

FOR A SEMIO-NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Engagement (in French: *embrayage*) literally means “mesh”, “clutch”. To be precise, *engagement* is the engaging of the clutch and, for example, in the case of a vehicle, the gradual start of transmission between engine and gear; the disengaging of the clutch and the interruption of the transmission, which enables us to change gear, will be the *disengagement* (in French: *débrayage*), which, on the contrary, means “disconnect”.

We must underline that semiotics accepts these terms giving them a special meaning, referring to the theory of the enunciation, that was addressed at length by Émile Benveniste whose work was lately received in the “enunciative turning point of structuralism”, according to Giovanni Manetti’s¹ definition, which is Algirdas Greimas’ work.

According to this view, in short:

“The enunciation is *the structure of mediation* that converts the *langue*, the language system, in *parole*, speech adopted individually; and at the same time it is the request of establishment of the subject. Therefore the enunciation is *the individual act through which the speaker appropriates the language*, using it in speech, and through which the speaker enunciates him/herself as a subject”.²

A crucial point, resorting again to the excellent summary made by the Italian semiologist Ugo Volli, is that:

“To be able to express itself, first of all the speech must objectify itself, take its own values and meanings independently of the moment and the person that made it up and so, in a way, *denying the instance itself of the enunciation, moving away from it*”.³

This *detachment* (“creative split” is Greimas’ and Courtés’ definition⁴) enables the setting-up of the categories of person, space and time inside the utterance and, in other words, allows the “materialization” in a speech of something deeper and more unattainable, coming from the deep generative structure of the language and more in general the structure of the significance. It is called *disengagement*. It’s thanks to the disengagement that we can become absorbed in a novel, and forget that we are reading a book written by an author in the flesh, in a certain historical time and in a certain geographical place, perhaps very far from the time and place where the novel is set and from the time and place where we are reading. It’s thanks to the disengagement that we can enjoy a film without thinking that just behind the scene there is a film troupe and a

¹ Manetti (1998)

² Volli (2000, p.117)

³ Volli (2000, p.118; italics is mine)

⁴ Greimas, Courtés (1979, p.88)

real world that have nothing to do with the film story. If at each page of *Poirot at Styles Court* we reminded ourselves that it was written during the WW1 by an English nurse and that what we are reading is her pure invention, we wouldn't enjoy the book so much, and also the narrative competence and encyclopaedic culture (encyclopaedic in semiotic sense rather than superficial knowledge) would be at risk.

Therefore if the "engine" of a story is made by the complex psychological and social amalgam of a certain author, whether he is a novelist or a film director, a journalist or a man in the street, on average he will have to "disappear" from the story in order not to spoil the illusion of objectivity or, to be more precise, of "independent reality": *in this sense the text must "disengage" from the generative "engine", whose noise must not be heard inside the text. This "disengagement" will be major or minor in accordance with its purposes (aesthetic, didactic, informative...).*

This condition of disengagement of the text from its empirical author, by the way, is strongly underlined by the aesthetic of *impersonality of art* (TS Eliot). For "text" we mean also a figurative work or, in radical approach of semiotics, the display of items in a supermarket, an advertisement or a commonly used object. The author may keep - as Alessandro Manzoni explains in the famous Preface to *The Count of Carmagnola* - a "little corner" (the Choir in *The Count of Carmagnola*), where he can speak "in the first person", in order to express opinions and comments about what is going on upon the stage.

Here we come to the "engagement", that is a sort of going back to the enunciation, the engagement of the gear that brings back, *even if deceptively*, the "engine" on the scene. Manzoni who turns ironically to his "twenty-five readers" at the end of *The Betrothed* when, after summarizing the essence of the story, asks for their leniency, practices an engagement that technically gives rise to an *enunciative illusion*, that is the illusion that subject, time and place of the utterance return to coincide with subject, time and place of the enunciation, after that long account that is the body of the novel. It is Alessandro Manzoni who comes out from behind the scenes at the end of the story and talks with us, *still today* (even though he died more than one century ago).

