

L'ULTIMA A MORIRE: SEMIOTICHE DELLA SPERANZA FRA RELIGIONE ED ETICA

THE LAST TO DIE: SEMIOTICS OF HOPE BETWEEN RELIGION AND ETHICS

PROGRAMMA / PROGRAM

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Fondazione Bruno Kessler
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COORDINAMENTO SCIENTIFICO / SCIENTIFIC COORDINATION

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Ciclo di seminari: “Solitudine e comunione nella religione e nell’etica”
Cycle of Seminars: “Solitude and Communion in Religion and Ethics”

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ABSTRACT

La giornata internazionale prende avvio da una constatazione condivisa: la percezione diffusa di un tempo attraversato da atmosfere cupe, segnato da una progressiva diminuzione della luminosità simbolica del mondo e da una crescente sensazione di fragilità delle condizioni di vita individuali e collettive. Guerre che riemergono nello spazio dell'esperienza europea, crisi ambientali che testimoniano un pianeta esausto, e un generale slittamento dalla forza del linguaggio alla logica della forza contribuiscono a generare un sentimento di angoscia anticipatoria, orientato verso minacce ancora lontane ma percepite come in avvicinamento. In questo contesto, la domanda non riguarda soltanto che cosa si possa sperare, ma soprattutto che cosa significhi sperare: quale funzione semiotica, etica e religiosa possa assumere la speranza quando il futuro appare opaco e incerto.

L'incontro propone una riflessione interdisciplinare che intreccia semiotica, filosofia, teologia e studi culturali per interrogare la speranza come pratica interpretativa e come forma simbolica. La letteratura moderna e contemporanea offre figure paradigmatiche di questa tensione: dalle trasformazioni interiori e sociali narrate in *Great Expectations* di Charles Dickens, dove la speranza si confronta con disillusione e maturazione, all'orizzonte politico e collettivo evocato da André Malraux in *L'Espoir*, in cui la speranza emerge come costruzione condivisa di senso in condizioni storiche estreme. Parallelamente, la tradizione filosofica e religiosa mostra la complessità di tale concetto: Seneca, nelle *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, invita a riconoscere l'intreccio fra paura e speranza come dialettica fondamentale dell'animo umano; Sant'Agostino concepisce la *spes* come tensione dinamica che orienta la comunità verso il compimento escatologico; Leopardi, nello *Zibaldone*, individua nella speranza una forza inerente e inseparabile dalla vita stessa, capace di persistere anche all'interno di un orizzonte radicalmente disincantato.

Accanto a queste genealogie classiche, la giornata si aprirà a riflessioni contemporanee che ridefiniscono il ruolo della speranza in contesti di crisi globale. Ernst Bloch, con *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, interpreta la speranza come anticipazione utopica inscritta nelle pratiche culturali e nei desideri collettivi; Charles Péguy, nella figura della *petite fille espérance*, ne sottolinea la fragilità apparente e al contempo la forza generativa; Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, propone una concezione della speranza non come previsione ottimistica ma come apertura radicale all'imprevedibile. In dialogo con tali prospettive, la testimonianza di Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo* ricorda come la speranza possa sopravvivere anche nelle condizioni più estreme, non come consolazione astratta ma quale pratica minima di dignità e di resistenza.

Volutamente internazionale e interdisciplinare, l'incontro si svolge a Trento come spazio simbolico di dialogo tra tradizioni religiose ed etiche diverse, rifiutando una prospettiva esclusivamente europea per aprirsi all'ascolto di voci provenienti da altri continenti. Se "l'ultima a morire è la speranza", allora la questione centrale diventa comprendere in che modo essa possa guidare l'interpretazione del presente senza ridursi a retorica o illusione. La giornata intende dunque esplorare la speranza come dispositivo semiotico capace di articolare nuovi linguaggi per il futuro, trasformando l'angoscia contemporanea in un campo di elaborazione critica e di responsabilità condivisa.

This international workshop begins from a shared diagnosis: the widespread perception of living in a time permeated by somber atmospheres, marked by a progressive dimming of the world's symbolic luminosity and by an increasing sense of fragility in individual and collective conditions of life. Wars re-emerging within the horizon of European experience, environmental crises that testify to an exhausted planet, and a general shift from the force of language to the logic of force all contribute to generating a form of anticipatory anguish, oriented toward threats still distant yet perceived as drawing nearer in time and space. In such a context, the question is not only what may still be hoped for, but above all what it means to hope: what semiotic, ethical, and religious function hope can assume when the future appears opaque and uncertain.

