

## José Enrique Finol

# On the Corposphere

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The levels of the semiosphere comprise an inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them being simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole).

*Juri Lotman, 1984*

## 1 Introduction

In my brief speech I would like to call your attention to a field of research that, generally speaking, semioticians have neglected. The semiotic study of the body, as a vast field that I will call *Corposphere*, presents for us numerous and appealing challenges, some of which I will discuss.

For a few years now I have been trying to present a systematic approach to the study of the body as a semiotic object, an approach that I hope will go further than the few analyses, theories and concepts that have been carried out by some semioticians, approaches that usually stay in the frontiers of the body and that have taken into account subjects like gestures, gaze and facial signs and, in some cases, tattoos. Using these approaches as starting points, I will go further in order to advance, even if it is just a little, a field of interest where semioticians have a lot to say.

In the last couple of years, for instance, two important steps have been presented to the international community of semioticians about studying the body. The first one was the publication in 2010 by the Latin American Federation of Semiotics of an issue of the journal *deSignis* dedicated entirely to the study of the body from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Second, in 2011, thanks to the wonderful support of Professor Eero Tarasti, we were able to organize in Imatra, Finland, a three day seminar entirely dedicated to the epistemological, methodological and theoretical problems related to the various, rich and complex issues regarding the production, communication and transformation of the meanings of the body. Some of the works presented at that seminar were published in a special issue of the Korean

journal *Épistémè*, published by the University of Korea. I thank Professor Kim for his support in this matter.

So, what I would like to do today is to continue a discussion that I hope will contribute, even if it is just a little, to the task of developing what I call the *Corposphere*. As you can imagine the term *Corposphere* derives from Lotman's Semiosphere, and my reflection, at least at the beginning, aims to situate the *Corposphere* in the realm of the Semiosphere. As it is known, according to Lotman the *Semiosphere* is "the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist". And he adds: "a semiotic continuum filled with semiotic structures of different types and with different levels of organization" (Lotman 1989: 42–43).

But Lotman also says that the Semiosphere is structured by other "spheres": "The levels of the Semiosphere comprise an inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them being simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the Semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the Semiosphere as a whole)".

So I will say that the Corposphere is one of the "inter-connected groups of Semiospheres", one with a special place since, as we shall see, it is where semiotization of the world begins. The Corposphere might be characterized as the whole ensemble of significations—signs, languages, semiosis—that originates from/in/around the body as a multifaceted, dynamic semiotic complex.

## 2 Why Corposphere

Western societies were defined by what Debord in 1967 (2008 [1967]) called "spectacularity". According to him, our societies, in their deep structures, had become a real spectacle not just as solely visual phenomena but also as a way of life and, more over, as a *Weltanschauung*, a vision of the world. He said it in a direct, conclusive manner:

The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *Weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm - a worldview transformed into an objective force.

[No debe entenderse el espectáculo como el engaño de un mundo visual, producto de las técnicas de difusión masiva de imágenes. Se trata más bien de

una *Weltanschauung* que se ha hecho efectiva, que se ha traducido en términos materiales. Es una visión del mundo objetivada (2008[1967]: 38).]

Moreover, as you see, the spectacle was not just a matter of images but a social relationship between people mediated by images. In that sense, cultures saturated with an infinite world of images, coming from different, unstoppable sources, became dominated by visual images since they were capable of showing even visual characteristics of objects that we were not able to see directly with our eyes. The development of image technologies has shown us pictures of the small things that escape our physiological visual power but also of the enormous things that are so far from us that our eyes are not able to perceive.

These overwhelming worlds of images have originated new forms of social relationships in which even our own personal image and our own body, as a part of it, is compromised.

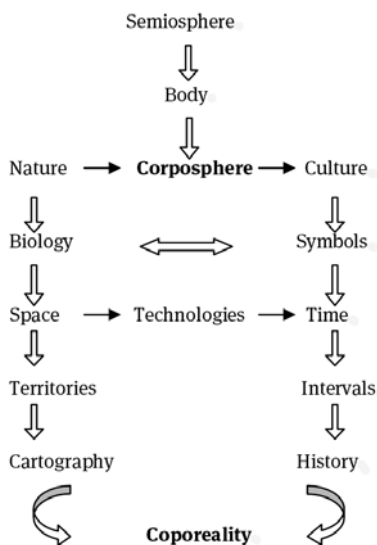
Recent research suggests that these new worlds of relationships that are based on images have been debilitated by communication through social networks where communication is based, mostly, on words. But if we look to Facebook, for example, we will see a world of images (particularly photos and videos but also drawings). One exception among these social networks is Twitter, where communication is based in words and where there are no images. But, even there, you can link images to the text.

