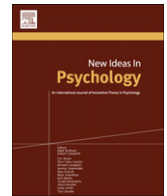




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# Affect, unconscious and sensemaking. A psychodynamic, semiotic and dialogic model

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## A B S T R A C T

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The work presents a psychodynamic, semiotic and dialogical model of affect and of the role it plays in sensemaking. The model is based on the following three general assumptions. A) Affective semiosis works in accordance to the dynamic unconscious which Freud conceptualized in terms of primary process. According to this interpretation, the unconscious is the mind's homogenising way of functioning, which transforms every categorical relation into a relation of identity. B) Affect is the generalized, homogenising and absolutizing embodied basic intersubjective meanings according to which experience is interpreted. C) Affective semiosis performs both the grounding and regulative functions in sensemaking, orienting the way people interpret experience.

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## 1. Introduction

In Summer 2006 Italy won the Soccer World Championship. We were able to witness first hand how a state of collective euphoria and happiness spread through the country. The Italian TV's commentator shouted repeatedly: “Today it is more beautiful to be Italian” (“Oggi è più bello essere italiani!”). Unknown people embraced each other, toasting to the win. The then Prime Minister of the time made a public speech in front of a large crowd and predicted that the GDP would have increased by about half a point, as a result of the feeling of pride and confidence in the country created by the victory.

A film made several years ago tells the story of a group of aluminium casings sales people who meet for a convention. One of them explains his infallible trick to a junior salesman. While he is speaking to a potential buyer, he drops a medium-size bill from his pocket. Soon after it falls, he

picks it up off the floor and gives it to the interlocutor, as if he had accidentally found it and were returning it to the legitimate owner. This surprises and astonishes the potential buyer, who before this had tended to consider him like any other salesman – that is, manipulative and even dishonest, feelings that almost always change into an attitude of trust and willingness to accept him and what he is offering.

A novel tells the story of a woman, quite old and not pretty, working as the doorkeeper of a luxury flat in Paris. The woman has secretly dedicated all her life to reading and study, in this way developing her own spirit and knowledge, for the sake of pure pleasure. She goes to great lengths to hide this quality, as she does not consider fitting to her position. There is, however, one thing she is unable to accept: the ignorance of the rich people living in the flat. When she experiences this, indignation and anger take possession of her; despite her desire to keep a low profile, she literally cannot tolerate the fact that people who have everything and want everything from life can make mistakes with the tense of a verb.

In 1375 saint Catherine of Siena was asked by a political prisoner (Niccolò) to stay with him in the moment of his

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execution. Thus Catherine caught his head in her arms, ending up covered in his blood. Catherine recounts that moment, saying that the blood of the executed man was incorporated into Christ's blood:

"...His head was resting on my breast. I sensed an intense joy, a fragrance of his blood. ..(And) when he had received the sign I said 'Down for the wedding, my dear brother, for soon you will be in everlasting life.' ... His mouth said nothing but "Gesù!" and "Caterina!" and as he said this, I received his head into my hands, saying, 'I will', with my eyes fixed on the divine Godness. Then was seen the God-Man as one sees the brilliance of the sun. (His side) was open and received (Niccolò's) blood into his own blood... Once he had been so received by God..., the Son... gave him the gift of sharing in the tormented love with which he himself has accepted his painful death... for the welfare of the human race" (cited by. *Bynum*, 2007, p. 164).

What do these episodes – so different in terms of content, time, and protagonists, some imagined and some that actually happened – have in common? Descriptively, all of them show an affectively charged socially meaningful action: the euphoric reaction of the Italians, the surprised-willing attitude, the cultured doorkeeper's indignation, Catherine's "intense joy" are all examples of emotions sustaining how people feel, interpret and cope with the experience of a given piece of the world. These circumstances therefore offer cues to the powerful role of the affective process in sensemaking.

The aim of this article is to conceptualize this process – the characteristics of affect and the role it plays in sensemaking. Our ideas are presented in four parts. Firstly, we clarify the notion of semiosis which we take as the basic framework. Our reference is Peirce's triadic model of the sign – grounding our semiotic and dialogic view of psychological processes. Secondly, we discuss the conception of the unconscious that is adopted by our model. This conception merges two traditions of psychoanalytic thought – not usually connected. On the one hand, the semiotic approach to the mind conceives the unconscious as a specific, systematic modality of sensemaking; on the other hand it is a relational model, providing an interpersonal vision of the psychological reality. Matte Blanco's bi-logic theory of the unconscious provides the grounds for this merging. We discuss Matte Blanco's innovative theory in some detail. According to this author, the unconscious is a mind's basic way of functioning, which is radically different from rationality, but is however systematic and specific. Thirdly, we present our model of affect, in the light of the notion of the unconscious as elaborated by Matte Blanco. Our model provides a view of (a) how affect works; (b) some of its characteristics. Finally, we conceptualize the role affect plays in sensemaking.

## 2. The framework

### 2.1. The triadic nature of the sign

Our standpoint is the view of sensemaking elaborated by cultural psychology, in particular by the semiotic and

dialogical approach in this discipline (*Linell*, 2009; *Salgado & Gonçalves*, 2007; *Valsiner & Rosa*, 2007; *Zittoun*, 2007). We see the psyche as an ongoing process of shaping experience through the mediation of semiotic devices (meaning, linguistic and aesthetic canons, ways of acting and so forth). We consider these devices semiotic because they work as signs. A sign...

"...or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen." (*Peirce*, 1897/1932, vol. 2, p. 228) "Namely, a sign is something, *A*, which brings something, *B*, its interpretant sign determined or created by it, into the same sort of correspondence with something, *C*, its object, as that in which itself stands to *C*. " (*Peirce*, 1902/1976, vol. 4, pp. 20–21)

Peirce has enabled us to recognize the relational triadic nature of the sign (see *Fig. 1*). It stands for the object through the mediation of another sign motivated "in the mind of that person". It is this "perhaps a more developed" sign (the interpretant) that determines in which "respect or capacity" the sign represents the object. Hence, the sign performs its semiotic function (the standing for something else) through the relation with another sign, this relation being established by the activity of interpretation performed by an interpreter. Semiosis is the infinite process of interpreting the signs by means of other signs, as a way to refer to the reality (the object), which is however grasped only "in some respect(s)" and is therefore always open to a new interpretation. Meaning is what such infinite process of semiosis produces in the interpreter's mind at a given moment – that is, a further interpretant sign in the ongoing chain of signs (*Eco*, 1975; *Gillespie*, 2010).

### 2.2. Our semiotic and dialogic view of sensemaking

The triadic nature of the sign grounds the constructive and dialogical nature of the semiotic mediation. The use of signs enables human beings to go beyond the immediacy of the experience – to live immersed in the here and now and at the same time to treat it as something else that transcends the present moment and has form, consistence and persistence (*Rosa*, 2007). This process is constructive, in the sense that form, consistence and persistence are not inherent qualities of the object; they are the product of semiosis, the output of the ongoing infinite interpretative chain of signs that continuously re-write the relation of the previous signs with the object. Form, consistence and persistence are given by the capability of semiosis to keep signs in (some kind of) correspondence with the reality they refer to by *means of their connection with other interpretant signs*, in turn in correspondence with reality by means of other interpretant signs, and so on in an infinite stream. Hence, signs are not to be seen as having a fixed pre-established meaning, reflecting their unchanging linkage with the object they refer to. Rather, signs are

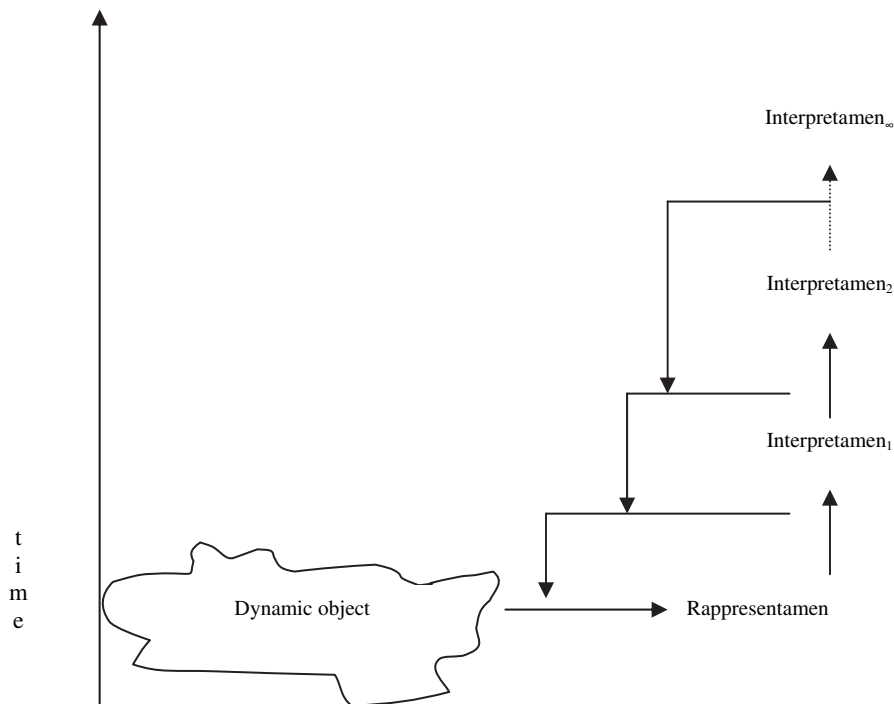


Fig. 1. Peirce's triadic model of sign.

potentialities of sensemaking. Their combination with other signs makes meaning into a constantly and ever-changing emergence (Salvatore, Tebaldi, & Poti, 2009). The constructive product of this inexhaustible relationality is the stabilization of hierarchies of pictures of the world that come to be felt as if they were the reality, according to their usability within the forms of life in which they unfold (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Nightgale & Comby, 1999; Wittgenstein, 1958).

