Future
A Time of History
Edited by Jorge Lozano (Universidad Complutense – Madrid) and Daniele Salerno (Universiteit Utrecht)

Founded in 1971 by Umberto Eco, who had been its editor-in-chief until his death in February 2016, Versus is one of the first international journals of Semiotics, Philosophy and Theory of Language. It is currently directed by Patrizia Violi (Università di Bologna. For further information see: http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/riv1_en.php).

For the issue number 131 (December 2020), edited by Jorge Lozano (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and Daniele Salerno (Universiteit Utrecht), Versus invites contributions on the semiotic and cultural construction of the future.

Although Structuralism mainly focused on the synchronic dimension of phenomena, temporality is for Semiotics and for the analysis of the historical discourse a fundamental theoretical and methodological aspect. Indeed, the major social and political changes we are experiencing nowadays ask for a reflection on how we imagine and construct possible futures. Jurij Lotman defines the future as the space of possible states. From this perspective, history and memory are to be framed within the fundamental orientation of culture toward future experience. Yet, the semiotic construction of the future is a topic so far almost unexplored. The issue 131 of Versus, whose publication is planned for December 2020, will address this gap by exploring the semiotics of future.

Every era and culture have their own specific modalities to imagine the future and shape the temporal axis with past and present. Future-oriented regimes of historicity between the 18th and the beginning of the 20th century were dominated by the idea of progress and liberation (not to be forgotten the messianic temporality of some religions); in the 21st century the orientation of cultures toward the future is dominated by the catastrophe – nowadays particularly linked to the climate change –, with a projection on a temporal scale which is not only human but even geological (see the debate on the Anthropocene and the so-called “deep time”).

The future can take the narrative configuration of the promise or of the threat; or it can be represented in a conditional form as series of bifurcations in the temporal projection (if A in the present, B in the future; but if C in the present then D in the future).

State of the art: making the future present

If Semiotics studies how systems of signs permit the presentification of absence, the theoretical reflection and the analytical work in the field have predominantly been focused on the study of how we make the (absent) past present. The linguistic study of the verbal tenses by Emile Benveniste, the semiotic analysis of emotions like nostalgia in Greimas, the analysis of some model texts like Sylvie. Souvenirs de Valois by Nerval or Recherche by Proust and the debate over the semiotic status of the trace epitomize how the construction of the past has been the main object of semiotic analysis. Indeed, the very ways we explain and conceptualize how signs link something present (the signifier) to something absent (the signified) often – or almost exclusively – focus on how something present is linked to something absent because belonging to the past. However, also the future is absent and need a semiotic work in order to be made present, thinkable and actionable through signs. If the presentification of the past has been a central topic in Semiotics, the presentification of the (still absent) future has been a topic so far neglected in the field.
Yet, the very semiotic canon can help us in developing a reflection on the future and on the semiotic modalities of its construction.

On one hand, Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory envisions meaning and habit not simply as the result of what has been, but also as the ensemble of the effects that could, in the future, be produced by a sign. Generally, semiosis is the progressive and temporary synthesis between a pertinentization of what has been (said or done) and the production of a bundle of possibilities regarding what will (probably) be.

On the other hand, the concept of explosion in Lotman locates the future within the perspective of the semiotics of culture: how does a culture construct and project its own possible futures in particular after an “explosive” unexpected change (e.g. a scientific discovery, a political change, a surprising event)?

The relationalist approach is a fundamental aspect for the analysis of future in a semiotic perspective. This means that the future cannot be investigated by itself but always within the system of temporality. Hence, we need to question the future and the semiotic forms it takes always within the relationships that it establishes with present and past.

On one hand, regarding the historical discourse and the construction of memory, the past is not only shaped according to the political and social needs of the present but also according to the image – which can be explicit or implicit in texts – of a future reader or audience that a text addresses. On the other hand, imagined futures hold a performative force in the present, namely they produce effects. In daily life, in media, political discourse and in the strategic thinking we use the concepts of anticipation, deterrence, prevention (or pre-emption) and risk, which all imply the production of possible futures. Processes of anticipation, prevention or protection from future possible risks and catastrophes impact on the present, producing real effects. This is particularly true in the case of forecasts and self-fulfilling prophecies (particularly important in the economic discourse), in which a state of things is realized simply by envisioning a scenario.

