

## About the Changing Ways of Writing in the Field of Social Sciences

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### 1. The discourse of social sciences and the expansion in the acknowledgement of its diversity

In the late 70s, Greimas y Landowski compiled works about “the discourse of the social sciences”<sup>1</sup> in a widely read volume. Making due allowances for exceptions, they found that there had been little exploration of this field, and began by pointing out the vast diversity of the ways in which these works had been produced and circulated. Nowadays, we could say that the diversity they found has not only increased, but also frequently become the object of the said discourse, a process that had already started by the time their work was published.

By the early 70s, there had already been standpoints that forewarned the appearance of the phenomenon. A few years after the new hermeneutics and the various formats of the open essay had become installed, Barthes had posited, in the prologue to an issue of *Communications*, the terms under which current programmatic rules of obedience to restraints on academic prose had been left aside. He himself had joined the new trend since the previous decade<sup>2</sup>. Roughly speaking, he stated that (research) work had to be anchored in desire. He warned that when this was not the case, that kind of work turned “gloomy, functional, alienated, prompted by the need to pass an examination, to earn a Diploma, to ensure career promotion.” He was addressing young researchers, and continued thus: “[...] research is expected to be made public but not written.” But his text also deployed a reservation: he also pointed out that it was not a matter of demanding “freedom at large”, for “the vindication of a naive sort of freedom would bring back the form of culture that had been a stereotyped matter of learning” [...] (since) spontaneity lies next door to something that has already been said by others.” Regarding the works included in the issue whose prologue he was writing, he disclosed the *virtuous* component of insisting on learning to search, a notion which, at that time, he called the deployment of the Signifier.

From then on, these new starts and their assumptions have been either subjects of debate or have throbbed in various debates as presuppositions regarding stances on the legitimacy of modes of scientific writing. The fact is that old verisimilitudes of writing persist alongside the new forms, although the ruptures experienced by the field already appear to be establishing different traditions.

Each region has its own ghosts. Sometimes the splendor and the slumps of style stand out from the historical scenes of public writings that are honored and imitated. And there are times when these *imitations* –understood as Gerard Genette puts it; that is, copying operational modes of production from previous texts, which goes beyond the *transformations* of one particular work<sup>3</sup> - define the mode in which a piece of writing, or even a trend, is presented. They also define the rejections they suffer: the turnarounds on scientific discourse as such, and/or the irruption of

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Greimas and Eric Landowski. “Les parcours du savoir”, in *Introduction à l’analyse du discours en sciences sociales* (Greimas y Landowski, eds.). Hachette, París, 1979, pp. 7-15.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes. “Jeunes chercheurs”, in *Communications* magazine, #19. Ed. du Seuil, París, 1972, pp. 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Genette. *Palimpsestos*. Editorial Taurus, Madrid, 1989, pp. 9-44.

mistrust about the quality of transparency that permits its objects to be observed free from the hindrances of literary or rhetoric clouding. This also results in a waste of time caused by having to resort to words rather than to things, added to the suspicion that a parallel neglect has occurred: that of deontic precautions that are part of scientific nature's social existence. The established polemic scene has never ceased to insist to this day.