Persons are the authors of the inexhaustible relationality of which semiosis consists. Signs stand for something else insofar as and in terms of how they are interpreted by *somebody*, that is in terms of how somebody experiences them and according to how his/her lived history connects them to other signs. However, given that signs are used for acting and communicating, the somebody at stake is not the isolated individual. Rather, each participant to the dialogue is the interpreter of her own signs and those of others. Sensemaking is therefore inherently dialogical and contextual. Even when people are alone, engaged with their private thinking, this is an inherently dialogical process. There are three general reasons for this (Linell, 2009). Firstly, because the person is thinking through signs that belong to him/her as a member of a cultural system: any sign is charged with the “echoes” of previous uses. Secondly, the act of thinking itself is motivated by – and addressed to – another addressee under specific social circumstances (Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007). Thirdly, because inner thinking works in a dialogical way, in terms of responsivity to previous signs and anticipation of future ones, these signs being made by a present other, or by an imagined or imaginary interlocutor (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007).

### 2.3. The centrality of affect

Within the (broadly speaking) socio-constructivist vision of sensemaking, the phenomenon of affect is usually not given universal recognition. There are many authors who do not attribute a significant role to them. This attitude can be found both in authors focusing on discursive practices (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harré & Gillett, 1994) as well as among researchers within the socio-cultural tradition (Cole, 1996). On the other hand, various scholars focusing on the interplay between the cultural organization of semiotic resources and the local dynamics of meaning construction in a convergent way have developed an interest in affect as a process playing a central role in personal and social sensemaking (Linell, 2009; Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2009; Zittoun, 2007). According to the hierarchical model of semiotic regulation proposed by Valsiner (2007, chapter 7; see also Cabell and Valsiner, *in press*), affect triggers the process of pre-semiotic and subsequently semiotic differentiation of the hierarchical construction of signs (Valsiner, 2001).

This process works through abstraction and generalization (Bühler, 1990) and ends in the emergence of a hyper-generalized affective semiotic field (for the conceptualization of the sign in terms of field, see Valsiner, 2007) which in turn opens possibilities for the semiotic regulation of the person's whole field of action. Acting along the lines of deep-seated personal beliefs—known as *values*—is an example of the regulative power of hyper-generalized semiotic fields. Linell (2009) points out that pre-verbal, pre-conscious, pre-conceptual and pre-intentional processes are associated with conscious

communicative and cognitive activity. The former processes are almost ubiquitous and trigger, ground and recursively interact with the latter. “When we think, speak or understand, these processes often start in implicit, affective and pre-semiotic phenomena that are not conscious at all (Salgado & Goncalves, 2006, p 22), but which gradually become more so, when they are partly brought into language” (Linell, 2009, p. 259).

We assume the centrality of affect as our starting point in understanding sensemaking. Our focus is on the specific dynamic shaping the way affective processes function and the interplay between these processes and the complementary processes of sensemaking which entail communication, thinking and imagining.

Various models addressing this level of theorizing are already present in our knowledge base, built upon psychoanalytic (Bucci, 1997) and neurobiological research fields (Damasio, 1999). Importantly, these models share two basic understandings with the conceptualizations of affect we outline here. Firstly, the idea of affect as the embodied, undifferentiated basic level of activation triggered by the encounter with the immediate environment. Secondly, the idea of the affective processes as inherent within a hierarchical and recursive process of differentiation – first at pre-representational and then at representational level. Nevertheless, these models are limited from the semiotic and dialogical point of view. They conceive the affective process in intra-psychological terms, as confined within people’s heads: they do not consider the role played by affect as semiotic regulator of the relationship between persons and their social context. Moreover, these models are basically interested in the computational mechanisms that lead the higher mental function (thinking, reflective consciousness) to emerge from the basic affective level. The interplay between affect and thinking and its function in sensemaking is left in the background. In contrast, according to our fundamental thesis, overcoming this limit requires that affect is conceptualized in psychoanalytical terms, that is in the light of its root in the psychodynamic *unconscious*.

### 3. Dynamic unconscious

Theories that can be subsumed under the broad umbrella of socio-constructivism (Billig, 2003; Linell, 2009; Moscovici, 1993; Salgado & Goncalves, 2007; Zittoun, 2007) consider the unconscious as a dimension *intervening* in sensemaking (however, for a contrasting position, see Ratner, 1994). Nevertheless, the use of the notion of the unconscious is fundamentally descriptive and, in the negative, is equivalent to the *absence* of awareness – not-consciousness. This descriptive approach needs to be developed in the direction of a theory of the unconscious that models it as a specific, systematic way in which the mind functions. It is this theory that can help us to conceptualize the micro-dynamics of affect.

#### 3.1. The semiotic view of the unconscious

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1899) conceptualized the unconscious as a *mode of expression*: a language

with its own syntax (characterized by rules such as: condensation, displacement, symbolic transformation, absence of negation and time) and creating a specific form of meaning. As can be seen, this is a particular way of seeing the unconscious – different from the topographical model (the unconscious as a place-container of repressed thoughts) and the structural model (unconscious-Id as an entity of the mind) that Freud himself elaborated – depicting it in a semiotic way: the unconscious as a mode of combining meanings and, in so doing, of generating texts.

The semiotic standpoint has been taken up and deepened by other psychoanalysts. Lacan (1978) spoke of the unconscious working as a language. The leading Italian psychoanalyst Franco Fornari (1979, 1983) no longer conceives the unconscious as a structure– or an area of the mind—but as a semiotic function feeding the subject’s tendency to signify itself and the world in terms of very basic affects, regarded as fundamental meanings connoting the experience (“the few things the unconscious speaks of”). In other words, he sees the unconscious as the process of affective interpretation of reality.

“Psychoanalytic philosophy radically changes if when exploring the unconscious, we assume a subject wanting to signify itself marked by the primal function of signification (*facultas signatrix*), or we assume a subject that always has to hide behind the modes in which it manifests itself” (Fornari, 1981, p. 13, italics in the text, our translation from original in Italian).

In sum, the semiotic standpoint looks at affect not merely as a reactive embodied activation but as the use of this activation as a basic form of meaning, that is as the first interpretant motivated in the interpreter’s mind, in turn triggering further interpreting signs. For this reason, affect is to be considered in terms of process rather than of state – affect then, as *affective semiosis*. (for the interpretation of psychoanalysis as a theory of affect, see Stein, 1991).

Take the Italians’ euphoria after the Italian soccer team won the World Championship we referred to in the introduction. The sense of happiness, friendship, buoyancy, trustfulness and pride in being Italian – a bundle of feelings that infected many people not usually interested in sport – were not mere reactions to the event, like the sense of cold or the pain after bumping into a sharp corner. Those feelings were much more: they were meanings interpreting the experience of being Italian, of belonging to this community, in terms of intensive and polarized subjective value – e.g. as something-wonderful-for-me. These feelings are therefore signs mediating affective semiosis. One could read this event in terms of Peirce’s triadic model of the sign. A (dynamic) object –the universe of discourse consisting of the Soccer World Championship, encompassing, among potentially infinite aspects, the specific historical sequence of events making up the Italian soccer team’s participation – is represented in terms of a sign (*representamen*) – the Victory in the World Cup – which, in turn, activates an affective sign (*interpretant*) – *We are the champions! We are the best!* This affective interpretant defines in what respect the first sign stands for the object (i.e. Victory as Superiority, Power, Capacity, Goodness) and at the same time activates further interpretants (feelings of

happiness, rituals of belonging, statements of pride, celebrative events) in an infinite chain of affective semiosis, where ideas, emotion and actions participate in creating a symbolic world.

### 3.2. *The socialization of the affective semiosis: the contribution of interpersonal psychoanalysis*

Semiotic models *a la* Fornari entail an intra-psychic conception of the mind implying a Kantian-like assumption of the affects as universal *a priori* embedded within the individual mind. The event mentioned above highlights how limiting this assumption can be. What we have said about the Italian Summer of 2006 is an event obviously experienced by individuals (groups do not have the brain for experiencing). Nevertheless its qualities of chorality, participation and diffusion through languages, social domains and circumstances, make it very hard to see this phenomenon as the accumulation of intra-subjective self-contained dynamics of affective meaning-making.