The symposium proposes an interdisciplinary reflection weaving together semiotics, philosophy, theology, and cultural studies in order to interrogate hope as both an interpretative practice and a symbolic form. Modern and contemporary literature offers paradigmatic figures of this tension: from the inner and social transformations narrated in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, where hope confronts disillusionment and maturation, to the political and collective horizon evoked by André Malraux in *L'Espoir*, in which hope emerges as a shared construction of meaning under extreme historical conditions. In parallel, philosophical and religious traditions reveal the conceptual complexity of hope: Seneca, in the *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, invites us to recognize the entanglement of fear and hope as a fundamental dialectics of the human soul; Augustine conceives *spes* as a dynamic tension orienting the community toward eschatological fulfilment; Leopardi, in the *Zibaldone*, identifies hope as a force inherent and inseparable from life itself, capable of persisting even within a radically disenchanted horizon.

Alongside these classical genealogies, the workshop will engage contemporary reflections that redefine the role of hope in contexts of global crisis. Ernst Bloch, in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, interprets hope as a utopian anticipation inscribed in cultural practices and collective desires; Charles Péguy, through the figure of the *petite fille espérance*, underscores its apparent fragility and, at the same time, its generative strength; Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, conceives hope not as optimistic prediction but as a radical openness to the unforeseeable. In dialogue with these perspectives, Primo Levi's testimony in *Se questo è un uomo* reminds us that hope may survive even under the most extreme conditions, not as abstract consolation but as a minimal practice of dignity and resistance.

Deliberately international and interdisciplinary, the workshop takes place in Trento as a symbolic space of dialogue among diverse religious and ethical traditions, refusing an exclusively European perspective and opening itself to voices from other continents. If "hope is the last to die," the central question becomes how it might guide the interpretation of the present without collapsing into rhetoric or illusion. The day thus seeks to explore hope as a semiotic device capable of articulating new languages for the future, transforming contemporary anguish into a field of critical elaboration and shared responsibility.

PROGRAMMA / PROGRAM

- 8:30** ***The Semiotics of Somber Atmospheres***
Massimo LEONE, ISR-FBK, Italy
Juan ALONSO ALDAMA, University of Paris Cité-PHILÉPOL, France
Federico MONTANARI, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy
- 9:00** ***Gramsci Fractured: A Metatheory of Hope***
Frédéric VANDENBERGHE, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 9:30** ***The Last to Die: The Narrative Complexity of Hope in India's Epic text Mahābhārata***
Seema KHANWALKAR, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, India
- 10:00** ***Semiosis of Hope: Towards a Passion for the Possible***
Yunhee LEE, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Republic of Korea
- 10:30** Discussion
- 11:00** Break
- 11:30** ***Esperança (to Hope): The Semiotics of a Possible Future in Brazil and Latin America: Freedom, Imagination and Cognitive Justice***
Clotilde PEREZ, University of São Paulo, Brazil
- 12:00** ***The Subject of Hope: European and Extra-European Orientations***
Michael FACIUS, The University of Tokyo, Japan
- 12:30** ***Stuck in Dysphoria. "War Atmospheres": From Art Activism to the Possibility of Building Hope***
Cristina DEMARIA, University of Bologna, Italy
Federico MONTANARI, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy
- 13:00** Discussion
- 13:30** Break

15:00

Poster session

Antonino DI COSMO, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy

Silvia GIUBILATO, University of Padua, Italy

Manuela MORETTI, University of Trento, Italy - University of Svizzera Italiana, Switzerland

Francesca PADOVANO, University of Palermo, Italy - University of Paris Cité, France

15:30

Roundtable with the Center for Religious Studies, FBK

Daria ARKHIPOVA, Luca BRUNET, Valeria FABRETTI, Lucia GALVAGNI, Accursio GRAFFEO, Alessandro LONGO, Desy MACIS, Boris RÄHME, Tommaso ROPELATO, Rebecca SABATINI, Debora TONELLI, Stefania YAPO

17:30

Hopeful Final Remarks

Paolo COSTA, ISR-FBK, Italy

ABSTRACT

Juan ALONSO ALDAMA

University of Paris Cité-PHILÉPOL, France



Hoping in Fear: Passional Complexity and Semiotic Tension

This paper seeks to explore hope as a complex passional configuration, grounded in a central semiotic hypothesis according to which no passion is pure. Far from presenting itself as a homogeneous state, hope is constituted within a tensive dynamic in which it necessarily coexists with its opposite pole, fear. To hope does not mean to abolish fear, but to inhabit a tension in which positive anticipation remains inseparable from the possibility of the worst.