Another example of engagement is the film use, quite rare and generally forbidden, of the *camera-look*, that causes a direct engagement on the members of the audience, proposing an involving "I'm really looking at you" which breaks the stage illusion and creates an illusory extra-narrative space. Whatever the film director wants to do when he proposes the camera-look, the fact remains that on average it is "a point of incandescence", as Francesco Casetti⁵ successfully defines it when talking about *interpellation*. We can widen the picture to the engagement in general, which overheats the emotional atmosphere like the sudden and unpredictable end by Baudelaire: "De te fabula narratur - hypocrite lecteur - mon semblable - mon frère", other famous example of engagement, and, also by Baudelaire, the equally famous "Je suis un vieux boudoir"⁶. Going back to the cinema, an example of amusing engagement is given by the

⁵ Casetti (1986, p.26)

⁶ In this case it would be an *hetero-categoric* engagement, that takes place, in Greimas and Courtés definition: "when the categories of disengagement and engagement are distinct, for example, in Baudelaire who enunciates: 'I am the boudoir...'" (Greimas, Courtés: 1979, p.102)

sequence of *Annie Hall* where an exasperated Woody Allen/Alvy Singer turns directly to the audience, summoning then Marshall McLuhan who, in a famous cameo, tells off the pedantic character who annoyed Alvy.

In fact therefore the engagement brings the text back near the situation of enunciation, which always presupposes an “I and you” and a “here and now”.

Vice versa, the strategies of disengagement, to allow the objectification of the reality that the subject of enunciation wants to communicate, reduce - in different ways according to the kind of text - the presence of this subject inside the utterance. The “separation” of the subject of the enunciation can be increased by further and progressive *internal disengagements* in the text, as in the case of the change, in a novel, from the account to the dialogue with inverted commas. Another example of internal disengagements is given by some TV programmes: the presenter in studio announces the link with the correspondent, who then introduces the report where someone is interviewed. These steps create a progressive focus on a reality which looks more and more “true” as - disengagement after disengagement - the clearly fictitious and television dimension of the presenter in studio gets further and further. We must also bear in mind the increase of the dramatization and aesthetical “enjoyment” as we go from the studio to the street. If we want, it is a similar procedure to the change in Google Maps from the traditional map to satellite view.

Paradoxically also the engagement produces a great effect of reality. For example, the strategy of engagement of the camera-look, if it tends to be forbidden in cinema, on the contrary it is largely used in television, mainly in news: journalists always look in the camera as if they talked *directly* to the audience, who is therefore emotionally involved. So what is the difference between the reality produced in the disengagement and the one produced in the engagement? In semiotics is at times proposed the difference between *reality* and *presence*, suggesting that the strategies of disengagement increase the effect of reality (documentary style) and the strategies of engagement increase the effect of presence (interview style), meaning the “closeness” of what is represented to the user and its degree of subjective truth. The oscillation between disengagements and engagements, a kind of “breathing” that permeates each utterance, allows a variable mixture of *reality* and *presence*, of *objective truth* and *subjective truth* inside the text, in a more or less unaware, more or less affected way.

ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT IN THE ANALYTICAL TEXT

Also in the “analytical text” continuous operations of disengagement and engagement happen: they are definitely more unaware than the ones we have, for example, in TV schedule, where they are the result of accurate (although invisible) tuning.

In order to make it easier, it is necessary to simplify the notion of analytical text, leaving aside, for example, that meaningful not verbal components come into it.

Once we have admitted this simplification, we can make another one, considering schematically two levels of text:

1. the patient's text;
2. the total text of the session on the whole, including the analyst's interventions.

1. *Disengagement and engagement in the patient's text*

In the patient's verbal text, that by definition represents the "raw material" of the analytical work, we shall meet continuous oscillations between disengagement and engagement, which will affect the quality of the analyst's listening very much.

