

On Connectedness.

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“Dan Brown is a character from ‘Foucault’s Pendulum!’ I invented him. He shares my characters’ fascinations — the world conspiracy of Rosicrucians, Masons, and Jesuits. The role of the Knights Templar. The hermetic secret. The principle that everything is connected. I suspect Dan Brown might not even exist.”

(Umberto Eco, interviewed by Lila Azam Zanganeh for *The Paris Review*, 185, Summer 2008)

1. Introduction: mystical stereotypes.

“To be connected with the whole”: what does it mean? This or similar sentences often occur in the discourse of various present-day spiritual trends. They circulate through the contemporary culture by means of sundry texts and media. Even more significantly, they turn into the many stereotypical fragments through which society constructs its everyday discourse. “I feel connected with the whole” is a phrase that is often heard during night conversations among friends over a glass of wine or similia. The purpose of this essay is to investigate both the sociocultural and the semiotic meaning of affirmations of this kind, aiming at a more encompassing critique of the concept itself of connectedness. What does it actually mean, “to be connected”? Delving into the semantic field of connection, connectedness, connectivity, interconnectedness, etc. is essential in an epoch in which the terms derived from it often constitute the linguistic and textual cornerstones of the prevailing rhetoric of our times, a rhetoric according to which there would be a value in the passive status of “being connected” as well as in the active status of “connecting”.

The spiritual utopia of a permanent state of connectedness with the whole is not an invention of the era of digital social networks: in the past, human beings have expressed wishes and projects of total union of a similar kind in relation to transcendence, to nature, or to humanity as a whole (Leone 2014). The concept, feeling, and rhetoric of connectedness that was formulated in relation to these different targets of complete unification were not constant

but changed in relation to both the subject and the object of fusion. As a consequence, cultural semiotics must underline both continuities and discontinuities between these epochs and the current one: on the one hand, a subtle thread links the contemporary youngster that today, often stimulated by substances of various kinds, expresses a wish of total connectedness and, on the other hand, seventeenth-century Spanish Catholic mystics voicing a similar desire of merging into the totality of God (De Certeau 1982).

On the other hand, though, the two expressions significantly differ not only as regards the specific object and context of the connectedness that is wished for, but also and most significantly, as regards the discourse that promotes, describes, and, sometimes, performs such fusion. In a nutshell, if the rhetoric of total connectedness has existed for a long time, and expressed itself first and foremost in some spiritual trends in world religions — and later in the naturalistic utopias of Romanticism and post-Romanticism — the era of digital social networks has pushed this cultural trend to a both superior and inferior level: while turning mystical connectedness into a matter of technical algorithms, accessible to all, it has also placed this anthropological drive of human beings into a marketing framework (Natale and Pasulka Forthcoming).

2. The meaning of connectedness.

The essay that follows, then, works both at a diachronic and at a synchronic level. It retraces the current ‘connectedness fever’ to previous similar sociocultural manifestations in human history, and simultaneously seeks to develop a synchronic typology of its discourses. Both operations must start from a semiotic reflection on what a connection is. The etymology of words is not equivalent to their semantics: the history of a word leads to its present usage but does not fully explain it, for the simple fact that speakers often ignore the history of words when they use them and sometimes even use them with a semantic content that contradicts their history. The etymology of a word, however, offers clues about the main stages and switches marking its cultural history (Plotke 2017). Most probably, the etymological core of the word “connexion” is the proto-Indoeuropean root “*ned-”, which is conjectured to have covered the whole semantic area of “binding together”. This root can be derived from words such as the Sanskrit “*nahyati*”, meaning “binds, ties”; the Latin “*nodus*”, meaning “knot”; the Old Irish “*nascim*”, meaning “I bind, I oblige”; and the Old English “*net*”, meaning “*netting, network*”.

The same kernel of meaning occurs in all these expressions, constituting, therefore, the semantic specificity of the abovementioned proto-European root. Such semantic kernel seeks

to evoke a range of possible phenomenologies, which in turn constitute the perceptible manifestation of a basis of possible ontological situations. Here follows a formal description of the main features of both this ontology and the phenomenology to which it gives rise. First, there is no connection in absolute singularity. In order for one of the phenomenological situations inscribed in the root “*ned-” to take place, ontology must be posited as dual: there are at least two elements in reality, and these two elements appear as separated. The appearance of this separation, nevertheless, deserves further reflection. For two entities to manifest themselves as distinct, indeed, a potential of connectedness must already somehow linger between them. In other words, when two beings are thought of as separated, the thought itself of separation contains a potential for interconnection. Thinking at two separate entities at the same time is inevitably tantamount to envisage at least the negative possibility of their connection. “*Ned”, therefore, refers to this idea of two or more separate entities whose separation is, however, perceived as temporary or, at least, not intrinsic.