The performativity of imagined futures is particularly relevant when the enunciators are subjects holding power (political or economic institutions) or knowledge (scientists), but also when collective subjects like demonstrators and political activists are involved.

As cultural fact, the future exists according to different modalities and its efficacy is not simply limited to the realization of a new state of things. The imagined futures that never could have been realized have indeed a semiotic existence: those futures that we would have liked to realize or could have realized are remembered and “stored” as failed actions (or failed narrative programs, in Greimas’s terms). Failed futures produce effects and in particular emotional effects like disappointment, regret and remorse. Worry and fear for what will happen, resignation when we face the impossibility to change the future of events, but also anger, aspiration and hope that mark the political practices of protest and activism are some of the many emotional configurations that emerge in the friction and tension between past, present and future in their different modalities of semiotic existence.

**Topics**

Proposals can develop a theoretical reflection and/or case analysis. This is a non-exhaustive list of topics:

1) **Theoretical aspects.** The representation of the past can imply a judgment of truth or authenticity regarding the correspondence between the representation itself and the “real” past object or event. Yet, the representation of the future asks for different modalities and
categories. In the construction of a plan of reference, the imagined future cannot be “true”, “false” or “authentic”; rather it can be “plausible”, “probable”, “credible” or “convincing”: how is the future constructed and imagined? How does it semiotically “exist”? What are the signs of the future in the present?

2) **Genres and discursive practices.** Forecasts in science, prophecies in religions, predictions in divination, science fiction and dystopias in literature, the counterfactual narration and history are only some discursive genres that imagine possible and failed futures. How do these genres and texts work? How can we describe the performative power of futures?

3) **Future of the past: historical discourse, conservation, heritage, invention of tradition.** The future is included in the past in different ways. Some texts are designed and stored to be transmitted to future generations: looking at itself from the perspective of a future reader, the present imagines and transforms itself into the past. The historical discourse reads the traces of the past imagined futures. Politics of heritage and its conservation, as well as the invention of traditions, envision the future and in particular imagine how people will read texts, will use and look at monuments and museums and will (re-)perform rituals. The past transmits also imagined and never realized futures that survive, persist and produce effects in the present. How do the past imagined futures survive and persist in the present?

4) **Politics of future: uses, abuses and conflicts.** The future and the ways we imagine it are fundamental tools for governing the present. For example, in the last 20 years we used the concept of prevention, anticipation, pre-emption, risk and precaution in different contexts, with positive or even dramatic effects (e.g. the idea of “preventive war” in the so-called “war on terror”). What are the uses and abuses of the future? How do institutions and activists use and mobilize different visions of the future in the political life of our societies? How can we conceptualize the conflicts of/over the future (just like the “conflicts of/over memory”)?

5) **Emotions of the future.** Regret, aspiration, hope: these are just some – collective and individual – emotions that narratively work by imagining possible futures (to be realized or whose realization failed). What are the passions of the future? How can the passion of the future be described? Which roles do the passions of the future have in triggering individual and collective actions?

**Evaluation process**
Proposals will be evaluated by the two editors of the volume, the editor- and vice editors-in-chief. Papers will be submitted to a double-blind peer-review process.

**Deadlines**
November 30, 2019: abstract between 600 and 700 words, plus a short bibliography and a bio;
December 20, 2019: notification of result;
April 15, 2020: paper not exceeding 40,000 characters (footnotes and bibliography count toward the word limit);
December 2020: publication of the issue 131.
The proposals are to be sent to the journal redazione.vs@gmail.com and to the editors of the special issue Jorge Lozano (jorgelozano@ccinf.ucm.es) and Daniele Salerno (daniele.salerno@gmail.com).

**Languages**
English, French, Italian

**Style sheets**
English: http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS_guidelines_ENG.pdf
Italian: http://versus.dfc.unibo.it/VS_criteriredazionali.pdf