Let's imagine a patient who says:

"Yesterday in the kitchen my sister was very angry and she said to me: «You must stop going and wasting your time and money on analysis!». Obviously that upset me and I remained upset for quite a long time. I think that the work we are doing is so important to me!"

This imaginary patient begins by making an "enunciative disengagement"; it puts in an "uttered enunciation", which remains implicit in the text: "(*I, here and now* I'm telling *you*, the analyst, that) yesterday in the kitchen..." The uttered (or reported) enunciation, in short, is that enunciation where subject, time and place of the utterance coincide – to be precise *they seem* to coincide - with subject, time and place of the enunciation; it is the case of accounts in first person or, for example in a novel, of dialogue-sequences.

The account carries on with a further disengagement, spatial and temporal, establishing a time ("yesterday" = "not now") and a space ("the kitchen" = "not here"), inside which the dialogue with the sister is set; time and space defined and different from the time and space of the "language act", that is the analyst's consulting room at the moment of the account. This way a feature of "objectivity" is given to what happened, an "objectivity" that we find complete in the so-called "utterative disengagement"⁷, that establishes the so-called "uttered utterance": in this case, beside the "not-now" and "not-here", we have also a "not-I". It is about every account not involving the protagonists of the enunciation directly: the "uttered utterance" is therefore peculiar to a wide range of accounts, from an "objective" speech, like a scientific paper, to the "once upon a time in a far land there was..." of fairy tales.

Going back to our example, to these first disengagements, a further internal disengagement follows, which starts a dialogue with inverted commas ("You must stop..."). In the end, a first engagement happens ("that upset me...") and a second engagement that brings everything back to the moment when the psychoanalytic dialogue happens ("I think - that is: *I, here and now* - that the work we are doing..."), ratifying "live" own "authentic" point of view.

As Greimas and Courtés point out about internal disengagements:

⁷ "Uttered (or reported) enunciation" and "uttered utterance" are the two fundamental discursive forms. Cf. Greimas, Courtés (1979, p.88)

“(...) each internal disengagement produces a *referentialization effect*: a second-degree discourse, installed inside the narrative, gives the impression that this narrative constitutes the “real situation” of the discourse: it referentializes this dialogue”.⁸

Where for “referentialization” we mean the whole of the procedures with which *the referential illusion* is made, that is the setting-up of the “effect of reality” (Roland Barthes⁹) in the utterance.

But not just the disengagements create the referential illusion. Also the play between disengagement and engagement takes part in the referentialization. As we said earlier when talking about TV programmes, the engagement following a disengagement definitely helps increase the effect of reality of the disengagement, by countering a personal comment with something that “really” happened. Equally and inversely, going back to our example, the “disengaged” scene of the dialogue in the kitchen, in contrast, by its “reality”, underlines genuinely lived and subjective character of what the patient “really” thinks.

As Maria Pia Pozzato summarizes:

“The engagement is therefore always secondary to a disengagement. These different systems of speech often find themselves boxed the ones into the others and they create effects of reality since each previous level is set-up as a referential level in comparison with the following one. (...) As Bertrand reminds us, in the realist novel the succession of the disengagements was tightly encoded just to create an illusion of truth: the descriptions came first, then the account, then the dialogue and each segment exploited the previous one as internal referent able to guarantee a referential illusion.”¹⁰

Going back to psychoanalysis, these operations can significantly affect the listening of the therapist, who can be “seduced” by the referentialization and, in practice, induced to consider the dialogue situation, which took shape with the disengagement, as a “real” situation. Equally, the analyst could be seduced by the following engagements, by which the patient, using the personal pronoun “I”, introduces her own *authentic* point of view and her own experiences in the account, in short she introduces her own “presence”, her own truth.

