly individualized and that the performance can be "copyrighted" so to speak), or it can be cut up into discrete clusters, into specific "outbursts" of sounds. Both are communications directed to somebody (including oneself). In the first case, for example, I see a possible mate I wish to attract (but in some such situations, we know that not only the sound works: birds dance, show off of colors, posture, the tail… or the dexterity in building nests…).

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[7] However, what looks like a painful faux pas in one setting, leaving the emperor without clothes, can be "redeemed" by the "real" experimental musical composition in another.

Yet uttering of these discrete sign- or signal-messages will also include melody and certain strength of the outcry. All these elements, even if not coded, will still communicate something (say, the urgency of the message). However, aspects of melody (intonation) and strength can and will be coded in the later human languages: in these, for example, intonation differentiates assertions, questions or orders; on the lexical level, it may distinguish meaning (in Chinese or in Mayan languages).

If we now also call "language" this level of sound-based communication system in the animal world, we need to be aware of its limitations due to its restricted symbolic values. The system of "speech acts" here can be very simple in its range of sounds and references, and can also be quite complex (say in prairie dogs; Grandin & Johnson, 2005:275). "One-scream utterances" produced in this way will refer to present situation only, to something happening here and now (for example, "Watch out for..."). And the screams may be replicated by other members of the community. This level of symbolic aural communication allows for a very limited over-all social communication beyond the actual situation, although community and territoriality can make it remarkably precise in conjunction with visual communication.

The clusters of expressive sounds are coded into a differentiated system of signs or signals, used in communication as simple "utterances" meaning/referring to diverse things or events happening around. We have considerable difficulties in naming these communications, because we need to avoid contamination of this level of zoosemiotic communication by the later verbal language and our semiotic understanding of terminology: 'signs' and 'words' (as elements of the grammatically organized sentences), or 'utterances' (referring to verbal communications that can be simple or fairly complex). These signs or signals are discrete, outwardly differentiated and therefore codifiable; yet, internally, they are formally and semantically undifferentiated cluster-sound-enunciations. In communication, they are complemented by visual means (for example, by gestures, "Come to me!"; or by the body language: for example, not only pointing out peril for others but also showing the way for others through one's own behavior). Which ingredient is stronger in any given communication depends on the situation.

Alison Wray speaks of "holistic utterances," that is, messages not composed out of smaller units of meaning, as the hominid protolanguage. However, while putting emphasis on the undifferentiated "utterance," she misses the fact that the repeated causation creates a codified meaning of the "utterance" centered on something happening. The communication "Fire!" depends on the notion of "fire" established from experience in the code ("any fire"). Without their encoding out of context, these signifying elements could not be used contextually with any precision. Code and communication cannot be mutually exclusive.[8] While it is technically correct that there is "no place for individual words" in these "utterances" (Wray, 2000:294), these communications model the world around, after all; and the meaning of the sound produced is confirmed and specified visually and ostensively, by showing off of some reality that must be examined cognitively (Is it a predator over there or just the shadow of a bush?).

On the other hand, from the existence of certain differentiated "sound-vocabulary" in the code we should not leap to the supposition of some complex messages based on this "vocabulary." It would be preposterous to imagine the following message couched in some long "undifferentiated" howl: "Go and hunt the hare I saw five minutes ago behind the stone at the top of the hill" (quoted from Mithen, 2006:172). However, one can picture some such a bit more simple communication consisting in the combination of determined gestures and shouts. In this sense, the quoted "message" would rather be a description (or a script) of an aural and visual communication in a specific ostensive situation, not transmitted by one means only (although one could rather envision a visual and not an aural reduction of this communication).

Wray then assumes that human verbal language has emerged through the process of segmentation of the allegedly ever more complex yet undifferentiated utterances (Wray, 2000:296). Her seemingly communicative origin of human language is subverted by the creeping linguistic fallacy, reducing communication to *linguistic* messaging and to the labyrinths of grammatical structures (including formulaic expressions) that build up on and beyond the basic syntax given by the communicative situations. Linguists who by their professional training attempt to retrace human language to some "protolanguage" from which it apparently "evolved," miss the boat of the diverse means serving as the complementary vehicles of

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[8] Wray's emphasis on "noise/gesture utterance" and Bickerton's on "vocabulary" are only apparently opposed; they are actually complementary. Bickerton attends more to the interplay of brain and cognitive capacity and language development.

communication. Some theories are hilarious: "babbleluck," gossip, baby talk, grooming, computer modeling of monkeys writing Shakespeare's works (Wind, 1992). Anything but the real communication!

