

OBSERVABLES AND ETHNOSEMIOTICS THE ORTHODOX LITURGY OF VESPERS

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ABSTRACT: The description of an Orthodox ceremony through the method of the participating observation is problematic, since the observation and the writing process are linear, while the structure of the ritual is nonlinear. In these cases, there is an unavoidable uncertainty in the description of meaning, forcing the writer to postulate structural stability to reconstruct the meaning by catalysis. From the uncertainty principle follows the notion of observable, mediating between the observed world and the point of view adopted by the observer.

La descrizione di una cerimonia ortodossa attraverso l'osservazione partecipata è problematica; l'osservazione e la scrittura sono due processi lineari, mentre la struttura del rituale non lo è. In questi casi sussiste un'incertezza inevitabile nella descrizione del significato, costringendo chi scrive a postulare una stabilità strutturale per ricostruire il significato tramite catalisi. Dal principio di incertezza deriva la nozione di osservabile, che media tra il mondo osservato e il punto di vista adottato da chi osserva.

KEYWORDS: Experience, Catastrophe, Uncertainty, Structural stability, World

PAROLE CHIAVE: Esperienza, Catastrofe, Incertezza, Stabilità strutturale, Mondo

I. Objectives

Ethnosemiotics can be defined as an inquiry on the condition of possibility of ethnographic writing. As Francesco Marsciani (2020, my translation) writes, “these are nothing less than the significant conditions of life in common, conditions that are significant to the extent

that they articulate and categorize the intersubjective experience of the lived world.” To this purpose, the present paper⁽¹⁾ explores the limits of observing participation in the case history of the rituals of the Polish orthodox church. During the Ukrainian war, many Ukrainian refugees went to Poland, where they were helped by the Polish orthodox minority. These methodological notes have been inspired by the problem of analysing the relation between Ukrainians refugees and Polish society.

2. Problems

In general, the kernel notion of semiotics is meaning. However, since meaning is not observable, its description implies the observation of a *manifesting* plane.

The observation of the manifesting plane is not a straightforward operation: every observed practice can foresee simultaneous events: consequently, it is not always possible to observe everything at the same time.

For this reason, the relation between the observed events and the point of view of the researcher gives birth to *observables*. In what follows, a more precise conceptualization of this notion will be proposed.

The relation between the observed world, the observable, and the observer calls into question the ethnographer. According to Geertz, there is a hiatus between the ethnographic writer and experience:

The “I’s” these writers then invent — “invent”, of course, in the sense of construction, not imposture — to serve as the organizing consciousness of these works, Barthes’s ham actors and seducing selves, correspond in turn to the text–form employed. Indeed, they define it (Geertz 1988, p. 93).

In what follows, the selection of the observables and their assemblage will determine the distance between the ethnographer and the observed object as well as the experience and the subjectivity of the latter.

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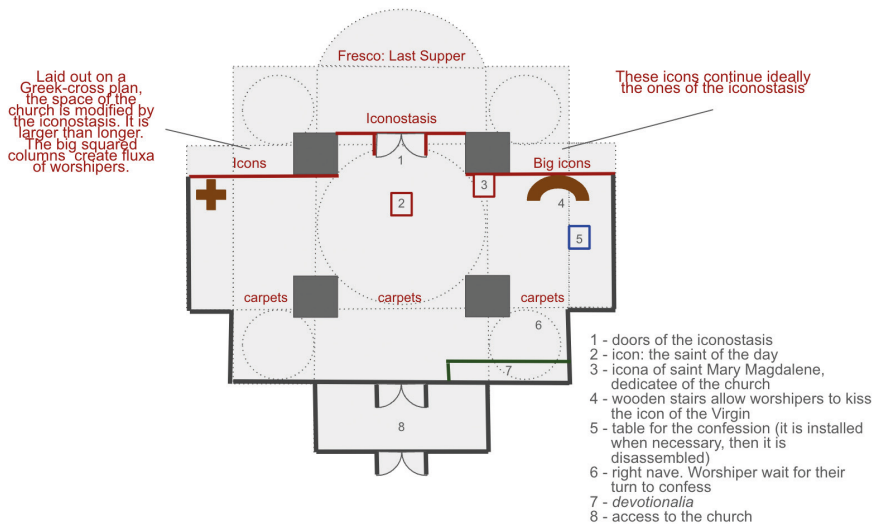


Figure 1. The Orthodox cathedral of St. Mary Magdalene in Warsaw (plan with field notes).

3. The Orthodox cathedral of St. Mary Magdalene in Warsaw

The map of the Orthodox cathedral exemplifies the practical impossibility to observe every point of the space (fig. 1). The Iconostasis and the large columns transform the plan of the building, a classic Greek cross layout, so that the internal space appears to the viewer to be larger than longer. When the observer's point of view is placed in the side aisles, it is not possible to perceive whether the doors of the Iconostasis are open or not.