### 3 Frontiers of the Body

Following Lotman's own work on the frontiers of the Semiosphere, I think that it is useful to outline some of the semiotic frontiers of the Corposphere. It is possible to outline, at least, three complementary ways, one that we will call **micro frontiers**, which starts from the body itself; a second one that we will call **macro frontiers**, where we look at the frontiers from the different body contexts; and a third that we will call the **body imaginaries**, where we look into the myth, beliefs, legends and stories about the body that prevails in a society at a historical moment. In that sense, the **micro frontiers** begin distinguishing between body interiorities and exteriorities, and if we pursue this line it is possible to disaggregate these two extreme limits into open interiorities, like the mouth or ears, and closed interiorities, like the stomach and the heart. Needless to say, there are rich and various meanings associated with the mouth or to the heart, for instance.

Following this approach we explore the age old distinction between body and mind or between body and spirit, between body and soul or, for that matter, between body and consciousness, four pairs of terms that have in common, as you can see, the body. Again, it is trivial to note that there are many meanings that stories, myths and beliefs have created around such distinctions.

The second way of regarding the body frontiers should be the one related to its limits between nature and culture (see Figure 1). Such distinction allow us to go from the bio-physiological characteristics of the body to the representations that individual, groups and societies have of their bodies; but, at the same time, it is also very important to look at the visions of the body embedded in the discourses of natural and cultural sciences. Also, as is well known, the sacredness of the body, its inviolability for being a sacred sanctuary for many religions, has been broken by the many medical technologies that not only have been created in order to heal the sick body but, in today's world, in order to make it beautiful, a process where the natural body becomes a sort of technological artifact (Valdettaro, 2010).



**Figure 1:** Corporeality

The third way, in which historical imaginaries determine body social and cultural visions, in today's world might be classified in four different spheres:

body and beauty, body and health, body and technology, and the political body. These three main imaginaries are built around four main isotopies: neo-narcissism (Finol & Finol, 2008) youth and eternal life, technology, which has allowed to create the cyborg body, and power (see Figure 2), every one of them permanently acting in mechanisms of feedback towards the others.

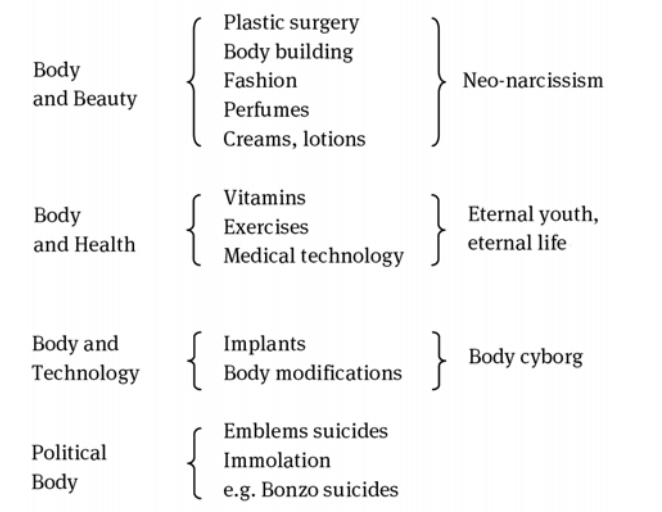


Figure 2: Contemporary Body Imaginaries

## 4 Body and Image

Now, the construction of our own image is strictly related to our body, as demonstrated by Goffman, particularly in his book *The Representation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In our daily process of interacting our body is the first thing that others see even before they hear our words. What usually do they see? Do they see our general body or just a part of it? And in the latter case what parts of our body do they see first? Naturally, it is difficult to establish an order of visual perception but at least it is important to make an inventory of what may be typically seen.

Even when we meet other people through media that doesn't allow us to see their body, we immediately begin to build an image of their bodies taking into account the tone of their voice, the way they write or the stories they tell us. The

same thing happens to people that have lost a limb—they still tend to think and act like their body part is still there.