Even if this level of sound-based communication is enriched by the visual and the ostensive field, by the play and by our capacity for learning from the others just by looking (Yogi Berra seems to have anticipated the discovery of the "mirror neurons"), the potential for a more complex social communication is highly limited and limiting. In higher organisms there is clearly an asymmetry between the richness of what is experienced by an individual and what can be expressed, indeed named and communicated to others. "Yesterday" is in experience, but not in communication; "death" is experienced, but not named and recalled in communication; "tomorrow" or "Next year in Havana" is unnamable, yet the experience of time and even of seasons is there. What is at fault? Is it this "language" or rather the cognitive capacity of the species and the low level of social organization and planning?

2.4 The brave new world of human language

We can imagine a self-reinforcing loop emerging here and working in fits and starts: Changing physical environment and more complex social interactions push for more effective communication, and that demands more cognitive capacity. I understand that the "next step" is never simply an "evolution" but a leap, a kind of "revolution." The time-line of the changes needed to go from *homo habilis* to *homo sapiens sapiens* is generally accepted, but the interpretation of what actually happened at different stages continues to be hotly debated.

What interests me here is the end-result: the emergence of human articulate language, although that "end-result" has turned out to be yet another *beginning*; and we are still in the middle of all that happening. We don't have to imagine some Marcel Proust smelling a cookie (some proto-*madeleine*) over some brew in a cave in Altamira and reciting an elegy on the *temps perdu* out of Africa. I am sure it was initially something very very elementary and was borne out of interaction, out of rudimentary communication and dialogue.[9] But this new something had two marvelous interlocking aspects: an open-ended lexicon of signs created from the in principle *aleatoric* combinations of "phonemes," discrete sound elements themselves without meaning; and some rudimentary syntax, based on interactive communicative situations, allowing for some elementary propositions and argument[10] in a dialogic communication.

While verbal lexicon creates a loosely structured system modeling the habitat and the cultural world of the community *analogically* (not unlike the more primitive lexicon formed already on the zoosemiotic level), phonemes constitute a small, tightly knit, and in principle *digitalized* system of sounds. Yet while the phonemes are established in the code, phenomenologically, as ideal and transparent constructs, in concrete lexemes they may become semantically colored by their specific sounds, by their repetition or by their oral qualities, such as their point of pronunciation, timbre and accumulation in speech (harmonious or cacophonic), and may be used specifically for this semantic connotation (the sound metaphor, onomatopoeia, would be the limit of this process, still within the language).

Now we can imagine, just for comparison, some such communication and argument occurring on the previous level of zoosemiotic communication. Let's visualize a party hunting a mammoth: the leader might growl "Hhmm" and show a gesture "there" to one member ("you go there"), and "Hhmm" and gesture to somebody else ("you go there, you do this or that"). We have got a communication based on a social hierarchy and on interaction, a message (an order) and communicative syntax ("you" – implicit "go/do" – adverb/direction "there"). The gesture could even determine the "functional sentence perspective": emphasis on "you," on "go/do" or on "there" as the thematic nucleus of enunciation. But some of those addressees may have answered back, "Hhmm" and gesture (meaning "*you* go there," "*you* do this or that"), and we would get perhaps more than an argument, a fight. A hunting wolf-pack would disperse instinctively according to the initial spatial position of its members around the alpha male.

We do not have to wait for the "rules" of syntax in human language to have interactive communication at the zoosemiotic level. And even on the human level, language is both a vehicle and a part of communication; it is

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[9] The linguist and Russian Formalist fellow-traveler Lev Yakubinsky has pointed out the dialogue as the basic linguistic form as early as in the 1920s, against the tendency in linguistics to focus on the syntactical labyrinths of monologic forms (Yakubinsky, 1923). Bakhtin's group would become famous for developing this linguistic insight into a broader concept of "dialogism".