We have to refer to the interpersonal psychoanalysis to find an intersubjective version of the semiotic standpoint. The interpersonal psychoanalysis takes one of the fundamental insights of psychoanalysis (more specifically related to Melanie Klein's Object Relation Theory—M. Klein, 1967) to its extreme consequences: the social basis of the mind. It leads to a semiotic conception of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. As one of the most representative authors of this approach (Mitchell, 1988) stated, the mind does not preexist the relationship, but emerges within and by means of the intersubjective co-construction of meaning. According to this conception, persons are immersed in relationships – with imagined and or real others – and thus continuously committed to affectively interpreting their relational world (Gill, 1994; Hoffman, 1998; Mitchell & Aron, 1999). One can consider this approach semiotic because it sees the unconscious as a system of affective meanings guiding the way people feel and understand their world and themselves. In other words,

“In place of Freud's topographical and structural theories of mind we envision an organized totality of lived personal experience, more or less conscious and more or less contoured according to those emotional and relational experiences. Instead of a container we picture an experiential system of expectations, interpretative patterns and meanings (...)

Within such a system or world, one can feel and know certain things often repetitively and with unshakable certainty” (Stolorow, Orange, & Atwood, 2001, p. 675)

### 3.3. *The specificity of the psychodynamic unconscious: the primary process*

Interpersonal psychoanalysis has developed a semiotic approach that can surpass the implicit hypostatization of meanings entailed in the Kantian-like vision of the affective processes. Yet this has been accomplished at the cost of the loss of the psychodynamic specificity of the notions of affect, that is the misrecognizing of its functioning in terms of primary process.

The primary process – which Freud himself considered his fundamental discovery (Freud, 1938) – is not simply the weakening of rationality (secondary process in Freud's terminology). Rather, it is the specific, autonomous and totally different way of functioning that Freud identified as the fundamental dynamic characteristic of the unconscious (Matte Blanco, 1975, see below). The primary process does not admit time and negation, or distinction between inner and external reality (Freud, 1899). It is grounded on the possibility of freely combining (condensing, moving) representations, without the constraints imposed by reality. Its product is the magic and hallucinatory thinking whose cues can be tracked down in dreams and in delusion.

In fact, in interpersonal psychoanalysis there is an overlap between the unconscious and unawareness. This theory assumes a descriptive, non dynamic idea of the unconscious, defined in negative terms as *not-conscious*. It conceives of affective semiosis as a kind of sensemaking that is not constrained by normative rationality, however working according to the same fundamental rules of rational thought. Thus, affective semiosis retains the capacity to establish differences and create distinctions (classifications, categorizations, evaluations and so forth) (see next paragraph). In so doing, the notion of affective semiosis ends up overlapping with commonsense concepts like emotion, feeling, and desire. It ends up merely being seen as a form of subjective reaction to environmental occurrences.

The “experiential system of expectations, interpretative patterns and meanings” to which Stolorow and colleagues refer (see the passage quoted above) is a constellation entailing an idea of the psychological reality as being strongly shaped and regulated by idiosyncratic passions and emotions, desires and relational memories. Nevertheless, this kind of constellation has little to do with the primary process. Expectations entail the capability of making distinctions – distinctions between present and future; between what is represented as expected and the rest. In other words, expectations are the province of the secondary process.

In sum, the semiotic approach in psychoanalysis seems unable to develop a model of affective semiosis that is specifically psychodynamic and at the same time relational. However, a different model of affective semiosis that takes into account the horizontal dimension of intersubjectivity and the vertical dimension of the unconscious world can be created. To accomplish this, our starting point will be the model of the unconscious elaborated by the Chilean psychoanalyst Ignacio Matte Blanco (1975).

## 4. Matte Blanco's theory of the unconscious

### 4.1. *The formal model of the unconscious. The principle of symmetry*

We are indebted to Ignacio Matte Blanco (1975) for a seminal contribution to the understanding of how the unconscious works. In accordance with the Freud of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Matte Blanco's bi-logic theory sees the unconscious as a specific modality of the mind's

functioning. This modality is conceived as being different from the rational modality grounded on the principle of non-contradiction, but is no less systematic. Through the study of the thought of schizophrenic patients, Matte Blanco developed a formal logical analysis of the principles of the unconscious that Freud had recognized as the basis of dreams (condensation, displacement, plastic representation, symbolic transformation, absence of negation and time). In so doing the Chilean psychoanalyst manages to model the unconscious in terms of the *principle of symmetry*. The logical and semantic relations sustaining rational thought are asymmetrical – that is, the positions of the terms of any relation are not changeable, they cannot be subjected to inversion. For instance, if the statement “ $A > B$ ” is valid, then the statement “ $B > A$ ” cannot be valid at the same time. Again: if “Marco is the father of Bruno”, then “Bruno is the father of Marco” is not true.

In fact, the law of identity ( $a = a$ ) violates the principle of asymmetry. Consequently, one is led to conclude that rational thought entails symmetrical relationships too. Nevertheless, the law of identity is a borderline case for rational thought – the basis of it. Yet in order to produce meaning (knowledge, understanding...) thinking has to involve asymmetrical relations. Moreover, there are transitive relations that seem to violate the principle of asymmetry as well as the law of identity. For instance, “to be the brother of”, “to work with”, “to be married to” are all examples of relations in which the reverse is admitted. Nevertheless, these transitive relations also entail asymmetry. As a matter of fact, even if in the abstract the inversion is allowed, on the pragmatic level of meaning the inversion of a relation of this kind makes a difference. For instance, take the case of the following claim: “the Prime Minister spent a night with the wonderful young show-girl” and its inversion “the wonderful young show-girl spent the night with the Prime Minister”. It is evident that the former allows and entails the latter. Nevertheless, they are different statements, triggering different reactions in the listener – a moral and/or political judgment on the Prime Minister in the former case; some sort of comment on the show-girl in the latter case.

The asymmetrical constraint – which is at the core of conscious and rational forms of thinking – does not concern the unconscious. The unconscious does not set constraints on the exchangeability between the terms of a relation. This means that according to the unconscious, all statements yielded by all possible permutations of the terms are identical. Therefore, for instance, if Marco is the father of Bruno, then Bruno is the father of Marco too.

Matte Blanco considers this exchangeability – which he calls “principle of symmetry” – the specific way the unconscious functions. This principle openly and radically violates the non-contradiction principle; moreover, its full application cancels any difference and produces homogeneity among the components of a given relation: insofar as both Marco and Bruno are at the same time father (and son) of the other, they are not distinguishable from each other. In the final analysis, this means that *the unconscious transforms any relation of contiguity – that is the nearness between sign A and sign B created by the relation  $R(A;B)$  – into a relation of identity.*

Incidentally, the symmetrical principle is not the only type of logic that violates the laws of classical logic. Even the contemporary forms of non classical logic are characterized by the weakening of the supports of classical logic (Goble, 2001). For instance, according to temporal logic, both “A” and “non-A” can be true, if projected on different times. Moreover, deontic logic introduces further logical operators (obligatory, permissible, forbidden); in so doing this logic violates the law of the excluded third: an act can be neither compulsory nor not-compulsory, since it is permissible. Nevertheless, one has to take into account that the contemporary forms of non classical logic do not reject the laws of canonical logic. Rather, they integrate them with other principles and formal conditions (i.e. the temporal dimension and deontic operators). In the final analysis, one can conclude that it is only from the point of view of classical logic that these formalisms entail a violation of the classical laws. In contrast, from this point of view, non classical systems work consistently with classical logic, as an extension of it. Incidentally, this extension addresses issues already raised by Scholastic logic and by Aristotle himself with his discussion of the problem of future contingency (Fine, 1984). Here we find the basic difference between the non classic forms of logic and symmetrical logic, the latter having a radically different syntax which is alternative to canonical logic.

#### 4.2. *The symmetry principle in action*

Matte Blanco provides an example of the symmetry principle in action. He reports the case of a schizophrenic, who was bitten by a dog and went to a dentist. And he explains the case in the following way.

The dog bites P (the patient). According to the symmetry principle this means that P bites the dog.

Now, biting can be seen as a bad act. Therefore, the dog and P are doing something bad. Yet, as a result of the symmetric identity *pars-toto*, those who act badly are bad. Again according to the symmetric identity *pars-toto*, the dog and P’s teeth are bad as well. From the symmetrical point of view, being bad, being damaged, being decayed is the same (all of these attributes are part of the generalized class of badness). Therefore, P goes to the dentist for his badly-decayed teeth.

#### 4.3. *Some further considerations*

Before going on to present Matte Blanco’s model, one point needs to be made clear. Matte Blanco’s use of the term “unconscious” might leave the way open to an essentialist interpretation of his theory, as if the unconscious were an entity with a given way of working as defined by the symmetry principle. It is beyond the scope of this work to make a deeper conceptual analysis of Matte Blanco’s thought. Here we confine ourselves to saying that we give an anti-essentialist interpretation of Matte Blanco’s ideas, which holds that the unconscious does not work according to, but rather it is the principle of symmetry: a rule depicting a mode of working of the mind. This means that according to our proposal, the unconscious is not an entity, somehow having an agentivity of its own. In

accordance with this statement, henceforth we use the word “unconscious” to refer to the rule describing the way the mind functions, that is, as a synonym of “symmetry principle”. We use “affective semiosis” to refer to the mind’s functioning that works (predominantly, see next paragraph) according to the symmetry principle.