3. Expansions and contractions.

For cultural semiotics, it is especially crucial to consider how, in different epochs and societies, the range of connectedness expands or contracts according to forces that are both material and symbolical. Connecting two countries divided by a mountain range, for instance, was unconceivable for a long period of human history. In the presence of a frontier constituted by a mountain range, the two human communities separated by it were doomed to exist separately. The idea of their connection was not even envisageable, and any attempt at overcoming the gigantic obstacle mostly expressed itself in the individual endeavor of an exploration, or in the aggressive initiative of an invasion (Leone 2007). Only the development of complex technical means allowed human beings to ‘pierce’ mountains and to establish permanent connections between hitherto separated societies (Stutz Steppacher 2013). The engineering of tunnels not only allowed previously separated communities to interact on a regular basis, but also deeply transformed the ontology of a mountain range. People divided by mountains are not any more cultural monads, but societies whose separation already invokes an effort of interconnection.

The same goes for other natural obstacles separating societies and, therefore, cultures: the sea was, up to modern times in human history, an agent both creating and preserving a semantics of unredeemable separation: that which was beyond Hercules’s Columns could not be possibly bridged, it was immune to any human project of connection (Attali 2017). Yet, technical advancements in the art of navigation transformed the phenomenology of

separation by which the planet would appear to most of its inhabitants: today, no sea is seen anymore as an agent of permanent separation. Given the appropriate navigation means, every shore in the world can be reached.

The expansion and the contraction of both the ontology and the phenomenology of potential connectedness does not depend only from material and technical circumstances. For instance, human beings do not have the technical means for reaching distant astronomic destinations yet they do not, for that matter, currently cease to perceive them as potentially reachable (Friedman 2005). Since the “giant step in humankind” of the moon-landing, the space is not seen as an obstacle anymore, as something that will always keep human beings apart from what is “out there”, but rather as a porous interspace, which advancement in technology will sooner or later be able to ‘pierce’ and ‘bridge’ as it was the case for mountains and oceans. Similarly, the way in which cultures stress rather the singularity of entities or their separation, and therefore their possible connection, responds also to a symbolical logic that is underpinned by material conditions but it is not completely determined by them. The interdependence between the materiality and the rhetoric of connection can also turn into independence, to such an extent that the former can actually progress to the detriment of the latter.

To give an example: technical developments in the flight industry and especially in the algorithms of pricing have led to the flourishing of low-cost flight companies, and to the consequent exponential increase in the amount of journeys across country frontiers in Europe and elsewhere. Cities that would heretofore been perceived as very distant in terms of space and traveling costs have become reciprocally approachable: young people of Madrid can now easily travel to Istanbul and vice versa. On the one hand, this technical and commercial development was already prepared by some cultural conditions: the establishment and the successful running of ERASMUS, the European program for students’ exchange, for instance, prepared the sociocultural conditions that were subsequently matched by the technology and marketing of low-cost flying. On the other hand, though, the material conditions of connectedness and the corresponding symbolical discourse do not always develop in parallel; while this essay is being written, for instance, Europe continues to cultivate an utopia of connection, and technical meanings to ensure progress toward such utopia are in constant improvement: the current generation of European young students, for example, is able to express itself in English as European lingua franca like no other previous generation of students. At the same time, one also gathers the impression that technicalities of interconnectedness increasingly acquire a negative connotation in the light of a symbolical

discourse that, opposing the former, tends to recreate an idea of separation that cannot be bridged, of a separation that inexorably slides toward a semantics of singularity and incommensurable distinction.

It is hard to determine what forces in the history of human cultures provoke the blossoming of utopias of connectedness and what other forces, on the contrary, push them toward an opposite idea of isolation and, ultimately, toward the feeling of being encircled by an incomparable, impenetrable cultural enclave. It cannot be denied, in any case, that this dialectics of expansion and contraction of the idea of connection exists, and unfolds according to patterns that are usually not linear but entail a number of paradoxical movements and convolutions.

To recapitulate, the semantic range condensed into the proto-Indoeuropean root “*ned-” refers to the ontological existence, and the consequent phenomenological appearance, of two or more entities, which are separated, but whose separation already potentially hints at the possibility of their connection, that is, at the possibility of somehow bridging the gap that creates the separation itself. The perception of the transient character of the separation, which coincides, symmetrically, with perceiving the foreseeable character of the connection, depends on both the ontological and the phenomenological level.