[10] Karl Popper adds "argumentative function" to the three basic language functions in Karl Bühler (later multiplied by Roman Jakobson), and projects these functions in a somewhat questionable genetic line going from plants and animals to babies and adult humans (Popper, 1982). 'Argument' can be understood as a bit more developed explanation or as a dialogic conflict.

not primarily a self-sufficient and self-enclosed game that linguists love to study. Language code and multi-modal communication (Mithen's term; Mithen, 2006) co-exist in mutual tension, colliding in utterances within determined communicative situations: utterances can be surprisingly "ungrammatical" and yet communicate; and, due to those tensions and shifts, both the code and the way verbal and non-verbal communication is constructed continue to evolve and change (for their interaction see Volek, 2009). Yet the language code and verbal language can be easily abstracted and forever happily studied outside of communication (as in the Saussurean and the Chomskyan linguistic paradigms), creating an illusion of a self-contained structure that does not need anything else for its bliss.

If we now return to our human language as a superstructure built upon the biological and zoosemiotic levels of communication, we can see that a new "algebraic" language has begun to assemble, a language of the second —actually third— order, destined to radically change all human communication and life (see Volek, 2007). Homo sapiens has made a vertiginous leap for the *brave new world* of a strangely *utopian* language (language unbound from context, yet communicated in context). His —our— home and homelessness will be —intimately yet at times painfully— enciphered in it.

It seems to me that much of the discussion about the emergence of language in humans has been marred by the fact that anthropologists and linguists have had in their purviews 'articulate verbal language' only. Yet *speech capacity* does not equate *articulate language*; and verbal language is not only *the range* of sounds produced: in the new human language, from the zoosemiotic analogous curves of "growling and howling" (Chesterton) a *digital system* of 'phonemes' has emerged. *The first digital revolution has arrived*. Others will follow in ever shorter order.

All explanations of the emergence of this level of language based on *analogous* and transitional models have failed to grasp this fundamental leap into the new world of constructing language and communication. On the other hand, the mentioned proposals such as "babbleluck" miss the complexities, continuities and functionalities of communication. Furthermore, only those who would already have known the language would have had the capacity to recognize it out of the "babble." From the communicational approach we can also better understand the diversity of human languages stemming from different needs for communication in communities living in different habitats and creating different cultures.[11]

2.5 Languages in human communication and in social interaction

So far, we have identified three levels of "language" that construct our social reality:
1. The biosemiotic "ostensive language", biologically determined and used for analogous, bodily mapping of the inhabited environment (language$_0$ and communication$_0$).
2. The zoosemiotic —aural and visual— languages of the second order, analogous and only partially symbolic, used to communicate symbolically within the given environment (languages$_1$), although taste, tact and smell also communicate.
3. The "utopian," digital-analogous, human verbal language, used to communicate symbolically within and over the given environment (language$_2$).

In one way or another, all three levels of languages participate in our communication and in the creation of our culture. Only the human verbal language can "jump" with precision present environments and time, and move freely between the real and the "utopian" chronotope, anticipating most diverse "possible worlds," real and imaginary (the world of the gods, that of the dead, utopias and dystopias included). We can dissect these worlds without having to bring them upon us first; conversely, we can live in false reality, be inebriated by words (freedom, justice, revolution…) and by literary worlds (the best selling "magic realism"), and only slowly see through what is the "raw" reality and what is "cooked." The ostensive shock of historical events (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11, the scope of the NSA vigilance revealed), occurring now more and more in "real time" literally "before our eyes," can also help us wake up.

Around this new level of language, then, a host of further diverse special symbolic languages and modes of communication has been created. Our mind's capacity for abstraction and for meaningful explanation, developed through our human language in the long process of social and cultural interaction, has turned

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[11] A savvy linguist comments: "Languages do not correspond to one another as simply different solutions to exactly the same problems. Individual languages address different aspects of reality, understand reality differently, and therefore the reality is different for each language" (Skalička, 2004, I:362).

human verbal language into a unique *metalanguage* vis-à-vis all the other symbolic languages. 'Metalanguage' means that it can explain all of them, comment on them, frame them, yet it cannot substitute for them (Romain Rolland can write marvelously about Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, yet...).

A different asymmetry arises at this stage: language as "the archives of history" (Emerson, "The Poet"), of culture and of the human experience is now much larger than any individual human experience can be; it shapes us in different ways (we are schooled), expands our horizon and even substitutes for real experiences (the reality culturally construed; petrified metaphors, clichés; "implanted memories," in individuals and in nations). It brings back memories, events. While the lived experience (for us the 9/11) will be always different from the later "recalls," and we may quarrel about the veracity of the narratives created around the original events, the "recalled experience" is there to be recalled at will and for many purposes. It may even help our fading and ever changing memories themselves. Unless we are traumatized or transfixed, we may never re-enter the river of our memories at the same point. At the end, "nothing is as it is but as it is remembered."