It is a matter of a different level of analysis – which is beyond the scope of this paper – to depict the neurobiological processes whose way of working is reflected in the symmetry principle. This is to say that we consider the symmetry principle a rule to be further explained, rather than a cause. In other words, we do not think that the mind works in a given mode *because of* the symmetry principle. Rather, we deem that the mind’s functioning can be described through the symmetry principle, which is the emerging product of dynamics to be studied at the neurobiological level. In the final analysis, the symmetry principle has to be seen in a dual fashion. On the one hand, it is a descriptive model of one of the mind’s very basic modalities of functioning. As such it can be connected to and – further modelled in terms of – neurobiological mechanisms. On the other hand, insofar as the focus is on the psychological processes, it can be used as an explicative criterion of the micro-genetic dynamics of sensemaking – as in the case of the analysis of Matte Blanco’s clinical sketch that we have reported below.

#### 4.4. Bi-logic and bags of symmetry

It is worth noting that Matte Blanco did not consider the two logics – the one involved in rational thinking and the other involved in unconscious thinking – as juxtaposed; rather they were conceived as depicting two complementary dimensions of the mind’s functioning. According to the unconscious, the mind homogenizes, transforming any relation into identity. At the same time, according to the asymmetrical rule, the mind works in terms of setting categorial distinctions-relationships on such homogenization.

This point is central in understanding our model of affective semiosis. Affective semiosis is not the output of the unconscious alone. Rather, it is the mind’s mode of functioning characterized by the predominance of the symmetry principle, while maintaining to some extent the asymmetrical capability of setting distinctions. The functioning of the mind is always bi-modal. This is because a way of thinking that works exclusively in terms of the unconscious could not express any form of signification, producing only a homogeneous and indivisible totality. In this sense, it is not surprising that Matte Blanco underlined that the concept of drive itself would entail a quantum of asymmetry, because a drive entails the representation of a target object and such a representation is not possible solely with the language of the unconscious.

As we have said above, the mind antagonizes the symmetrisation that it produces by introducing elements of differentiation. Matte Blanco depicted this function as an operation of creating “bags of symmetry”. These bags are the first emerging classes of meaning: They are differentiated (one bag is different from another). On the other hand, each of them retains its symmetrical homogeneity. This

means that within a bag of symmetry only relationships of identity work: everything is everything else.

Matte Blanco conceptualized the bag of symmetry by means of the mathematical notion of the infinite set. An infinite set has constraints – not every element can be part of a set of this kind – but at the same time it is always possible to add a further element to it, and then define a new relationship of identity. Take for example the case of the set of natural numbers: they are infinite, but, for instance, the irrational numbers are not members of this set. This mathematical model helps to highlight a significant property of bags of symmetry: the identity does not only concern the relationships between the elements of the set, but also the relationship *pars-toto*, that is the relationship between every member and the set as a whole. In fact, an infinite set can be defined as the set for which one may always identify a subset of it with the same number of elements as the set itself.

The *pars-toto* identity has a fundamental implication: it means that the principle of symmetry defines a member of a class as being identical to the class itself. To use Matte Blanco’s terms, the unconscious treats the member of a class as being identical to the class it is part of, and it treats this class as identical to the more generalized class it is part of, and so on. Matte Blanco called this logical rule: “principle of generalization”.

## 5. Affective semiosis in the light of Matte Blanco

### 5.1. Affective meanings as bags of symmetry

The notion of “bags of symmetry” provides a way of modelling affect.

Affective semiosis is a way of functioning of the mind (therefore of sensemaking) characterized by the predominance of the symmetrisation function (i.e. the mental functioning following the principle of symmetry) and the antagonistic – yet complementary – action of the function of asymmetrisation. By working jointly these two functions create the generalized and homogeneous class of meaning that people use in order to affectively signify the experience of the world. In sum, based on Matte Blanco, we propose to consider affect in terms of bags of symmetry.

The conceptualization of affect in terms of bags of symmetry offers an innovative way of looking at this notion. Even though in the contemporary psychoanalytic literature the concept of affect is not systematically separated from the notions of emotion and feeling, it is generally conceived as a bodily state of activation elicited by the experience of an object<sup>1</sup> and endowed with basic hedonic value (positive vs negative, exciting vs relaxing) that sustains the subject’s conative attitude towards the object (Salvatore & Zittoun, *in press*; Stein, 1991; Stern, 1985). Incidentally, this way of viewing affect is not extraneous to psychological literature, even though in that domain the term “emotion” is preferred to “affect” (e.g. Frijda, 1988; Schachter & Singer, 1962; Scherer & Ellgring, 2003).

<sup>1</sup> In psychoanalytic language, “object” can refer to an inanimate thing, a person, as well as to a piece of a person (a breast, a penis).

Nevertheless, we have chosen not to use the term “emotion” (henceforth we will adopt it only as a term in common usage), because it is quite a polysemic word, with too many definitions in the literature. Therefore, we will refer to the term “affect”, as defined above, differentiating it from the notion of “feeling” that we see as the conscious self-representation of affect.

Matte Blanco’s theory does not negate the view of affect as a state of activation endowed with hedonic value; rather it enables it to be incorporated into a more general framework, thanks to which one can realize the generative function of affect in thinking. Based on Matte Blanco, one can see the hedonic value sustaining affect as the basic form of asymmetrisation/creation of bags of symmetry. In other words, the hedonic values can be conceived as the “antagonist” of the unconscious, introducing a quantum of differentiation within the symmetrical totality. In the final analysis, Matte Blanco’s theory leads to an inversion: while according to the classical view there is the object and then its affective connotation, according to the bi-logic model it is the differentiating hedonic connotation that generates the object as a mental fact, a source of further semiotic activity.

## 5.2. *Affect as value of life*

It is worth underlining an important implication of conceiving affect as generalized (symmetrical) class of meaning emerging from the first (bodily conveyed) differentiation of the mind. Matte Blanco’s theory helps us to realize why affective semiosis produces a feeling of existential implication of the people engaged with it (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008, 2010). Affect does something more than connoting a given experience; affect give *value of life* to the world. Being affectively activated means producing a kind of vital commitment – it means experiencing the world as something animate, engaging us in a relationship (we refer to this property as “anthropomorphization”). It is no coincidence that in daily language we do not only feel emotions – *we are caught up* in them (Freda, 2008). This characteristic is well illustrated by how children react when they hurt themselves after accidentally bumping into a table or something similar. The child, or the mother, hits the table, as if it were the one wanting to hurt the child – as if it were animated by a particular relational intention – aggressive in this case. Anthropomorphization therefore means that things, events, and qualities are meant as being endowed with agency, namely with a *relational* agency addressed to the perceiver.

Now, assuming the symmetrical quality of affective meaning, one can conclude that the value of life is consubstantial to affective meaning because it is the first ontogenetic way of experiencing the world and as such it remains part of the affective meaning alongside the developmental trajectory. Let us think of a newborn infant. She/he perceives the world in terms of patterns of activation producing proto-differentiations according to very basic hedonic tones linked to physiological functions/conditions (pleasantness/unpleasantness; excitement/relaxation; intensification/de-intensification). That is, she/he encounters the world in terms of the affects, as they are traditionally conceived. These proto-differentiations are the first

forms of discretization of the totality in which the infant is immersed. According to these first basic discretizations, the infant experiences the undifferentiated flow of stimuli (where self and other are not yet segmented) in terms of different states of the mind – e.g. a state of “pleasantness”. It is worth noting that in this stage the infant does not have the cognitive competences to modulate these states of the mind: they are experienced in an absolute fashion, in all-or-nothing terms. And this is evident in the infant’s way of acting, for instance in the ease of passing suddenly from one state to the opposite one.

Now, it has to be taken into account that generally the infant is immersed in a social environment providing stimuli that are not randomly associated to the elementary discretizations of states of mind. The mother’s presence and absence depends on the infant’s need to be fed, and she also interacts with the infant when the latter is willing to interact too, and so forth. This means that while the infant is producing a given proto-differentiated state of the mind, she/he experiences a huge amount of other (endogenous as well as exogenous) stimuli occurring in a somehow organized fashion. For instance if the infant is in the state of pleasantness it will be more probable that at the same time she/he perceives the smell of the mother’s skin than the sound of the father shouting. Therefore, sets of co-occurring stimuli will systematically tend to be associated – and therefore made identical to each other and distinguished from the others- with the first proto-differentiations.

As a result of this, the initial proto-differentiations will progressively develop into classes of affective meaning, with the initial states of the mind being combined and merging with further patterns of co-occurring stimuli. This means that the affective meaning is not to be conceived of as coinciding with the hedonic content. In point of fact, since the classes of affective meanings are symmetrical, the hedonic values are infinitely associated and made identical to an infinite set of other states of mind (perceptions, declarative or procedural representations, more differentiated feelings, patterns of interactions, concepts, aesthetic judgments, and so forth). In the final analysis, at this level the mind-body distinction is not given: the hedonic values as well as any other content of experience are made identical to each other – a hedonic tone *is* an idea, a movement just like an act *is* a hedonic tone.

Now, given that according to the unconscious, the mind lives in an eternal present outside time, the classes of affective meaning maintain their original absolute potentiality of activation even in the adult. This means that when an adult subject affectively symbolizes a given field of experience in terms of goodness/pleasantness (or badness/unpleasantness), she/he is experiencing it<sup>2</sup> in the same absolute way as she/he inhabits such a state of the mind in the first stages of her/his life (for similar considerations, but applied to how the institution works, see Douglas, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> This experience is an embodied condition, not overlapping with the way people represent it in terms of feeling. As we have specified above, feelings entail a further process of representation – therefore of asymmetrisation – of the embodied activation (Bucci, 1997; Salvatore & Zittoun, in press; Stein, 1991).