We should think instead that the objectivation allowed by the disengagement, objectivation that carries the scene from the analyst’s consulting room to the *on the road* of the kitchen, is the fundamental way the patient can use to give shape to one of her own personal experiences based on conflict, by throwing, for example, an end of one of her own conflicts *into the reality* and, in this way, dissociating herself from it. The reality at hand can be more or less remote, in the time and in the space, and in the *actors* who come into play and the account itself could therefore happen in a very different way, while remaining identical in its essence. For example: “I remember that last year, while I

⁸ Greimas, Courtés (1979, p.89)

⁹ Barthes (1989)

¹⁰ Pozzato (2011; p. 73)

was channel surfing, I found an American programme with subtitles, where a neurologist from New York was actually saying: «psychoanalysis is of no use at all». I was shocked! Obviously it is not what I think”.

The disengagement becomes then, in the case of polysemic texts as a poem, but also like a patient’s account, the enunciatory operation that establishes and communicates the “objective correlative” (according to the TS Eliot’s definition, the “objective correlative” requires that emotion in art be expressed through an objective equivalent: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the *particular* emotion.”¹¹).

The analyst who was seduced by the referentialization would be inevitably lead to focus on the *objective* rather than on the *correlative*, losing sight of the fact that the *actor*, for example “angry sister”, if we want in agreement with the psychoanalytical theory of the internal objects, can put on the scene a pocket of transference hostility of the patient involved.

What would happen at this point? The patient would get a result, but would miss another one. The result achieved would be given by being able to realize a *dramatization* of a given emotion, for example like rage, which is “disengaged” in an utterance. In the Bionian and post-Bionian slang, it means having directed a number of β elements towards the transformative chain that goes through the α elements up to the “putting in speech” and to the consequent narrative derivative. At this point a first important level of emotional decompression would take place.

The missed result - in case of naïve and literal listening to the patient’s account - would be given by the risk that the emotion put in words remains trapped in the narrative space opened by the disengagement, that the rage of our example remains trapped in the “sister” actor, without being recovered in the internal world and mentalized.

In a way, it is what happens with very ill patients, who try the analyst’s mental abilities severely. In this case we often have the impression of remaining caught in a narrative reality with no way out. It is the patients who always tell the same concrete stories, nowadays frequently “documented” with text messages read to the analyst (with and from the partner, wife, lover and so on), as if they were objective evidence of their suffered relationships about what the patient has to talk urgently. From the distinctive perspective we are explaining, we could say that in these circumstances the patients, and the analyst with them, suffer from a kind of *exile in the disengagement* or, to be more precise, exile in that narrative/mental *apparently objective* space established by the disengagement, with no chance to recover that Ariadne’s thread that would allow to get out of this cloistered universe and to expand other *possible worlds*¹², to use another picture that is so important in the modern semiotic reflection.

The living page

This is perhaps the most underlying meaning of a dream where Giovanni finds himself, with a life of very deep anguish, trapped inside a book, as if he tragically was a living

¹¹ Eliot (1919)

¹² Eco (1979)

page of it. After listening in the heat of the moment to the account of the dream, I imagined it was the representation of his feeling himself caught in my theories, in my effort to find a sense to his distressed and distressing experiences by inserting them inside my *encyclopaedic knowledge*, even though I had the vital aim to find the “you are here” on the map in order to be able to direct the analytical journey. Today I think that this way of reading was correct, but indeed it has to be completed by the representation of the dramatic exile in a narrative mono-world, when the development of other possible stories was not even conceivable at that moment.

To summarize, the disengagement represents the operation which allows the *speaker* to represent a part of him/herself, while at the same time dissociating him/herself from the utterance; in the utterance the speaker disappears *even when he/she keeps him/herself presence with the personal pronoun “I”*. As Greimas and Courtés observe:

“no “I” encountered in the discourse can be considered as subject of the enunciation strictly speaking, nor identified with that subject: in such a case there is only a semblance of enunciation, a case of uttered or reported enunciation”.¹³

Therefore, also the “I” which weaves the patient’s accounts is a kind of *avatar* of the profound subject that, by that account, tries to express something of itself: also in the most self-referential speech, in a concealed way the disengagement sets a not-I (actantial disengagement), a not-now (temporal disengagement) and a not-here (spatial disengagement), that not any engagement will be ever able to cancel completely because a full return to the enunciation is never possible.