## **2. Acknowledgement of a textual world: that of poetics within the scientific text**

The social life of scientific writing also undergoes changes as a result of the ways in which they can be read. One part of its textual surface remains, but the critical discussion of one of its levels, or of the repetitions of some manner of exemplification alters its meaning, since its enunciation becomes a function of the new discourse it has aroused. Thus, Hayden White's works alter the effects of meaning of historical discourse by encouraging a reading that will focus on the poetics of his essay, hypothesizing about the effect of credibility of his rhetorical constructions and, more particularly, of his narrative patterns<sup>4</sup>. Borrowing an example from a different field, the visibility of rhetoric or gender procedures with which sociology underscores the plausibility of its descriptions and explanation gaps grows in the eyes of those who have read the last part of Robert Nisbet's work. According to Nisbet, one hundred years of social science discourses gain argumentative strength from the fact that they were grounded on the transposition of genders originally defined as pertaining to the visual arts, such as a landscape or a portrait<sup>5</sup>. Also the discourse of anthropology is used in texts like the ones by Clifford Geertz, with broad polemic effects related to the peculiar features of his writings. Here the issue does not lie in specific manners of rhetorization but in transversal phenomena like "the highly concrete nature of his descriptions"<sup>6</sup>. Just as realistic literature does, the anthropological text is said to privilege such devices as the construction of effects of achievement in the images it presents, or the modulation of a testimonial tone of authority in the narrator's voice. Geertz believes that the discussion of these procedures should also involve an analysis of the defensive discourses it arouses in opposition to the growth of critical undertakings like the one he intends. This type of resistance would give rise to value judgements that are also the subject of Geertz's ironical remarks, like when he says that "excessive preoccupation [...] about the way in which ethnographic texts have been composed would seem to be an insane distraction, a wasteful one, in the best of cases, and a hypochondriac one in the worst." One could well think that a reaction in favor of naturalizing custom underlies such feelings of alarm as are prompted by the beliefs that "good anthropological texts should be plain and unambitious" and that "they should neither encourage nor deserve close critical literary appreciation." Geertz, who is as polemic as or more polemic than those who demanded that writing be given equal attention in other fields of knowledge, requests—firmly leaning on the hope of a close application for every development, a hope that exceeds the academic field— that the limitations of the notion that scientific language should appeal only to what can legitimize the logical construction of its referent, and that it should perceive such logic for what it is. Regarding this matter, he declares that "the roots of fear (fear that the said rhetoric may be explored and rendered visible) are to be sought elsewhere, for perhaps this might offer the possibility of a better recognition of anthropology's literary nature and that is related to certain professional myths." Were these myths not to be textually reproduced, it would be impossible to achieve the persuasive effects of powerful discursive constructions like the ones that offered validity to the "pure strength of factual substantivity" within the anthropological discourse. From Geertz's viewpoint, the alternative to

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White. "El valor de la narrativa en la representación de la realidad" and "El concepto del texto: método e ideología en la historia intelectual", in *El contenido de la forma*. Editorial Paidós, Barcelona, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Nisbet. *La sociología como forma de arte*. Editorial Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Geertz. *El antropólogo como autor*. Editorial Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, pp. 12-20.

approach confrontation about this range of issues would sway between concealing the instance of writing or else making it visible.

### 3. A new author, a new subject of writing, a new dramatical scene

Metz and respect for discursive differences: during the course of a famous interview –the closure of the Cerisy Conference, held in 1989 in homage to his lifetime work- Metz answered a question about Deleuze’s books on movies, which were sometimes taken to be a confrontational option to his own. In his words: “I find Deleuze’s work beautiful and extremely intelligent.” This statement could be understood as a diplomatic refusal to enter into a confrontation, but then he added: “I have never understood why books should “agree” with one another.” The interview went on, and Metz’s interlocutors drew his attention to the internal differences in his own work – differences that had originated in his own writings. His earlier texts were deemed to be more self-referential through the inclusion of a larger number of autobiographical data and more space devoted to the development of examples illustrating personal situations and reflections. Metz admitted that this was so –his own books did not wholly “agree” among themselves<sup>7</sup>. Still, the issue was more complex than can be inferred at first sight from this chunk of dialogue.