Conversely, every form of fear entails a minimal dimension of expectation corresponding to the hope that misfortune may not occur. This presentation considers these passions as modal organizations structured by the regimes of willing, duty, power, and knowledge, and traversed by variations in intensity, modulations, and thresholds of transformation. Fear and hope appear as two complementary prospective passions: the former corresponds to the negative anticipation of a possible evil, the latter to the positive anticipation of an uncertain good.

Their relationship is conceptualized through a dynamic semiotic category that articulates hope and fear within the regime of the uncertain, and trust and despair within the regime of the certain. The central question concerns the transformation of these regimes: at what point does uncertainty stabilize into positive or negative certainty? From a semiotic perspective, trust is understood as the positive stabilization of hope; it corresponds to a reduction of doubt and a relative relaxation of tension. However, such stabilization may entail a risk if it leads to illusion or complacency. Conversely, fear may turn into despair when the threat is regarded as certain.

The analysis thus aims to describe the conditions of an unstable equilibrium between tension and stabilization.

This hypothesis will be examined through two contrasting literary and historical configurations. In *Man's Hope* by André Malraux, the Spanish Civil War is approached as a narrative laboratory of passional tension in which collective hope does not eliminate the threat but intensifies through its confrontation with it, gradually transforming into organized trust.

By contrast, *The World of Yesterday* by Stefan Zweig enables us to observe the transition from a regime of uncertainty to a form of negative certainty, while still preserving a deferred trust in the future survival of humanistic values. The comparative analysis demonstrates that hope cannot be understood as mere positivity. Rather, it functions as a semiotic dispositif for articulating uncertainty: at times mobilizing tension, at times confident stabilization, at times fragile resistance in the face of despair. In contexts marked by war and collective fragility, hope appears not as optimistic projection but as a dynamic regime of unstable equilibrium between elevation and threat—that is, as the maintenance of a possibility of meaning in the face of the opacity of the present.

Cristina DEMARIA

University of Bologna, Italy

Federico MONTANARI

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy



Stuck in Dysphoria. “War Atmospheres”: From Art Activism to the Possibility of Building Hope

The idea—famously articulated by the influential sociologist Niklas Luhmann—that “the future cannot begin,” together with the punk slogan “No future,” appears today to be dramatically confirmed. Drawing on recent debates surrounding the concept of atmosphere, this paper offers a socio-semiotic and cultural analysis of the contemporary condition of war, frequently described as a “fragmented Third World War” (Pope Francis) or as a state of permanent global warfare increasingly characterized by hybrid and radical forms of conflict. Within this framework, the paper also explores potential prospects for hope and peace.

The notion of atmosphere enables us to move beyond an understanding of war as a discrete event or merely as a contextual background, allowing it instead to be conceptualized as a situated, affective, and media-mediated condition. From this perspective, the concept of atmosphere allows us to rethink the contemporary “predicament” of war and its representation by integrating spatial, temporal, sensory, and discursive dimensions. Far from being an impressionistic or vague category, atmosphere has re-emerged as a key analytical concept across several fields, including visual studies, aesthetic and phenomenological theory, media studies, sociology, and international relations. In this paper, atmosphere is understood as a shared configuration of affects, images, discourses, and practices, spatially and temporally situated and operating within the relational space between subjects, media environments, and broader social contexts. The paper investigates whether—and how—it is possible to reconstruct a historically situated shared sensibility surrounding contemporary forms of warfare through the analysis of media representations, public discourse, and visual production. In particular, it aims to identify recurring affective tones, regimes of visibility and invisibility, and temporal structures—such as urgency, suspension, and permanence—that contribute to the normalization of war as an ongoing condition.

Finally, the paper discusses selected case studies, including media representations of contemporary conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. Particular attention is devoted not only to recent forms of media reporting but also to practices of art activism capable of producing counter-narratives and forms of resistance. These practices attempt to “begin” anew by projecting possible futures and by articulating shared meanings for alternative forms of community.

Michael FACIUS

The University of Tokyo, Japan



The Subject of Hope: European and Extra-European Orientations

Reading the conference exposé and its reference to fragility, war and environmental crisis as a recent phenomenon, I began to wonder: who is the subject of this hope and its perceived diminishment? The exposé situates the theme squarely inside the “horizon of European experience” and its intellectual tradition from Seneca to Charles Dickens, which, of course, makes sense given the venue of the conference.