This asymmetry between language and experience and reality is perilous for us and for our social health. We can —cultures and nations can— become intoxicated with words and let realities pass unattended. Or pretend that changing a word changes reality (although sometimes it works). "If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success" (Confucius in *Analects*). If the touted "crisis of language" and of "representation" has some merits, it would have to be in this regard: in the *use*, not in the *structure* of language.

Our human language as such, fine-tuned —through thousands of years of cultural work— into an infinitely flexible instrument empowering our communication, cannot be accused as the culprit of some such crisis: our language is "algebraic," "utopian," "conventional." It has emerged to channel the growing needs in our human communication. It has never been "Cratylic," it has never attempted to name any god-sent essences of things.[12] To do that, we would have to catch a glimpse of the gods' language (if that's the ultimate language of the universe). To search through etymologies or through hermetic philosophies in order to get to some such god-sent language makes for great literature in Borges and for great poetry of Being in Heidegger; nothing more and nothing less. Yet "crises" sell on the markets of "ideas."

A new self-reinforcing loop has emerged: the new power of communication has enriched human culture, and the culture has created, in and through language, its layers upon layers of flexible expressions. And if we do not have something suitable in English, we can go to French, to German, and so on, and even beyond language, to its outskirts in the *zaum*. Yet strangely enough it is still "Latin" in Morgenstern, still "Russian" in Khlebnikov, and still French in Derrida's Heideggerese... The depth of language is potentially infinite; yet, even today, the pole of verbal communication may be minimal and still sufficient in some environment (you can become famous for it: take the verbally challenged Stallone; or think about the struggle to teach U.S. teenagers some English in freshmen classes).

Language and human beings have always been considered as belonging together. Some modern cultural theories (Wilhelm von Humboldt, Husserl, Voloshinov, Sapir, Lacan) have identified human verbal language with human consciousness (or with the unconscious as in Lacan). I think that all these theories are too purist. Why only this late-comer would be important for our psychic organization? The old Western Christian separation of humans from all other living organisms is still lurking there. I think that all levels of languages and all means of communication must also be active in human consciousness as well as in the unconscious.

Rather than arguing that verbal language vertebrates each and every human consciousness (since not every consciousness, or the unconscious for that matter, have been created equal), I would say that we as humans have plenty of diverse yet complementary talents: some of us are gifted in mathematics or in, somehow strangely, closely related music; others in visual arts; autistic geeks have problems with language communication but are great with technology; poets are great with language and imagination but have problems with reality; the autistic person such as Temple Grandin helps us understand and communicate

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[12] Thousands of years before Lacan and Derrida, Socrates shows to Cratylos that even words are in flux. In the dialogue's afterlife, Cratylos goes on to the other extreme and comes to renounce speech since for him then words cannot say anything true about the ever changing nature of things; what remains for us to do is to point the finger in silence (let the reality be, like modernist poetry). At the end of his life, he becomes practitioner of ostension in the Heraclitean spirit: one cannot even point to the same reality twice.

with other living beings…[13] Different talents compensate for each other's "challenges." Verbal language as a metalanguage vertebrating our social interactions permits for social integration not only of people of most different talents but even of those carrying most diverse disabilities. The gap between them may be porous and technology is closing it fast.

Yet, as I have been repeating here, all the other levels of languages participate in our communication and cultural construction of social realities. From these complex layers of social communication, I think that there is something emerging beyond the diversity of individuals, something like "cultural smarts" (cultural ecology modeled on the *street smarts*): some good, some bad. Some cultures help its members to rise up, work and thrive together; others tend to keep them separate and down. Gender issues come up here. And also the locally bound political culture (that's why it is not easily transferable; see, for example, "democracy" without democratic political culture in so many countries today). Human culture is a ceaseless work-in-progress, a continuous struggle as new issues arise and old go unresolved, and relapses are painful.

3. Conclusions: liabilities and costs of human consciousness

Human language as a new "algebraic" means of communication has facilitated more durable and efficient ways of accumulation, storing, and sharing of information and experience, and the ever faster social build-up of know-how has propelled mankind to new momentous revolutions: writing, print, cybertext, and whatever else might follow. Now we are on the verge of becoming more and more *cyborgs*…The pace of these changes has been dizzying and ever accelerating. While "culture" as a specific going about the daily life in each and every society has emerged to a certain degree already in lower species, our language has been instrumental for creation of complex and competing symbolic cultural constructs.