Incidentally, this embodied vision of the affective meaning is not accepted by the majority of psychoanalytic theoreticians. In fact, in the Kleinian tradition affective symbolizations are seen as representations: as fantasies endowed with a declarative, albeit unconscious content (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Klein, 1967; Sandler & Rosenblatt, 1962). Moreover, psychoanalysts influenced by cognitive theory have conceived affect in representational terms: as schema as well as implicit theory orienting thinking and acting (inter alia, Bornstein & Masling, 1998; Erdelyi, 1985; Singer, 1985). On the other hand, recent psychodynamic scholars – especially those interested in the outcome of early childhood research – have developed a model of the mind grounded on a vision of the inner affective processes in terms of procedural sub-symbolic memories (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002).

### 5.3. Conclusion. Merging primary process and dialogic perspective

We concluded the previous section by highlighting how psychoanalytic theory seems unable to elaborate a semiotic model of the mind consistent with the psychodynamic conception of the unconscious that is at the same time dialogical. And we have introduced the work of Matte Blanco as a way of overcoming this limit (at least according to our standpoint). We are now in a position to bring this issue to a conclusion.

On the one hand, Matte Blanco's theory of the unconscious in terms of the principle of symmetry is a formal way of rereading the primary process, quite consistent with the core of Freud's original concept. Freud conceptualized the primary process within the frame of the energy model. On this basis, he outlined the primary process in terms of unconstrained freedom of the libidic charge associated with representations. According to this model, the mind working in terms of the primary process is able to associate, merge, condense or substitute any representation with any other, insofar as the energy charge associated to the former shifts to the latter. The principle of symmetry preserves the unconstrained capability of making associations as the core of Freud's concept of primary process, yet "purifying" it of the original energy interpretation.

On the other hand, grounded on the theory of Matte Blanco, affective semiosis comes to be conceived of as an inherently dialogical dynamics. Yet this conclusion is not self-evident. Matte Blanco himself developed his model within an intra-psychological frame. Nevertheless, our dialogical interpretation of affective semiosis is fully consistent with his theory. This is so for two reasons.

Firstly, as we have seen, affective semiosis concerns the whole field of experience, prior to and regardless of the self-world distinction. Given its symmetrical nature, affective semiosis is related not to the object in itself, but to the relationship between the subject and the object; more precisely, the content is not even the relationship as a discrete "thing"; rather, it is the whole subjective field of experience associated with the practice of the situated encounter with the world (we will return to this point in the following section).

This means that affective semiosis has to be conceptualized as a dialogical – rather than interactive – phenomenon; namely, the units of analysis are not individuals in their interacting with each other, but the intersubjective process itself. In other words, it is not a process concerning the individual in her/his interaction with the object, but it concerns the space of their encounter seen as a whole dynamic field (Lauro-Grotto, Salvatore, Gennaro, & Gelo, 2009) (on the distinction between dialogic and interactive analysis in terms of unit of observation, see Grossen, 2010). Secondly, affective semiosis assimilates the field of experience to the state of activation associated with the first moment of relating with the world. In other words, as we have underlined above, affective semiosis connotes the piece of the world experienced as having a relational intention – a property we have called anthropomorphization.

We can thus conclude that affective semiosis can be conceived of as rooted in the unconscious and at the same time inherently dialogical. Moreover, our discussion should have made clear that these two characteristics are intimately related. It is thanks to its symmetrical properties that affective semiosis is inherently dialogical.

Finally, we do not believe that our emphasis on the dialogicality of affective semiosis is in contrast with the Matte Blanco theory, which adopts an intra-psychological perspective. Rather, we think that our model makes explicit an aspect that is implied in Matte Blanco's theory. This is so because the model of affective semiosis we have proposed does not negate the fact that the symmetric principle concerns the individual mind too. On the other hand, it would be hard to think differently: only individuals have a brain. In this sense, the symmetry principle is a way of modelling the mind by picturing it in its inherently intersubjective dimension of functioning, before the self-other differentiation. In sum, we are led to consider the affective semiosis as the root and the source of intersubjectivity and of subjectivity as well.

## 6. How affective semiosis works

Matte Blanco's formal model of the mind helps us to highlight some significant aspects of the way affective semiosis works. In this section we will point out some of the main ones.

### 6.1. Is affective semiosis semiotic?

At the level of affective semiosis there is no representational relationship among signs, that is, a relationship based on the distinction and separation between representamen and interpretant, with the former standing for the latter. As we have shown in the previous section, affective meanings are classes of identity (bags of symmetry), or sets within which elements are linked to each other in terms of relations of sameness.

However, this does not mean that one may not consider affect in terms of semiosis. This is so for two convergent reasons.

On the one hand, semiosis does not necessarily require a representational relationship between signs. Semiosis

works through other types of semiotic relationships too. Peirce himself posited a distinction between symbols and indexes (Peirce, 1895/1993). Symbolic signs are the ones referred to above as representational signs (however, we prefer not to use the term “symbol”, reserving it to denote another quality of signs; see below). Indexical signs are the ones that do not entail a distinction between the representamen and the interpretant, being both part of a whole that the index instantiates. Thus, for example, smoke does not *represent* the flame; rather it is the index of the flame, inherently associated with it and for this reason standing for it. Also Piaget (1947/1950) adopted this distinction – however, following de Saussure’s conception of the sign – when he proposed the concept of undifferentiated signifier – that is a sign characterized by a relation of identity between signifier and signified – (e.g. for a little child, the voice of the mother does not represent the mother, it is the mother).

On the other hand, we have distinguished affective semiosis and primary process (the latter interpreted in terms of symmetry principle). Affective semiosis is the way of the mind’s functioning where primary process is predominant, yet where a function of differentiation (secondary process) is however active. It is the secondary process that introduces the first rupture within the totality, thus leading to the emergence of the first classes of meaning. Therefore, even if every affective meaning is an infinite set in which there are no distinctions, the set itself is however separated and different from the others.

On the basis of the last two considerations, we can arrive at the following conclusion. At the level of affective semiosis, when a given representamen (e.g. victory in the Soccer World Cup) motivates an affective meaning (i.e. a class of identity where words, acts, feeling and embodied state of activation are merged in a homogeneous whole), this representamen is projected and made identical to the affective meaning. It is not something that stands for the affective meaning; rather it is the affective meaning. Yet, given that this affective meaning is at the same time differentiated from other affective meanings, the identity between the representamen and the interpretant in any case performs a semiotic function, that is the function of instantiating one affective meaning compared to others and thus, in the final analysis, to establish a difference. In sum, affective semiosis is a form of semiosis, based on the indexical relation between representamen and interpretant.

Incidentally, one can find a clear indication of this level of semiosis in the way people deal with a class of signs generally called “symbols”. People do not regard these signs as simply the representation of the meaning they stand for. For instance, the flag of one’s Country as well as the photo of one’s child or lover are not just standing for the pieces of the world they represent, yet separate and other than the latter. To some (variable through time and space) extent they *are* what they represent, as if they were part of the interpretant and were participating in its quality and life. We see and interact with a flag, and in so doing we feel we are experiencing our Country. And it is worth noting that the symbolic power of (some) signs of *being* what they stand for, is clearly connected with the salience of affect.

This is why we prefer to use the term “symbol” just for this kind of semiosis, when the indexical relationship between the representamen and the interpretant goes beyond perceivable linkages between representamen and interpretant, leading to the instantiation of abstract meaning (Country, Love, and so on).

Before continuing, a terminological specification is required. In order to avoid confusion, henceforth we reserve the term “sign” to the representational type of sign, characterized by the differentiation between representamen and interpretant. In the case of affective semiosis, which does not entail such a differentiation, we will use the term “proto-sign”. In some circumstances, we will use the more generic term “occurrence” encompassing both categories – sign and proto-sign. Finally, it is worth noting that our distinction between sign and proto-sign does not mean that they correspond to substantial qualities, as if there were two distinct types of occurrences. The same occurrence can work both as a proto-sign and as a sign, according to which level of mental process is involved.

## 6.2. *Affective semiosis is fast and immediate*

Affective semiosis is a very fast and immediate semiotic engagement with the world. This is so because affective semiosis is not the result of a computational process. Rather, it reflects a dynamics of “irradiation” (to use a Matte Blanco term) that connects and transforms occurrences perceived as contiguous into a class of identity. The immediacy of affective semiosis can be recognized if one looks at emotional reactions – that is, subjective experiences in which affective semiosis is reflected in the most direct way. Now, people usually feel and think of emotional reaction as a subjective condition that tends to emerge quickly and suddenly (think of expressions like: “he burst into laughter” or “he had an attack of anger”); and in fact in many circumstances, people traditionally get their emotional reaction under control by marking time – by stopping, avoiding action (as in “counting to ten before answering”). Moreover, the idea of the immediacy of affective semiosis finds some indirect support in various studies that from different perspectives (cognitive science, neurosciences, economic psychology) have highlighted the presence of a way of thinking that works quickly and synthetically (Dentale & Gennaro, 2005; Gigerenzer & Todd, 1995; LeDoux, 2002; Nisbett & De Camp Wilson, 1977).