As a German living in Japan and working at the intersection of global history and East Asian studies, the “Europeanness” of the theme is striking not just because of the references to Augustine or Levi. In a global historical perspective, endless war and violence, crumbling social and political institutions, and environmental decay – and the sense of fading hope that European middle classes are experiencing now – has been an ongoing reality for the global majority for centuries.

There is of course a direct connection here, as European hope, clad in the ideology of scientific and technological progress and since World War 2, developmentalism and economic growth, was built on the exploitation and subjugation of other parts of the world since the beginning of European colonialism – one that now returns to the countries of the global North in a regrettable but expectable manner.

There is also the deeper issue to consider whether hope, and what type of hope, is actually a good thing. Again, while hope as an emotional constellation is rooted in human biology, there seems to be a quite specifically European component to the history of this emotion, as the orientation towards the future it entails is rooted in the Enlightenment idea of progress, which in itself is a secularized version of Christian eschatology as exemplified in St. Paul’s triad of faith, hope, and love.

To East Asian philosophical and spiritual traditions, in contrast, hope is not of great concern. Confucianism puts a much bigger focus on the cultivation of the heart, and the Buddhist tradition is outright critical of hope as a form of attachment to outcomes.

In this presentation, I would like to juxtapose these European and Extra-European orientations towards the future and their history and reflect on the question if, apart from the Chakrabarty-esque move of “provincializing” European hope, there is something in this juxtaposition that can be generative for the present moment.

Seema KHANWALKAR

Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, India



The Last to Die: The Narrative Complexity of Hope in India's Epic Text Mahābhārata

In what could be called a tryst with destiny, this paper is being presented at exactly the same mythical time period of the ancient Indian mythical epic, the Mahabharata. According to Indian Astrology, we in the modern world have reached the age when there is a collapse of every kind of moral order, relentless violence, age of greed, conflict and those who fought the war discover that victory is hollow and is without a future. The Mahabharata, composed in 300 BCE-300 CE, is an ancient Indian Hindu polychromatic epic, that is dystopic in its representation of the moral decay in the 'Kali Yuga'. Yudhishtira is one of the central characters of the epic, whose life trajectories and end of life journey is fascinatingly interwoven with women (first his mother, Kunti then his wife Draupadi, also known as Panchali, (the one with five husbands) in his life and in the final stages when he is the last to leave the earth along with his faithful dog who follows him up to the gates of heaven. The Epic has its beginnings in Adi Parva, the first of the eighteen books of the Mahabharata, where Kunti Yudhishtira's mother and the decisions she takes, leave little or no scope for either hope or despair. In an unending cycle of stories within stories, Yudhishtira is challenged by the god of death, Yama to answer a hundred questions, and it is through the dialogue and the linguistic references in Sanskrit that the fate of Yudhishtira and his brothers is determined. The entire text is coded with linguistic richness.

Yunhee LEE

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Republic of Korea



Semiosis of Hope: Towards a Passion for the Possible

An inquiry into hope is initiated by using different frameworks and adopting various viewpoints from theology, metaphysics, philosophy, psychology, and so on. Each approach has its merits and virtues in providing a way to understand hope from different perspectives through narrative discourse, allowing us to envision hope in conduct of life in the Anthropocene era, but with a high degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty is innate in life; however, that does not mean that it directly leads us into a feeling of fear. The immediate feeling of fear from the external world is mediated by “scientific” intelligence being capable of learning by experience in Charles S. Peirce. With a personal agent through a sense of learning, uncertainty serves to initiate a way of inquiry for fixation of belief in action. Through a process of inquiry, fear is transformed into anxiety in the inner world to cope with the external world, operating by instinctive inference with “cheerful hope”, through which the impossible “would be” the possible in the future.