4. Ontologies and phenomenologies of connectedness.

At the ontological level, only a change in the material conditions of the separation allows the two or more distinct entities to be perceived under a different light, that is, under the light of a possible reconnecting. To give an example, the human voice was considered as having a range of diffusion essentially limited by the power of amplification (through horns, through minarets, or through other acoustic devices or settings) until the technological practice of its recording became viable and, between the 19th and the 20th century, current. From that moment on, the human voice has not been conceived anymore as inextricably imprisoned in the geography of a body, but detachable from it and able to be transported in a completely different space and time. Today, there are no more limits for the human voice and its contents of expressions and emotions to be transplanted in a distant space and into a distant time (with the limitation that only the future, and not the past, is open to this transportation: we cannot send voices back to the past).

At the phenomenological level, however, the transient character of a separation is seen somehow in relation to the ontological level, but with a certain degree of independence. A separation that is ontologically transient can appear as permanent, and vice versa. The first

mismatch was already exemplified though reference to interstellar traveling: probably, the technical conditions necessary to reach some remote areas of the universe will never be at the disposal of human beings; despite this ontological limit, due to such rocky facts as, for instance, the speed of light or other physical conditions, nothing can prevent human beings from dreaming about reaching, through imaginary technologies, the limits of the universe, and see with their eyes the beginning of it. On the opposite, two entities that are perfectly bridgeable from the ontological point of view, through as simple technology as a bus, for instance, can become phenomenologically very distant when a symbolical discourse of distinction and singularity seeps into their perception. The current disintegration of the idea of a unified Europe, for instance, is certainly not due to the ontology of geographic and linguistic frontiers: we dispose of translation machines that perform increasingly well; our trains and planes are faster and cheaper than ever. Nevertheless, despite this ontology of connectedness, and perhaps paradoxically also because of it, a discourse of singularity starts to take momentum in the gap between spaces and societies: “we shall never understand them”; “they shall never be like us”; an agency of disconnection inevitably ensues, and seeks to transform the ontology of the relation so as to be in line with the phenomenological perception of it: ultimately, the reestablishment of passport controls among countries of the Schengen area comes down to that: we perceive ourselves as non-connectable, therefore we must disconnect us.

5. Agencies of connectedness.

Along this line, it is time to formalize that which has continuously been hinted at in the last paragraphs, that is, the idea that, in the semantics that is enshrined by the proto-Indoeuropean root “*ned-”, there is not only the possibility of a dialectics between the concept of a bridgeable separation and that of an unredeemable singularity, a dialectics that evolves through expansions and contractions as well as through a complex intertwining of matter and discourse, structural conditions and symbolical connotations; the semantics of connectedness also contains a fundamental idea of agency (Leone 2009). “*ned-” and its derivatives indicates that two separate items exist, and that they can be reconnected at both the ontological and the phenomenological level, but also that a force is necessary in order for this change in the level of connection of things to take place. “*Nahyati*” [“binds, ties”]; “*nodus*” [“knot”]; “*nascim*” [“I bind, I oblige”]; “*net*”, [“netting, network”]: in all old Indo-European languages, the idea emerges that, through the exertion of an appropriate agency and its force, the separatedness

of things can be transformed, so that two or more entities that were hitherto far from each other become closer or even merge into a mystical fusion.

The semantics of this connecting agency (which is contrasted, throughout history, by an opposite semantics of disconnecting agency) comprises two versions: in the radical version, the human agency is such that it can affect directly the ontology of a separation, according to the idea that this separation is actually not such at a deeper level, and therefore calls for an effort that realigns the phenomenology of things to their 'real' ontological substratum. This complex philosophical formula grasps phenomena that are indeed quite common, such as the utopia, quite frequent in certain historical periods, according to which the apparent variety of human beings is nothing but a superficial, super-structural feature, underneath which a common ground can be found. The second and less radical version does not posit a commonality of separated entities at an ontological level, but implicitly claims that, in the way they appear, that is, at the level of their phenomenology, an agency can be exerted so that previously distinct items might look as united or, at least, as closer.

6. Grounds of connectedness.

In both versions, a semiotic perspective on separation spontaneously arises. Even in the assumption of the separation of two or more things, indeed, a semiotic logic must somehow take place, and indicate to the beholder according to which particular angle the connection might take place. That which is here analytically exposed is actually characterized by synthetic simultaneity: when we consider two entities as separated, and when we plan and then establish a connection, we are implicitly looking at these two entities as signs of such connection. Framing them according to Peirce's semiotics is enlightening: entities are seen as objects in relation to which the idea of a connection selects a ground, on whose basis objects are, then, turned from static ontological items into dynamic objects, that is, into the origin of a phenomenology that is subsequently grasped by the semiotic agency of an interpretant.