This new language that has helped raise the wannabe hominid kind to fuller humanity of today has brought with it new liabilities and tensions.

On the one hand, human culture does not only organize daily life in each society, but it also offers means of transcending the "everyday" routine and mediates our relation to the totality of the living world. According to Jan Patočka (1996),[14] this relation can only be problematic, uniting the contradictory —"day and night," life and death— experiences. Mythical cultures cover up this gap, and offer an orgiastic, ecstatic type of transcendence of the everyday life. Man in them is a part of nature, of cosmic cycles; he lives in the world of myths, stories, memories, but not in a historical world. History —that is historicity— is the invention of the Greeks and is a specific European contribution to mankind. History, Patočka points out, emerged together with the political and philosophical *polemos* of the Greek *polis* and its democratic culture. Alongside the orgiastic, Dionysian transcendence, the Greek tradition of *theoria,* of philosophical exploration of reality, offers a rational search for truth for the truth's sake. *Mythos* and *logos* engage in a secular dance throughout European history, and make history. (Ideology is only the secular version of myth.)

Rational search for truth cannot not to reveal its own problematicity and its limitations. Even that initial questioning of received truths could not avoid social conflicts with the inherited culture (the fate of Socrates as the first intellectual-martyr in this line of inquiry, life, and politics). Modern mathematical reason, in contrast with man's experiential "lived world" (Husserl's *Lebenswelt,* Patočka's *natural world*), has only exacerbated this conflict. Finally, modern destruction of all communal tradition (Marx's "all that is solid melts into air") has pushed the feeling of homelessness of modern humans in the world to new levels of alienation and despair.

On the other hand, the habitat of the Earth has been conquered ruthlessly and has been exploited with little foresight. In this confrontation and secular miscommunication, the Earth appears to be responding, and the writing on the wall is worrisome.

Human verbal language sets us apart from other living beings and this *ek-sistence*, this "sticking out" among the living, has its costs because it thrusts upon us important and unavoidable responsibilities: we are not only part of Nature, we dominate and threaten Nature as a whole. Fortunately, we are not slaves of our

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[13] Paradoxically, helping to kill them in a more "human" way. What's "human," then?

[14] Patočka follows upon Edmund Husserl's critique of European science from the mid-1930s published posthumously (Husserl, 1970).

biological "bubble" and of our zoological instincts. Our cognitive ability, our capacity for hindsight and foresight, our social consciousness, all assign us a new task.

In his "Letter on Humanism," from 1946 (and written precisely *then*), Martin Heidegger has pondered on the predicament of mankind, thrusted through verbal language into a special new role among all living species. For him, language serving as an instrument of domination over beings would only deny its essence, to wit, "that it is the house of the truth of Being" (Heidegger, 1993:223). Endowed with language, "the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human" (245). His existence becomes 'ek-sistence', 'standing out', standing outside of the series of other living beings and destined to search for the truth of Being. By standing out, standing in-between, mankind —not unlike the narrator in a novel— communicates between two worlds, links the universe of beings with that of Being. If true to his mission, "man —for Heidegger— is the shepherd of Being" (245).

These are large claims, stretching verbal language between the habitat of mankind on Earth and the abode of Being, encompassing the whole universe. Cultural worlds, projected and made possible by verbal language, complicate human *Umwelt*: in each culture, the physical and the metaphysical worlds of values are intimately correlated in many contradictory and complementary ways. While it is clear that the algebraic utopian articulate language is much less than a magic wand lifting humans to quasi-divine transcendence, it is much more than mere gratuitous free play of arbitrariness. Heidegger's concept of 'humanism plus' is a far cry from the postmodern prophecies of the 'end of Man' and of the coming 'anti-humanism',[15] stemming from poor reading of both Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Heidegger's assertion that "the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human" echoes Blaise Pascal's "L'homme passe l'homme" (Man surpasses himself). This is our challenge, beyond myopic politics, academic posturing and failed theories.

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[15] If Foucaultian 'anti-humanism' means anything, it would be overcoming the exclusions of anthropocentrism, the limitations embedded in modern "middle-class" humanism. The savagery of recent history all over the planet has reinterpreted both "humanism" and "anti-humanism" in its own sinister way.

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