It is worth noting that this statement does not mean that affective semiosis necessarily occurs prior to the cognitive elaboration of the semantic content. As we know, the relationship between emotional and cognitive elaboration is controversial (Lazarus, 1991; Zajonc, 1980). Our statement does not concern this dispute. As a matter of fact, as affective semiosis is conceptualized in this work, it is triggered by any kind of occurrence, be it a perceptual stimulus or a semantic content acquired by the subject as the result of reasoning. On the other hand, the fact that affective semiosis can come before as well as after cognitive activity is part of daily experience. In many circumstances people experience an emotional reaction occurring without the intervention- and sometimes in spite of – any form of

semantic elaboration (for example the feeling one may experience when an unfamiliar, surprising event occurs). And many studies report data showing that in many circumstances affect precedes and primes cognition (see the classical review of Nisbett & De Camp Wilson, 1977; see also Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). However, in many other cases the emotional reaction requires a semantic understanding of the circumstances. For instance, think of a person that is a beginner at particular second language. Now, imagine that this person is told very good news by a friend speaking this language. He is required to make a great (cognitive) effort to understand what the friend is telling him. However, the news makes him happy only if and when he succeeds in the cognitive task of understanding it.

### 6.3. *Absolutization, generalization, homogenization*

Affective semiosis is a categorization that generalizes, absolutizes and homogenizes. Affective semiosis is a mode of categorization that does not focus on the single object, but treats it as the class it belongs to (principle of generalization). According to this way of thinking, everything is signified as a class. For instance, (the individual producing a process of) affective semiosis does not mean a mother as an individual, but *tout court* as the class of everything that can be associated (and thus become identical) with being a mother – that is, in the final analysis, it means *motherness* (Rayner, 1995). Everyday life offers many instances of this semiotic dynamic. To give an example, consider the awe we may feel before our boss or another figure with some authority over us (a teacher, a policeman, an older relative...); we know that such a feeling cannot be related to the actual attitude and power of the figure. Nevertheless, we are affected by it. This is because our emotion does not merely reflect the individual quality of our interlocutor – rather, it reflects the existential meaning (namely the value of life, as defined above) associated with the generalized class of the powerful authority figures we identify our interlocutor with.

Moreover, every element understood in terms of an affective class of meaning acquires all the properties of such a class, to the maximum degree (*absolutization*). Consequently, every element is made identical to the other elements falling into the same generalized class (*homogenization*).

Stereotyped thinking shows hints of this semiotic mechanism: all the objects that are projected in the stereotypical class are confused with each other regardless of their individual specificity, and treated as if they had all the properties associated with the class. Thus, for instance, stereotyped thinking tends to connote all Muslims as Arabs and all Arabs as fundamentalists, male chauvinists, terrorists..., giving all of them the maximum extent of the qualities of enmity, dangerousness, wickedness associated with the stereotype. Another example comes from the experience of falling in love. When a person is in this state, he/she views the loved person in an idealized way – that is as having, to the highest extent, the totality of the qualities associated with goodness and fineness. A Neapolitan saying depicts this process of idealizing: “Every cockroach is

perfect in the eyes of its mother”. Obviously a person falling in love, too, can understand that reality is different, but he/she does so by means of a further operation of asymmetrisation, placing some constraining differentiation on the absolutizing feeling.

It is worth adding that homogenization is not limited to the categorization of single elements, but it concerns inter-class linkages too. As we have already asserted, affective semiosis treats metonymic associations as relations of identity. This means that affective semiosis treats any chain of occurrences revealed by any activity – for instance a communicative exchange – as a single whole class of identities, regardless of the semantic differentiation and syntactic articulation. Let us imagine a flow of linguistic occurrences –  $o_1, o_2, o_3, o_4$  – that are tied to each other by means of syntactic connectors like “not”, “but”, “yet” “only if” – for instance: “ $o_1$  is not  $o_2$  but  $o_3$ , yet only if  $o_4$ ”. From the point of view of conscious thinking these occurrences are signs belonging to different categories or subcategories. In contrast, affective semiosis transforms their contiguity into a relationship of identity:  $o_1, o_2, o_3, o_4$  as proto-signs made identical to each other and therefore assumed to be members of a generalized and homogeneous class.

The studies of Turvey and colleagues (Turvey & Fertig, 1970; Turvey, Fertig, & Kravetz, 1969) and Murphy and Zajonc (1993) can be interpreted as being consistent with this way of modelling the unconscious. These studies show that the mind carries out a kind of categorization that is independent of semantic criteria, and is instead the expression of a symbolic space generated by a few basic latent dimensions of affective class of meaning (to whose operational depiction we owe the semantic differential; see Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) in an oppositional relationship (good vs bad; powerful vs powerless; active vs passive). According to their position, in such a symbolic field – and without any reference to their semantic content – the objects/stimuli are homogenized – that is, made symbolically identical (for instance, as part of the whole generalized class of “good things”) – or differentiated and made absolutely different (for instance the totally powerful object as absolutely other from the totally powerless objects). This means that affective semiosis builds connections between proto-signs admitting only two possibilities: treating the proto-signs as a unit (identical) – as part of the same generalized class of affective meaning – or treating them as absolutely different – as part of opposing classes (for further evidence consistent with this interpretation, albeit as a result of a different research paradigm, see Ciarumelli, Lauro-Grotto, & Treves, 2006, Lauro-Grotto, 2007, Lauro-Grotto, Ciarumelli & Treves, 2007).

### 6.4. *Generalized proto-signs as context*

Affective semiosis does not deal with specific, discrete objects of experience. This is because – at the level of affective semiosis – every proto-sign is *tout court* identified with the chain of proto-signs it is linked with – in other words, with the whole network of proto-signs the system of activity consists of. To give an example, let us consider a group of people taking part in a business meeting. Every

participant produces an large number of occurrences (utterances, body expressions, way of dressing); the meeting occurs in a place full of elements which in turn work as further signs (the kind and the placement of the chairs, the furniture, the form of lighting...); the organizational and functional characteristics of the meeting (the objective, the schedule, the way of recording...) are other sources of occurrences. Now, affective semiosis transforms this infinite set of co-occurrences linked by metonymic relationships into a class of identity, therefore into a single generalized proto-sign. Thus, we can conclude that affective semiosis does not signify single discrete objects of experience, but the field of experience (that is the totality of the proto-signs produced by any social circumstance) as a whole. This is consistent with Carli (2006) who states that emotion is the shared way of giving affective meaning to the relationship by the actors involved in it. We propose using the term *context* for the generalized proto-sign that emerge when affective semiosis transforms the metonymic linkage into identity.

According to this perspective, affective semiosis shapes the flow of experience into a context conveying an affective meaning. When people produce an affective semiotisation of the flow of experience, they carry out a double operation. On the one hand, they have an experience of the world in terms of a unique totality – according to our terminology: a context. In other words, they associate the ever-changing flows of experience with a stable-enough affective state of mind. On the other hand, the context is immanently sustained by an affective meaning, which is a generalized, absolutized, homogenized emotional significance. In the final analysis, affective semiosis generates the experience as a mental fact while at the same time giving it an existential value (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008, 2010).

## 7. Affective semiosis in action. An analysis

The model of affective semiosis presented in the previous two sections enables us to deepen our analysis of the cases mentioned in the introduction. They can be understood in terms of the following dynamics.

An interpreter represents the object of experience through a first sign A (representamen). Say, the first place in the Soccer Championship has been represented as |victory|, the salesman's action of giving the banknote to the client as a |return|, the grammatical mistake made by the very important person as |incompetence|, the participation in the moment of the execution as |closeness|. (Needless to say, these signs are in turn motivated by other signs of which they are the interpretants. We adopt them as conventions, for the sake of our exemplification).

Sign A is understood by means of its association with another sign (interpretant), say  $B_1$ . The victory to the Championship is interpreted as |the Conquest of the Cup|, emphasising the dimension of the collective competitive enterprise as well as the uniqueness of the event (i.e. "the", not "a" conquest); the incompetence as |contempt of spiritual beauty|; the |return| as |honest/trustworthy salesman|, the |closeness| as |sharing destiny and faith|. Sign  $B_1$  is an affective meaning, an infinite set. It selects a generalized and absolutized meaning from the infinite

possibilities offered by the object. In the terms of our model, it is a proto-sign.

$B_1$  activates further interpretant signs, say  $B_2 .. B_n$ , with higher and higher levels of generalization and absolutization. For instance, the [Conquest of the Cup] is interpreted [We are the Best!], therefore as absolute, powerful, beautiful we-ness |; the [contempt of spiritual beauty] as [aggressive ugly person], therefore [absolute wickedness]; the [honest/trustworthy salesman] as [salesman as a nice person], therefore [absolute goodness of the aluminium casings salesman]; the [sharing of destiny and faith] as [wedding], therefore [fusion].