Now, if we take into account some of the above-mentioned aspects of the body and try to make an inventory of its basic elements, we find many interlinked *representamen*, dependent upon one another, in a way that it seems impossible to make an inventory and a description of the body. On the contrary, I think that semiotics, departing from the epistemological general principle according to which the body is a totality that functions at the internal and external frontier of numerous *other languages*, has to be able to develop a model by which we may design a sort of *cartography of the body*.

This general *cartography* will allow us to navigate among the different areas of the body seen as a pluralistic semiotic system. To do so it is necessary, first of all, to establish some criteria that begins with the anatomical body, its unities, and elements, its functions and articulations, in a word: its syntax. Then we follow on with its basic process of creating meanings and how these meanings become articulated to body parts, to movements, in a word with its semantics. And finally, we move forward to the pragmatic level by which the body becomes, for oneself and for others, a sign to be used in a communicative way.

As it has been already established, our body is our first way of semiotizing the world, it is our first way of saying to ourselves and to others “This is who I am”; in a sense my body is my firstness (Peirce). But, at the same time, since the beginning of its biological conception, my body is, simultaneously, an emitter and receiver of signs; it is the system that receives electrochemical signs and emits them.

## 5 Towards a Cartography of the Body

We have suggested some criteria to begin building a model of the many parts the body uses to communicate. Not taking into account a general system of signs such as verbal language, it is possible to make an inventory of the enormous semiotic possibilities that humans have assigned to their body.

To do so it is possible, for instance, to make a simple division of the many physical and physiological dimensions of the human body, such as front, back and sides; upper, middle and lower levels, etc. In every section of this general cartography it should be possible to discover particular ways of creating meanings that in every culture are attached to them. It is not only the meanings attached to them by history, mythology or religion, just to say a few sources of

meaning, but also how those meanings are enhanced, changed or extended by the very connections that every body part has.

As is well known, Merleau-Ponty has said with brilliant insight, that our body “est un ensemble de significations vécues” or “it is an ensemble of lived significations”. It is important to note here the French verb “vivre” and its past participle “vécue”, which always reminds me of the beautiful expression of Ferdinand de Saussure, when speaking of Semiology as a science bound to study “la vie des signes dans la vie sociale” or “the life of signs in their social life”.

If our body is always, in a way, performing life itself, it is important to look at it and at its significations in the same phenomenological way that Merleau-Ponty did: as a real, unique, living ensemble of semiosis, as a realm of the universe where it is impossible not to signify, and, as a consequence, as signification itself and for itself, as the root of all meaning since the body is perfused by meaning and it is, also, at the origin of meaning itself.

## 6 Body, Image and Identity

I think that one of the key concepts to develop a *Corposphere* is the concept of *corporeality*, usually defined as the quality of being physical. Here we have to think about the body as a *semiotic corporeality*, which I interpret as seeing the body as an enacting world, a performing world of semiosis. It is in its overwhelming capacity of meaning and communication that the body is a key concept to understand the whole notion of identity that, as a social and individual construct, deep down only can be understood as a semiotic process.

Before going further on, it is necessary to propose a definition of identity that might help us understand how our body and its images are related to the construction of a personal, cultural and social identity. In a global world identity is multidimensional, multiple, ever identical to itself but, nevertheless, always changing.

When analyzing the identity that is socially and culturally constructed during interaction processes we might distinguish between our own identity and the identity that others build about us. But going further I think that we have to look even *before* the social and cultural analysis; we have to pay in-depth attention to the body, to its complicated, complex processes of building different kinds of identities related to the general *Corposphere*. Here I will just rely on the short but wonderful typology of identities of the human body made by professor Solomon Marcus (2011), who proposes eleven types of body

identities: material identity, genetic identity, structural identity, holographic identity, holonomic identity, managerial identity, computational identity, ecological identity, dynamic identity, life-identity of the body and, finally, semiotic identity.

## 7 Conclusion

If it is true that philosophy and anthropology have paid increasing attention to the problems of the body, it is no less true that understanding the multidimensional problems related to it requires a special effort from semioticians. In our heuristic set of interests the body becomes a *donné*, a fact, that we have continuously neglected. So, after thanking you for your kind attention, my invitation to you is to consider and reflect upon this vast field of the *Corposphere*, upon its challenges and rewards.

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