A paradoxical (transitional?) space comes to life, where the subject *is and is not present* in what it is talking about, that is in its own utterances. Quoting again from Greimas and Courtés:

“The language act thus appears as a split which creates, on the one hand, the subject, the place, and the time of the enunciation and, on the other, the actantial, spatial, and temporal representation of the utterance”.¹⁴

Ugo Volli helps us to understand this complex paradoxality from a not psychoanalytic point of view:

“The speakers are never all and only inside their own words: part of them, in order to carry on in this spatial metaphor, mainly remains behind them. But the fact of being present at the speech just as an outwardness, an objectivation, a subject of the utterance, is a guarantee for every human being of their chance to transcend that position, in the end it is guarantee of their freedom. In short, the point is the play (Gadamer) that fits between the masque and the face, the fact

¹³ Greimas, Courtés (1979, p.88)

¹⁴ *ibid*

that everyone, in any position are situated or situate themselves, are not tight-fitting (beyond their awareness of this gap) (...). The speakers' irreducibility to their own words, the guarantee of their transcendence and therefore of their freedom, is the main advantage on the ethical level of the position recognizing the speaker's outwardness."¹⁵

2. *Disengagement and engagement in the overall text of the session*

Disengagement and engagement are concepts normally applied to the same utterance (short or long) and to the strategies that more or less secretly regulate, as if it were, the breathing from *one only subject of the enunciation*.

However if we consider the text of the session on its whole, *as a sole, complex utterance*, for the production of which analyst and patient constantly swap their roles of author and reader inside the same frame, the setting (proper *con-text*), up to constitute a complex four hands work, we could add that the patient's speech is mainly organized in operations of disengagement, while the analyst's one in operations of engagement.

The introduction to put this proposal forward is indeed that, in analysis, there is not a sole "subject of the enunciation". This becomes as much more true as more we get close to a theoretical conception of "analytical field" for which, in a way, the real *instance of the enunciation* lies in the unconscious dimension of couple and therefore the profound subject promoting the enunciation goes beyond the individual persons, the patient and the analyst. For this reason, we can try to apply the point of view of semiotics to the overall two-authors text of a session.

In what sense then will the disengagement be mainly carried on by the patient and the engagement by the analyst?

The patients go to the analyst to express themselves, but on average they do not want in a way to recognize the fatherhood of their own utterances. They want to keep a *safety distance* between themselves subjects of the enunciation and themselves subjects and objects of the utterances they utter. Going back to Volli's quotation, they want to keep "a safety distance between the mask and the face". However by acting like that they risk losing important aspects of themselves, that can get trapped - as it was said in Giovanni's extreme case - in the disengagement of their own accounts.

For his/her part, the analyst pursues the opposite, that is the patients' aware reacceptance of what they have disengaged (and what has been worked out and at least partially "digested" by the analyst), in the belief that the recovering of parts of themselves increases the psychological freedom and allows the reduction of the symptoms.

In a very schematic example, if the patient said "my boss drives me mad, yesterday nothing I was saying was right!", acting a disengagement that places in an "elsewhere" a transference experience relating in fact to the *hic et nunc* of the analytical relationship, an interpretation that sounded like "you are saying to me that you did not feel approved

¹⁵ Volli (2008, p.37)

by me at all” would be an engagement trying to return as close as possible to the profound emotional (transferral) source of the enunciatory act. Actually such an intervention would run the risk, if not well gauged, of representing a harsh and potentially persecutory engagement, like a sudden and unpredictable camera-look followed by a “yes, I’m talking right to you!” that interrupts the film illusion. An extreme, unintentional and very incandescent case of engagement was the famous and perhaps legendary vision of the film *The arrival of a train at La Ciotat* by Lumière Brothers, that in 1896 caused the spectators to flee from the cinema in terror, thinking that a real train was coming: it can be said that excessively direct interpretations run the risk of making the patient lose the transitional and in the end symbolic dimension of the analytical experience; *in these cases the patient may feel to be “knocked down” by the analyst, felt like a concrete person who is transforming the relationship in a “personal matter”*.