Metz’s broad-mindedness involved an element of tension, which may have exerted a negative effect on his relationships with both publishers and publishing houses in the last years of his life. From his perspective, he acknowledged the wealth of the multiplicity of meanings that can be built from surface texts and renewed discursive constructions. This stance set him apart from those who rejected such devices as formations aimed at concealing conceptual gaps in all transmission of knowledge that did not follow the rules established by the *hard* forms of scientific communication. However, he was always faithful to a meticulous prose style in which figural rhetorizations –to give an example- were used for the sole purpose of emphasizing a concept or clarify dissidence. To some, from a *formal* point of view –though form exists also to be perceived as meaning- it may have stood for his resistance to the new poetics of prose. And Metz’s texts were not able to enjoy the kind of compensation provided by media discourse. On most occasions he refused to be interviewed, saying his physical presence was unnecessary for journalists to read and review his books, and that his books conveyed his word better than a conversation would. This was most certainly true, but only to those who valued the purest, most systematic forms in the transmission of knowledge in the same way he did. While Metz on the one hand *rejected the rejection* of deviant texts just because they were deviant, on the other hand he abstained from participating in any search that might imply the creation of a new subject of writing. Metz held Barthes in great admiration and read him often, but he never seems to have felt the urge to write anything that resembled *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, or *Barthes par Barthes*, or *La chambre claire*. In our days, his writings account for one of the most significant turning points in the movie theory, its connection with semiotic developments and, more importantly, Metz deployed and transmitted a particular way of looking at these issues that shed light on the differential location of the cinematographic phenomena whose validity has not dwindled. But he refused to cross the boundaries that marked differences among discursive genres. He left it to others to take upon themselves a different enunciation, one that he was able to read in Barthes and that would later emerge in others, in the various fields of social sciences, as was the case in our milieu with Eliseo Verón’s *Agendas* and his metatheory brought down to a daily life level<sup>8</sup>, or with Beatriz Sarlo’s *Escenas*<sup>9</sup> and the cultural pathways she depicts in them.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, Marc. “Entrevista a Christian Metz”, in *Coloquio de Cerisy: Christian Metz y la teoría del cine* (Marie y Vernet, deis.) Editorial Catálogos, Buenos Aires, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Eliseo Verón. *Efectos de agenda. I y II*. Editorial Gedisa, Barcelona, 1999 y 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Beatriz Sarlo. *Escenas de la vida posmoderna*. Editorial Ariel, Buenos Aires, 1994.

#### 4. Once again, a criticism of criticism

A reflection about boundaries: a difference should be made between the changes that affected both the essay and scientific writings. These changes occurred without ever being discussed, for consideration of the very problems they involved has irrupted into them. Before the concept of social science came into existence, Montaigne toyed with random procedures that could give rise to his writings (for example, he would speak of starting from the reading of books that stood side by side in his library.) But there was no pondering on either a form of prose or the mixture of themes that might surface once the subject matters picked up at random had been reordered. Accuracy, curtness, and desubjectivization of the scientific essay started to become constituent parts of it, introduced by formal teaching that met no opposition. They may also have been adopted as unavoidable factors in the logic that ruled a specific wording. In later times, when again the wording becomes a problem, the assumptions of scientific prose are already in crisis. Among these assumptions we could name the feasibility of seamless objectivity and the researcher's full awareness of the scope of his appeal to the realm of meanings. When Eco confronts Rorty regarding the limits of interpretation, he does so from a perspective that is, in turn, bound in by manners of treatment projected on various textual registers, even when he is speaking about the treatment of cultural objects that are verbal texts themselves. As is common knowledge, he demands that the attention paid to them enable the recognition of such specific boundaries as are demarcated by conceptual and diegetic fringes stemming from the writing once it has already materialized as a work, regardless of what the author intended to achieve<sup>10</sup>. In the scenario described by Eco, the treatment of such boundaries would be categorized as a problem pertaining to the construction of an object of investigation, prior or external to the secondary writing or metatext. In principle, the problem posed by the effects resulting from the various *rhetorics* that might find their way into the secondary writing would not be considered. Still, it can be posited that the replacement of a concrete author by a *model author*, already found in Eco's previous work, paves the way for acceptance of more specific density/opacity in *any* text. Thus the essay is included in this premise, and the need to consider its conditions of writing appears, no matter what the concrete writer himself explicitly proposed to do.

#### 5. The researcher's other discourse

Regarding the issue of the researcher's *parallel discourses*, I do not have enough data to risk a generalization. Still, many Argentinean newspapers and magazines interview researchers and essayists on current affairs related to the theory and matter of research. They sometimes also ask for brief opinion pieces, or surreptitiously delete the reporter's questions and turn an interview into an article by the interviewee. The stage is then filled with a discourse of extension in lay language, free from quotations and bookish references, exception made of a few whose vagueness takes on the tone of a saying or proverb. These appear as natural substitutes for what would make up the theoretical framework on which an academic piece is constructed or supported. Let me introduce a personal conjecture: it is my belief that, among other reasons, interviewees are not prone to refuse such exchanges because they have eventually learnt that they are carefully read in the academic milieu, where other people's works of a more systematic nature, and published in journals, are not read unless a special need to do so arises, or unless there is a conflict of some kind. The circulation of these bland writings in spaces outside the media should be tracked down. They most probably

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<sup>10</sup> Humberto Eco. *Los límites de la interpretación*. Editorial Taurus, Madrid, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1998.

contribute (or perhaps their function exceeds that of a mere contribution) to lend credibility –or to discredit an author, to gauge interest in lectures and seminars, and so on. This is independent from the informal way in which it is carried out, even when traditional feature and news article resources are always exploited.