In this paper, I explore a pragmatic account of hope from Peirce's semiotic, discussing a triad of logical sentiments of belief, love, and hope. In doing so, the way of love and the way of inquiry overlap, which is demonstrated in the analogous structure between Peirce's logical sentiments and regulative sentiments in the doctrine of Christianity. The main argument of the semiotic and pragmatic approach to hope is two-fold: intertwined relationship between a triad of logical sentiments and the semiotic human agency. The ideas of fallibility in the way of inquiry and fallible man in the way of love imply “cheerful hope”, tending towards approximating to growing or developing in search of truth and reality. Meaning of hope thus arises in a paradox of a fallible man with the power of intelligibility through a sense of learning, participating in semiotic activity of meaning-making. On this basis, I argue that phenomenology of “I” is understood by means of the ideas of the *self-as-agent* and the *self-as-subject* from a participatory perspective. Based on the discussion on semiotic agency and human subjectivity, dialectics of hope in narrative semiosis is illustrated in the case of *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan. The narrative symbolizes how a way of love with the desire to learn and a way of inquiry into truth and reality merge into a way to think in a theater of consciousness with cheerful hope, thus leading to mutual recognition between the self and other. I thus propose that dialogic and creative hope opens out a way to the future with a desire to love “a little person” in us as object of love and hope by cherishing and tending it in a search for a possible love of the true Self.

Clotilde PEREZ

University of São Paulo, Brazil



Esperançar (to Hope): The Semiotics of a Possible Future in Brazil and Latin America: Freedom, Imagination and Cognitive Justice

The topic of hope can be approached from multiple perspectives. It is true that the contributions of Nietzsche (1988) and Ernest Bloch's (2005) classic "The Principle of Hope" are fundamental; indeed, the latter provided the starting point for social movements, particularly in Latin America, by laying the groundwork for what became known as Liberation Theology. We could add Rossi (2013), Eagleton (2023), and Han (2023), as well as many other philosophers, historians, and semioticians. The selection of references is always an arbitrary act in which we seek more or less logical justifications. In this sense, I choose to direct my reflections on the semiotics of hope by incorporating the foundational contributions of Paulo Freire (2019, 2025), initially established in the text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and revisited in *Pedagogy of Hope*, originally published in 1992, and Marilena Chauí (2005, 2016) with her references to the need to establish true politics—that in which individuals exercise their virtues without any submission—embodied in the phrase "hope has conquered fear," in reference to Bloch (2005) and Ariano Suassuna (2025), with particular emphasis on the latter's contributions regarding hopeful realism. Freire (2025) believes that history is a time of possibilities, not of determinism. The Freirean utopia is a dialectic between denunciation—of that which causes fear and denies life—and proclamation, that is, the hope for a new world. The author argues that hope is not merely an abstract desire or even an apathetic and naive act, but an ontological necessity and a liberating practice. He defines it as "to hope"/"esperançar" (from the verb "to act"), distinguishing it from passive waiting; it is the active quest to transform reality even in the face of adverse and conflict-ridden situations, and here Suassuna's (2025) contributions bring a fresh perspective synthesized in the need for us to always be "hopeful realists," an offshoot of magical realism, a 20th-century artistic and literary movement, notably in Latin America, based on the fusion of everyday reality with supernatural, magical, or dreamlike phenomena. A peaceful coexistence between reality and the fantastic. This approach, in which the extraordinary is treated naturally, without many logical explanations, often serves to critique inequalities, politics, and repression in a more or less veiled manner, and thus relates directly to Freire's proposition regarding the "feasible unprecedented"—that is, the new that is imagined and made possible through the identification of obstacles and problems, the exercise of collective thinking, and action, which forms the foundation of his pedagogy of the oppressed. Hope also lies in the recognition of knowledge and practices that have been silenced by "indolent reason," a reality throughout Latin America. Recovering these omissions and silences is also a way of reinventing the present and paving the way for social, cultural, and intellectual emancipation. Here, Freire and Chauí alike call for the urgent and immediate restoration of cognitive justice in our countries, as one of the conditions for "to hope"/"esperançar".

Frédéric VANDENBERGHE

State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Gramsci Fractured: A Metatheory of Hope

In the last decade I have shifted my theoretical interests from the philosophical foundations of the social sciences to a diagnostic social theory of the present. This reorientation was motivated by the shifting conjuncture in Brazil under Bolsonaro and, more recently, by the accumulation of crises in the world at large. In my presentation, I will show how Antonio Gramsci's dialectical motto – borrowed from Romain Rolland – "optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect" has informed my work at various stages: my philosophical anthropology, my metacritique of the Frankfurt School, my theory of transformative collective action, my diagnosis of the present, my engagement with the Convivialist Movement, and my fieldwork on farmers' suicides in Maharashtra. My conclusion will be that the polycrisis is ultimately a metacrisis – a crisis of worldviews – and that as semioticians, we need to remain attentive to the "weak signals" that announce a turn of the tide.