4. *Ektenia* and confession

The following field notes were taken shortly after the observation on July 21st 2023.

When I arrived, after 5:30 p.m., a different rite was taking place than my last visit. The doors of the iconostasis were open. In line, worshippers kissed the icon placed in the center of the church by kneeling, then turned to the celebrant, placed on the left, who sprinkled them with a brush dipped in a small silver container held by his helper. Some

kissed the brush or the priest's hand — it wasn't very clear from my position. At the end, the priest crossed himself with the remaining water and kissed the icon in turn. As always, while this was happening, the elder chanted and the cantor responded. Finally, the celebrant closed the doors of the iconostasis.

At that moment, a younger priest crossed the church with a book in his hand and placed himself in the right arm. He placed the book on the lectern. In turn, the faithful (mostly elderly women; some young people) approached, kneeling in front of the volume. The priest placed a stole on their heads, touched them four times with his index finger, and listened to them — it seemed to be confession. Then he placed the stole on their heads again, touched them four times, and let them go. One woman walked away in tears.

Of course, while I was interested in this, I completely missed what was happening in the center of the church. When I returned, the doors of the iconostasis were open again and inside the *sanctum sanctorum* the priest was reciting an *ektenia* (it always ended with a word similar to Polish *prosimy*, meaning “let us pray,” and sometimes it was understood that the prayer was addressed to God or Christ). So, I finally understood something quite important: the priest recites the intentions of the vows and it is the cantor who responds on behalf of the faithful people — called *laòs* in the Greek text of the liturgy. In reality, however, since they do not understand the sacred language, the actual faithful do not necessarily know what they are praying for and simply bow and cross themselves.

5. Unobservables

My orthodox informer helps me to annotate some elements not directly observable:

- material: the substance in which the celebrant dips the brush is oil, and not water.
- variants: some worshipers kissed the celebrant's sleeve. It is a Ukraine custom. Thus, it is possible to estimate the number of Ukraine worshipers.

- content plane: the rite spiritually reinforces the worshiper in view of a solemn feast. The Orthodox church of the Praga district in Warsaw adopt the Gregorian calendar: the feast is the Assumption of the Virgin.

The informer also confirms two hypotheses:

- I probably observed an Akathist hymn in honor of the local saint;
- in the Orthodox tradition, confession does not foresee penance. After the confession, women returned to the principal rite.

The role of the informer is fundamental, since the observer does not share the codes of the ceremony and has to control the presuppositional efforts and the risks of aberrant presuppositions (Eco 1976, p. 142). To clarify the complex relation between observation and ethnographic writing, one should note that both the roles of informer and observer can be considered as delegates of the enunciator of ethnographic writings (Greimas and Courtés 1982, p. 168).

6. The nonlinear syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service

The syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service can be represented as a Thom graph (fig. 2).

Since time is reversible, the five syntagms of the graph are an assemblage of only three different *sections* of catastrophes (cf. Thom 1975, pp. 297–330 and 1983, pp. 163–191):

- *the border*: an *actant*⁽²⁾, a *subject*, begins or comes to an end. In the present case, it represents the start and the end of the ceremony, performed by the celebrants of the Akathist, considered as the subject of the action.
- *the rift*: emission or absorption of an actant: in the present case, the graph represents a second celebrant who leaves the first to perform the confession.

(2) René Thom borrowed the term *actant* from the structural syntax (Tessnière 1959). According to this view, any action implies up to three actants. In language, traditional syntax identifies them with subject, direct and indirect object. Here I prefer to identify them with sender, object and receiver, in line with narrative semiotics (Greimas 1987).

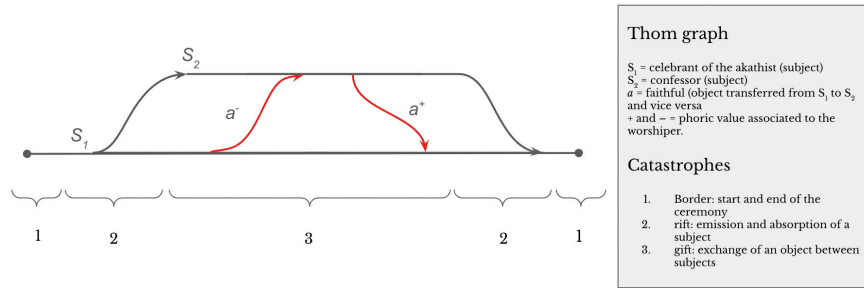


Figure 2. The nonlinear syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service, represented as a Thom graph.

- *the gift*: exchange of an *object of value* between the two subjects (a sender and a receiver). In the present case, it represents worshipers leaving the *ektenia* to confess and re-joining it shortly after.

The characters $+$ and $-$ represent a change in the value associated to the exchanged object: in the confession, this *phoric* value turns from dyphoric to euphoric.