These parallel discourses of the social sciences have also undergone changes. They should be followed up simultaneously with the others. If they are feature writings, they do not resemble the ones typical of the past century, and we can assure that they are not microessays. The changes made to essays meant to appear in books have tinged them with similar characteristics, but not because either of them has achieved rhetoric victory.

## 6. A problem that pervades register and genre hierarchies

An interval on the margins of scientific prose: some parallel developments occur behind a wide bar that divides genres from one another. These are intertwined with a feeling of discomfort about writing that might have pioneered something if the division between them did not operate on the fringes with such constant rotundity. When sociological and/or semiotic research are called upon to do research into communication (and even more so when it is about media communication), sundry searches of discursive efficacy are requested to take action in a typical conflict zone. This conflict does not stem from ignorance or lack of cooperation of any of the parties involved: it is constitutive of the work scenario. At some point, either the creator of the text or the final object (whether in the media or in design) behaves as if he/it thought *by means of* his/its actions; as if their practice were untranslatable because of its relation to some experience that can only be expressed in act. And the maker –or the object- may be standing across from a researcher who thinks that his systematic, transparent analysis will carve the clear and contrastable outline of the object to be produced<sup>11</sup>. If this were it, the association of the parts would be impossible. ¿Are there cases when it is not so?

We can give an affirmative answer, since some kind of transaction, even if it is a silent one, tends to occur. Discourse makers who opt for an anti-theoretical or anti-methodological stance (though not permanently) also provide rational grounds for their proposals. In the last resort, they will appeal to *explanatory anecdotes* whose role is that of an analysis that has been rejected. On the opposite side, analysts try to be original; their conclusions may get hold of impressionistic syntheses strengthened by metaphors that will seductively reduce the scope of the problem. Those who take the stand of the hands-on character or of the artist weave their discourse with rhetoric entimemes to achieve an effect of argumentative rationality, and analysts who wield reasoning as a tool attempt moving rhetorics which can neither take center stage nor name themselves in the scientist's or researcher's field of credibility. In the Aristotelian view, the association-confrontation poles exchange resources based on *moving* and *convincing*. In social science, such conflicts and transactions have been taking place ever since instances of application came into existence. A wealth of experience could be processed in terms of rhetorical and stylistic effects of the implementation of both resource areas and their enunciative and rhetorical constructions. But there is little circulation of experiences between (partly non-academic) instances of application in applied social science and those that systematically occur in institutional locations. To a certain extent, these locations guarantee the continuity of research throughout time. The same cannot be said about the places where application usually operates, for these are attached to deadlines related to one particular instance of planning or production. Continuity of analysis would prove essential to record changes in the temporal succession, but the facts in the rhetoric of conflict tend to break loose somewhere else. In a different time.

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<sup>11</sup> I addressed this issue in “Crear / investigar: fatalidad de una retórica de conflicto”, *Tipográfica* magazine #55. Buenos Aires, April-May 2003.

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## **Abstract:**

There has been a generalized acknowledgement of the crisis undergone by the textual world of poetics in scientific writing. Some of the strongest assumptions of this kind of prose, such as its natural condition of objectivity, have collapsed. In "the discourse of social science", its frequent opacity can be descried; an opacity that was already visible from Barthes' rebellious attitude in the 60s, when he denounced those who wanted "research to be shown but not written." However, a look at the essays produced in our times tells us that we are still confronted with the sometimes tragic option of participating in or standing aside from the searches that involve the creation of a new subject of writing; in other words, we need to choose whether or not to cross the boundaries that mark the differences among discursive genres.

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