According to the way affective semiosis functions, A,  $B_1$ ,  $B_2$ , ..  $B_n$  are made identical to each other. Thus, a hyper-generalized field of significance emerges, with the sign A assimilated in and homogenized to every other element of that infinite set. Moreover, the hyper-generalized field goes on to make every new proto-sign the former enters into relationship with, identical to it. This means that the hyper-generalized field works as a kind of gravitational semiotic space, attracting the elements entering its area of influence.

This capacity of attraction works in two fundamental directions. On the one hand, it works in a forward direction, transforming the new metonymic combination of signs into identity. This means that the [Absolute We-ness and Absolute goodness and powerfulness] do not merely stand for, but *are* the event of the Italian soccer team winning the championship; [absolute goodness of the aluminium casings salesman] is the return of the money; absolute badness of the person living in the luxury palace is the syntactical error in speaking; the fusion among prisoners, Catherine and Christ is the head and the blood of the prisoner.

On the other hand, the process of affective generalization works backwards, triggering the memories of past experiences that are thus made present with their charge of embodied activation (see section *Affect as value of life*). Thus, we can guess that the [we-ness] triggers and is made identical to the intersubjective scenario whose prototype is the infantile fantasy of succeeding in accomplishing the favour of the mother against the intrusive third (Klein, 1967). In the same way, we can associate the positive feeling towards the salesman with the very early experience of the mother experienced as the container of all goodness; the doorkeeper's anger with the opposite experience of the other attacking and destroying one's good things and Catherine's mystical account with the early experiences (orgasm, feeding) of losing self-other boundaries.

The backward activation of this scenario and its assimilation within the hyper-generalized meanings means that the latter has the role of affective activation that supports the scenario. Thus, the hyper-generalized affective field of meaning acquires value of life (i.e. it is anthropomorphized) – experienced in terms of bodily rooted feelings (euphoria, good mood, optimism, excitement; surprise, sense of trust, closeness; anger and indignation; "Intense joy" "fragrance of blood") grasped in various ways by reflective thinking. As such, this hyper-generalized affective field works as a powerful lever motivating, orienting and constraining the acting and thinking of the persons involved – that is, as *context*.

Finally, the considerations proposed above provide further opportunities to show that affective semiosis is inherently dialogical – even when they are experienced in an individual way.

- 1) Affective meaning is a collective product, performed *through* the individual minds. In other words, it emerges within and thanks to the communication, through and in the terms of how people combine the signs according to the cultural context they are part of. For instance, one would not expect expressions of enthusiasm and collective euphoria if the Italian team won the World Cup for baseball (not a very popular sport in Italy). This because that object is inscribed in a socially constructed chain of signs that moves towards other kinds of affective meaning – e.g. the event would probably be expressed as: “the team has won”. The representation of the movement of the banknote as |return| is clearly a cooperative product. As well, the capability of that sign to be interpreted as |trustworthiness| depends on how the various signs involved (returning money, selling, aluminium casings...) are interpreted in a given social area (Linell, 2009). For instance, people that have watched the film and by doing so have added this sign to the chain of signs orienting their interpretation, may be more suspicious of salesmen wanting to return money picked up from the floor!
- 2) The object of affective semiosis is the global field of experience, not the discrete object triggering it. The enthusiasm caused by the victory, the feeling of we-ness did not focus only on the soccer realm. It irradiated to the whole experience of Italian-ness. It thus becomes comprehensible how it was able to infect a great many people not interested in soccer. Moreover, the activation spread beyond sport. Otherwise, how could a given activity literally concerning a limited number of people (the soccer team and its organization) and a specific area of activity (soccer), have the effect of increasing the whole economy of a nation?
- 3) Affective semiosis produces a context that works as a powerful regulator of action and communication. Just after the victory, the winning soccer-players obtained very rich advertising contracts. Regardless of their actual contribution to the win, the goods associated with their image enjoyed a marked commercial benefit. The client does not only see the salesman and his products as |goodness| – he purchases the casings. Affective semiosis is at the same time a bridge towards action. The acting out of the affective meaning works in turn as another interpretant sign.

## 8. Affective semiosis and sensemaking

In the previous sections we have pointed out that from Matte Blanco's perspective affective semiosis is viewed as a mental operation whose product is the transformation of the flow of experience into a context – that is the generation of a single global mental state associated with the totality of the experience the subject is part of, before and

regardless of the articulation between past and present; here and elsewhere; me, thou, it, us, you.

The context plays a major role in sensemaking, performing an orienting function for the interpretative activity of people participating in social interaction. Daily life offers many clues as to the orienting power of affect. This is particularly evident in the circumstance in which people are caught up by an emotion. When we are angry we are led to interpret what happens and what other people do – towards us as well as towards the world – in a negative, even malicious way – as an act of aggression, a sign of negative attitude, an expression of the bad intentions the people have towards us, and so on. The same events and acts we experience could even be interpreted in a diametrically opposed way if we are in a different emotional state – e.g. if we feel happy, sad, and so forth.

What happens in the circumstance in which one feels an intense emotion helps to make it clear what the generalized and potentially infinite power of affective semiosis actually means. One is happy or angry or sad in association with a certain more or less specific circumstance; yet the more intense the feeling, the more easily one is led to interpret other events according to such a feeling, regardless – often even in spite of – the semantic and functional linkage between the circumstances associated with the feeling and the other events.

Our previous example refers to situations in which intense feeling is involved. We have chosen this example because in such cases the orienting function of affective semiosis is particularly evident. In most of these cases we may even be aware of the capability of our emotion to orient our evaluations, ideas, modes of thinking – as is evident in expressions like “I'm sorry. I do not actually believe what I said to you yesterday. The fact is that I was very angry”. Nevertheless, emotional experience is like the tip of the affective semiosis-iceberg. Affective semiosis is ubiquitous: it works even when we have no feeling of its working. No situation is affectively neutral. People cannot help affectively making sense, just as they cannot help perceiving or thinking. Every experiential encounter with the world triggers a movement of affective semiosis that shapes the existential meaning – the value of life – of such experience for the subject.

This means that the orienting function of affect is always in action, even if we are able to be aware of it only in situations where affect is particularly intense. In the many cases in which there is no intense emotional implication, we can still recognize – even if indirectly – the indications of affective semiosis and its orienting function. In every situation people interpret and produce the signs exchanged in the interaction according to the affective meanings with which they feel and connote the situation itself. Take what happens in a classroom. Students make sense of what teachers say to them not only and not mainly according to the content; rather, it is made meaningful through the mediation of and in accordance with the global significance of their whole experience of school (Salvatore, Ligorio, & De Franchis, 2005). Moreover, Carli and Panizza (1999) show that the affective way of experiencing shared activity by the actors involved in an organization works as a kind of implicit premise mediating the further interpretation of

events, as well as shaping the way of reasoning, evaluating and decision-making. In a convergent way, Salvatore, Forges Davanzati, Potì, and Ruggeri (2009) recently underlined the role played by generalized meanings in shaping economic thought and action. In the previous section we referred to some studies (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993; Turvey & Fertig, 1970; Turvey et al., 1969) that highlight the ability of affective semiosis to orient the subsequent process of thinking. Other studies, though generally produced within the framework of cognitivism (see Nisbett & De Camp Wilson, 1977 for a classical review; see also Carli, 2006) also provide data in support of the idea that an affective, fast and pre-semantic activity of interpretation of the object of experience orients the subsequent process of explicit thinking and judging.

### 8.1. How affective semiosis and rational thinking interact

So far we have modelled affective semiosis according to Matte Blanco. We have also pointed out that affective semiosis orients modes of thinking and acting. This raises the issue of how to conceptualize the relationship between these two ways of mental functioning. In other words, what kind of dynamics mediates affective semiosis and rational thinking?

A possible answer to this question would be to assume a hierarchical relationship between the two dimensions, with affective semiosis working as a superordinate level, framing and regulating the secondary process. The appeal of this approach – traditionally privileged by classical cognitivism – is not inconsiderable, due to its simplicity and closeness to commonsense. And we must admit that this appeal has exerted its influence on us too (Grasso & Salvatore, 1997; Salvatore et al., 2003). Nevertheless, there are many reasons to reject it, especially if one assumes – as we are doing here – a dynamic, dialogical and pragmatic conception of meaning (Linell, 2009; Ziemke, Zlatev, & Frank, 2007). Affective semiosis performs an orienting – rather than a regulative function. This difference can be meaningful if one takes into account a characteristic of affective semiosis we pointed out previously: its speed and immediacy. This means that the affective symbolization of the field of experience is produced beforehand and as such it primes the subsequent activity of the mind. In other words, the context – i.e. the product of affective semiosis – is the first form of semiotisation through which people make the experience meaningful; once a context has emerged as an implicit, embodied presupposition (Christopher & Bickhard, 2007), it orients the participant's subsequent interpretative activity performed in terms of rational thought.

It is worth adding that as we see it, the context carries out its orienting function not in a instructive way. In other words, it does not define prescriptively the mode and the content of the thinking. Rather, the affective context works as a constraint upon the modes of sign combination – in other words, as the structure of probability of the co-occurrence of signs in the flow of communication. Take for example an interaction between two people symbolizing their encounter in terms of a context of friendliness/goodness. Such a context can be seen as an immanent

constraint for some combinations of signs. For instance, the probability of co-occurrence of signs generally associated with an aggressive attitude will be low, while the probability of co-occurrence of signs of friendship and warmth will be high.