It is important to underline how the syntagmatic structure is nonlinear: some events happen simultaneously. This creates a friction between ethnographic observation and narration, since linguistic writings are forcedly linear. It follows from the structure that the participant observer cannot perceive everything at the same time: consciously or not, the observer selects what to observe between different possible *observables*.

7. The noncommutative syntagmatic structure of the observation

The order of the observations is relevant. If the observer changes them, the result will influence the description of meaning. To demonstrate this, two *observables* will be defined:

- *L*: the doors of the Iconostasis. Possible values: 1 (open); 0 (closed).
- *G*: presence of faithful to the confession. Possible values: 1 (present); 0 (absent).

If one observes the confession first, and then the iconostasis, one can see the line of worshipers ($G = 1$), then the open doors ($L = 1$) as a function of time. To demonstrate noncommutativity, let us multiply the two observers:

$$GL = 1$$

If one observes the iconostasis first, and then the worshipers, one can see the doors closed ($L = 0$), then no worshipers, since the confession ended ($G = 0$). Let us multiply the two observes again:

$$LG = 0$$

The observation is noncommutative. In fact:

$$GL - LG = 1$$

or, according to a simpler formalism, $[G, L] = 1$. Of course, in case of commutativity, one would expect:

$$[G, L] = 0$$

8. The uncertainty principle

There is a general uncertainty principle regarding participant observation. In the case study, if one observes G in state 1 (there are believers in the confessional), there is uncertainty (i.e., standard deviation) about state L (I do not know whether the doors of the iconostasis are open). In this sense, observables are paradigmatically opposing each other: in each place of the syntagmatic succession of the observable, the observer can select either G or L .

As an operator, the notion of observable is defined in opposition to the unobservable that semiotic theory has placed at the heart of its theory: the plane of the content, manifested and requiring a plane of manifestation: for example, the memory is manifested by the monument.

A good question concerns the semiotic existence of the structure represented by Thom's graph (fig. 2). In fact, while each part can be analyzed by the observer, the whole structure cannot be observed in its entirety, due to the uncertainty principle. The structural stability of the actants while unobserved can only be presupposed: for example, the observer presupposes that the ceremony performed by S1 continues as the observer attends to the confession performed by S2. This presupposition may seem a metaphysical claim about structures. However, it is a consequence of the requirement of an exhaustive description. According to Hjelmslev (1969, p. 94), some results "cannot be reached by a mere mechanical observation of the entities that enter into the actual texts". For example, in the case of the aposiopesis, "the analysis must likewise register the outward relations which the actually observed entities have, the cohesions that point beyond the given entity and to something outside it". Hjelmslev calls such presuppositions *catalysis*. This operation is the condition of possibility of the description of the content plane, since it is unobservable.

The uncertainty principle leads to further research questions on the criteria to distinguish necessary and unnecessary presuppositions, as well as correct and wrong hypotheses about unobservables, in compliance with Hjelmslev's empirical principle.

9. Relevance to ethnography

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 171), semiotic theory is subdivided into four different levels:

- the level of the object language upon which the analytic procedures will be applied.
- the descriptive level, where the object language is paraphrased in the form of a semantic representation.
- the methodological level, where the concepts and procedures that make possible the construction of the level of representation are elaborated.

- the epistemological level, where the coherence of the body of concepts is tested and the description and discovery procedures are evaluated.

The present paper started from a problem in the observation of the Orthodox liturgy (object language) resulting in a friction between a nonlinear object and its linear description (descriptive level). This leads to rediscuss the limits of observing participation (methodological level) since there is a limit to what it is possible to know by direct observation (epistemological level).

Is the epistemological notion of observable relevant to our starting point, i.e., the interpretation of Orthodox liturgy? The answer is positive. The Orthodox cathedral is similar to a public square, where different social activities take place at the same time. Some worshippers participate in the litany, others go to confession, others meet their saints represented by icons. The rite is not as programmed as in Catholic mass. For example, faithful do not understand the *sacred language*, and perform a *proskynesis* when they are so inclined.

The description of such a multidimensional object requires a “cubist representation”, renouncing to naturalism to analyze and reassemble the world it in an abstract form, capable of depicting the object from multiple perspectives.

10. The world as unobservable

As a consequence of the uncertainty principle and of the paradigmatic opposition of the observables, during any observation there are observables and unobservables. Some observables cannot be known simultaneously: the observer cannot know everything about a particular system: the observer must choose what to observe and what to observe not.

It follows that the choice of the observable also determines the knowledge of the observer and the ability to describe the world.

It is not sufficient to speak of a “constitution” or a “construction” of the object of study by the ethnographer: observables resist us.

At the same time, observables are not relevant to ontology, but to phenomenology: they depend on the relation between the world and the position of the observer.

Considered as a totality, the world in itself is not observable.

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