A light suddenly coming on

A little example of engagement that exceeds the limits of the patient’s tolerance is given by Paolo, an intelligent person, but using many defense mechanisms, who is slowly emerging from a deep anxiety that restricted his life potentialities for long time. Although being aware and satisfied of the changes he can see since he started his psychotherapy, as a precaution he remains in defence: the analytical dialogue ranges over the most varied topics (politics, society, family...) and just after wide spirals it periodically returns to face the most personal and psychological aspects of Paolo.

In an occasion, Paolo talks with me about his son for long time and about his difficulties to talk with him, a capable and intelligent boy who however always avoids talking about himself. I take advantage of this for thinking with Paolo (I was aware of talking about the character “son” as representative of one of Paolo’s psychological modalities) over the way the intellectual ability could defensively hide an underground emotional fragility and the profound need of an understanding closeness that however frightens at the same time. I can hardly finish my intervention and Paolo moves on his chair with a jerk crying out: “But someone turned the light on!” (it is nearly pointless to say that the session was taking place in day time and we were obviously on our own). Straight after this Paolo continues for few seconds to look around between anxiety and surprise, trying to understand who had come into the room and turned the light on.

It would be a *dream-like flash in waking life*¹⁶ (or *visual flash*) that “materializes” in the room the double experience of Paolo in reply to my words. On the one hand, my reasoning has “turned a light on” in Paolo: although the intervention had been minimal and under dosed, evidently it had touched Paolo helping him to arouse a new idea about himself all of a sudden. On the other hand, this emotional experience was at that moment clearly over dosed. Therefore the element “light that turns on” got emotionally

¹⁶ see Ferro (1999, p. 63): “Visual flash. As we know, these occur whenever an α -element - that is, a frame from the film of waking dream thought - escapes from the apparatus that was supposed to contain it and is projected and seen outside. They thus constitute a hot line to what is happening in the flasks of the mind’s laboratory.”

mixed up with the element “presence of a stranger in the room”: that is the “incandescence” of the engagement also materialized a sudden persecutory experience of threat and invasion “without face”.

So bearing in mind the need to gauge own intervention, it is however true that the analyst always aims at the engagement, to the best possible rapprochement to the deep sources of the patient’s accounts. The best possible rapprochement, because *a real return to the enunciation is not possible*: something of what has emotionally triggered the speech off is always lost. Translated in terms of the Bionian slang, the original α elements are incognizable. We can go close to them through the narrative derivatives, but the α elements are not directly cognizable, with the exception of the “dreamlike flashes in the waking life” that are a sudden projection of them in the conscious thinking in relation to a fracture of the mental *container*. Hybridizing the Bionian idiolect with the semiotic one, we could say that the α elements (with a mental apparatus intact enough) are constantly “disengaged” in the accounts, and at the same time lost forever, as just the *simulacrum* of them remains inside the utterance. Reformulated in these terms, it is understandable how the real return to the enunciation is impossible. Greimas and Courtés state:

“Total engagement cannot be conceived, since it would completely efface any trace of the discourse; it would be a return to the “ineffable”.¹⁷

We can interpret a poem effectively and profoundly, and grasp aspects of which the poet himself was not aware, but the original emotional alchemy is at least in part inexorably lost forever.

In the same way, in psychoanalysis, it will never be possible go back directly to the complex sequences of α elements disengaged in an account: the original emotional magma that is *behind* the genesis of an account therefore must be understood indirectly, keeping in mind the route and the mental operations that take from the emotion to the account of a story.

The quotations, when an English edition was not available, have been edited by the authors.

¹⁷ Greimas, Courtés (1979, p.100-101)

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