In the final analysis, the context can be seen as the preferential trajectory of people's semiotic intersubjective activity of producing and interpreting signs. Without such preference, no semiotic activity would be possible, because the infinite possibility of producing signs as well as the sign's infinite way of being interpreted would all be equivalent to each other – therefore none of them would be suitable for being selected in preference to another. We want to underline the circularity between affective semiosis and rational thinking. So far we have focused on one side of the relationship: the orienting function the context performs on acting, thinking and speaking. Yet, there is the other side to take into account too. In fact, while it is true that the context orients people's interpretative activity, it is also true that this interpretative activity produces a flow of actions, thoughts, utterances that reproduces the context. In sum, the context promotes the flow of signs and the flow of signs reproduces the context over time.

Secondly, the previous discussion involves a processual idea of the context. In other words, the context is not a representation according to which the semiotic activity goes ahead. Rather, it is the immanent organization – i.e. the inherent structure of probability and constraint – of sensemaking dynamics. As such, it is the behaviour of the system to produce and reproduce the organization that shapes the behaviour itself. In other words, we are maintaining that there are not two given ontologically different levels of reality: the level of the behaviour of the system (how people produce and interpret signs) and the superordinate level of the organization of this behaviour. Sensemaking has to be thought of as being akin to the dynamics of a vortex. A vortex is a structure of order emerging from the dynamics of a fluid – the vortex is produced by the fluid's molecules and at the same time it works as a constraint on the behaviour of further molecules; in so doing, it leads them to reproduce it (or rather, to produce it again and again over time). It is interesting to observe that if we continue with the analogy of the vortex, we have to embrace a dynamic view of the context. A vortex is not produced by the behaviour of the molecules themselves; rather, it is the shape of the fluid persisting through the flow of molecules. In the same way, we are led to regard the context not as a state, but as a meta-state: a structure of order persisting though time regardless – yet at the same time by means of – the specific signs that create it.

### 9. What does affective semiosis add to the understanding of sensemaking?

One objection to our model could be that that the puzzle of sensemaking is quite complicated – therefore, why add another dimension to it?

Firstly, simply because the influence of affect on social interaction and sensemaking is part of everyone's experience. Moreover, many studies – some of them mentioned above – offer strong support to those of us who think the

role of affect cannot be reduced to a kind of interference with rationality. In contrast, data from researchers leads us to think that affect is a resource for rationality. According to [Matte Blanco \(1975\)](#), affect is the grounds of rationality; thought emerges from emotion. Finally, we think that our model of affective semiosis can help to address some issues related to the modelling of sensemaking. In particular, here we recall one aspect related to our previous discussion: the value of life of the signs.

This issue concerns the genesis of the experience of mental activity. We find this a basic issue, even though it is not generally addressed in the literature ([Bradley, 2010](#), however deals with this topic). We are immersed in a flow of signs. Meaning can be conceived of as the way signs combine with each other in the stream of semiosis ([Linell, 2009](#); [Salvatore, Tebaldi, et al., 2009](#); [Wittgenstein, 1958](#)). Yet, when people experience a combination of signs, they feel they are meeting the world – not only signs, but pieces of the world having existential content – to use the terms we have used in this paper: signs endowed with value of life.

Now, feeling the experience as having value of life is not the byproduct of a ubiquitous psychological mechanism. Typically, when one dreams, one feels the dream is something actually true and real. An Italian poet wrote “they dreamt so hard that the blood came out of their nose”. And Pascal asked himself how we can be sure that our experience is not the product of the dream we are dreaming. In other circumstances our experience is sustained by value of life even if we know it has no realistic implication. This is what happens when we are caught up by the film we are watching and we feel we are part of the story just as the story is part of our life. On the other hand, there are circumstances when the opposite happens – people are unable to connote the experience with value of life.

An illustration of this kind of case is provided by [Damasio \(1999\)](#) who refers to a clinical study of a patient with neurological damage at the sub-cortical level – that is, damage to one part of the brain considered to be involved in the processing of the emotions. This patient was perfectly able to recognize situations and objects, and to represent events; yet he was unable to capture the subjective, existential implications of the understanding he himself gained. The evaluations, the predictions and the interpretations he made remained merely theoretical, virtual statements and thoughts as if they had no consequence and value for him. A patient of this kind could think and say to himself: “I see a big object falling down upon me. I am quite sure that it will hurt me and I will be killed by it” and nevertheless she/he would not move out of the way. This is because he would feel this inner talk as just words, signs without any value of life. In short, what this case highlights is that experiencing signs as having value of life is not something innate. Rather, it is a (contingent) product – something that usually is there, but sometimes may not be. Therefore, it needs to be explained why it varies in its availability.

Our model addresses this issue. We have proposed an idea of how affective semiosis charges the sign of value of life, merging present experience and past experience into a single whole laden with a sense of vital activation.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper we have proposed a model of affect and of its role in sensemaking. It can be summed up by the following statements.

1. Affect is a generalized, homogenising and absolutizing class of meaning according to which experience is interpreted. Accordingly, we have proposed considering it in terms of affective semiosis.
2. Affective semiosis is inherently dialogical and at the same time rooted in the unconscious (primary process in Freud’s terminology) – i.e. the mind’s way of functioning according to which every relationship between occurrences is transformed into identity.
3. Affective semiosis is characterized by the prevalent role of the unconscious (symmetry function) and an antagonistic – yet complementary – function of differentiation (secondary process in psychoanalytic terms). The latter introduces constraints upon the tendency of the unconscious to homogenise.
4. Affective meanings are the hyper-generalized and homogeneous class created by this interplay.
5. Due to its prevalently unconscious quality, affective semiosis is a fast and immediate way of semiotizing experience and of endowing it with value of life – i. e. with a sense of reality and subjective relevance.
6. Affective semiosis does not concern discrete objects; rather, it addresses the whole field of experience. It assimilates the field to hyper-generalized intersubjective affective meanings rooted in the embodied memories of activation associated to early relational experience.
7. We have defined *context* as the affective semiotisation of the intersubjective and personal field of experience.
8. The context plays a major role in sensemaking, because it orients the interpretative activity of people participating in social interaction.
9. This happens always, even if people are aware of it only in situations where affect is particularly intense and for this reason is experienced in terms of feeling.

Our model has various implications for a number of theoretical issues. Firstly, it provides a broader definition of semiosis, viewing it as a process encompassing a sub-symbolic level, where signs are to be conceived of in terms of field (rather than of discrete-point elements), and signification in terms of undifferentiated, indexical representamen-interpretant relationships. We believe that this broadening paves the way to overcoming the contrast between the visions of meaning in terms of embodied, sub-symbolic dynamics ([Costall, 2007](#)) and in terms of semiotic mediation ([Valsiner, 2009](#)). As conceptualized here, affective semiosis is the basic sub-symbolic way of sensemaking resulting from the first hedonic differentiation of the body’s states. At the same time, thanks precisely to its homogenising tendency, affective semiosis encompasses sensations, images, perceptions, ideas – in Peirce’s terms: “more developed signs” – merging them with the generalized affective meanings and therefore inserting the affective meaning within the semiotic realm of the mediated relationship among signs. Thus, affective semiosis has to be

conceived of as the interface bridging the pre-semiotic domain of the ever-changing states of the body – standing for nothing but themselves – and the semiotic domain where what occurs stands for something else. Thanks to this bridging function, the body is projected on the world of meaning, as an object and at the same time a medium of signification. Affective semiosis is semiosis *through* as well as *of* the body.

This last statement raises a complementary topic – the way of considering affect and rational thinking. The duality of the mind entailed in this dichotomy is found throughout psychology, albeit with different names and in different approaches (e.g. cognition versus affect, rationality versus emotion; scientific versus daily thought; paradigmatic vs narrative thought). Our model provides a specific way of looking at this duality, leading to the abandonment of the idea of affect and cognition as two separate processes instantiating different mental apparatuses/mechanisms. The distinction between affective semiosis and rational thinking is a matter of quantity, rather than quality – it reflects the different salience of two rules (primary and secondary processes) being however co-present within all sensemaking dynamics. Hence, affect and cognition are to be seen as depicting two different levels/forms of organization of the sole dynamics that comprises the mind.

Needless to say, we are aware that our model raises more questions than it answers. Questions like the following: What kind of relation is there between the dynamics of sensemaking, the social shape of the system of activity and the symbolic repertoires underlying the culture of the social group involved in such a system? What kind of relation is there between the intersubjective process of sensemaking and the individual mental activities conveying it, and at the same time being regulated by it? How to conceptualize the individuality and agentivity in accordance with the affective ground of sensemaking? Above all, our discussion raises the issue of which mechanism enables the dynamics of affective meaning to emerge. We have addressed this point only in general terms – modelling affective semiosis as emerging from the interplay of a homogenising and a differentiating function (primary and secondary processes according to the terms we have adopted). Nevertheless, we have not dealt with the issue of how this interplay works, namely the exact nature of the micro-dynamics of the interaction of primary and secondary processes and how it can assume different levels and modes of organization reflected in phenomenologically differentiated forms of sensemaking (i.e. rational thinking and affect).

We hope that this paper might be a starting point in moving in the direction indicated by these issues.

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