The two versions described above differ because the former considers that the connection takes place at the level itself of the grounds, whereas the latter esteems that the connection is rather established at the level of the interpretants. To give an example: in the marketing of the cell phone industry first, and then in that of social networks, company mottos and advertising slogans often emphasize the value of connection. Nokia's motto used to be "Connecting People"; Facebook's slogan is "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life". In both sentences, human beings are not considered with attention to their unbridgeable singularities but as objects (in the Peircean sense of the term) from which

the marketing discourse of these two companies selects a specific ground, that of the possibility and potentiality of interconnectedness. The slogans do not say *what in particular*, in human beings, they are going to connect. They do not specify whether, for instance, they are going to connect people with the same skin color, or with the same gender, or with the same political ideology. They more generally posit the universal interconnectedness of human beings, the fact they are ontologically inclined to connection and that these two technological and commercial endeavors, a cell phone company and a social network service, will allow them to express this natural inclination.

These and similar slogans do not claim, like certain political ideologies of the past would do, that human beings are all equal, which was asserted by Enlightenment and the French Revolution at the civil and political level and by Marxism at the social and economic level. Political agendas of unity would emerge from such ideologies, while the ideology of connectedness implicitly suggests that human beings are actually different but also that the separatedness among them can be somehow bridged through the power of technology. Both Enlightenment and Marxism would advocate for a semantic reunification of the humankind, in terms of either juridical or economic discourse; the marketing of cell phones and social network services, on the contrary, preaches a syntactic reunification of the humankind, in which no specific content is attributed to the connection among people.

7. Conclusions: rhetorics of connectedness.

Another rhetorical feature of these and germane slogans that is worthy of consideration is their tendency to hide or downplay the energy that the connection requires. In both the abovementioned slogans, the image takes shape of a connection that naturally establishes itself among people, as if they were spontaneously predisposed to that. The discourse of these slogans captures the essence of human beings as signs whose ground is the incoercible drive to get together. Both slogans, however, fail to emphasize that which is implicit in the semantics of the proto Indo-European root “*ned-”: establishing a connection requires both an agency and an effort. Most derivatives of this root, indeed, refer to material or metaphoric devices of netting, such as knots or binding contracts. In the currently prevailing rhetoric of the network, instead, the knots disappear; that which remains is the result of knotting, the effect of this binding agency, force, and effort.

Refocusing on the knots, rather than on the network, allows one to retrieve two essential phenomenological features of the former: first, a connection is not only a spontaneous dynamic, caressing the natural inclination of things toward each other, but also a form of

coercion, repressing the sometimes equally spontaneous tendency of things to separate from each other. The joyous marketing of social network services highlights the sparkle of the connection, as a result of which hitherto separated human beings magically start being part of a relation; this marketing, however, implicitly conceal a fundamental feature of every connection: it takes a lot of effort to keep human beings together, and such an effort cannot be uniquely syntactic, it must be a semantic one. It must, in other terms, downward explore the several layers of the human existence of an individual in order to ascertain if and when it can establish a connection with another human being, and whether this connection can be considered a more or less permanent one.

This argument brings us back to the beginning of this essay, that is, to the popularity of such expressions (and ideas) as that of 'total interconnectedness' or 'being connected to the whole'. When such or similar clichés of present-day mysticism pop out in casual bar conversation, the suspect arises that they are not actually prompted by familiarity with some sort of philosophical or religious holism, but that they are rather the new-age counterpart of the rhetoric of connection underpinning the marketing of social networks. In philosophical holism, instead, the idea — and the corresponding feeling — of 'being connected with the whole' stems from an excruciating study of both the whole and the self. The kind of holism that Buddhism encourages, for instance, is deeply based not on an abstract, syntactic idea of connection, but on a specific and semantic realization of suffering as binding link among all living and non-living creatures: I feel part of a whole encompassing the entire universe because a long and painful reflection has led me to realize how all beings share the same feature, from rocks to mammals, and such feature becomes the ground through which all these beings turn into as many rings of a common semiotic chain. Similarly, in Christianity the connection that binds a community together is not generic but based on the idea of a sacrifice of oneself that, after the image of the supreme sacrifice of God-Christ, allows the community itself to take place.

Social network mysticism, on the contrary, albeit claiming for itself a quasi-mystical pedigree, is not a semantic but a syntactic one. It is not based on a thorough examination of the world and on the discovery of a level at which it is all underpinned by the same logic but relies on the evidence of a purely syntactic connection. Lacking any semantically specific substratum, the idea of connection that expresses itself in digitally-inspired mysticism is essentially empty. I feel connected to the whole, but I could not explain how. Two pernicious ideological features emerge from this pseudo-mystical posture: first, the ideology of total connectedness shares many of the features of the ideology of total analogy, of that 'analogical

demon' that deconstructionism has somehow embodied and that semiotics has sought to criticize and unmask in all its guises. Second, both ideologies (total syntactic interconnectedness and total symbolical analogy) essentially voice a kind of hypocritical egotism: when present-day digital pseudo-mystics affirm to be "connected to the whole", the suspect arises that they are implicitly suggesting that "I am the whole, and I do not care about the rest".

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