Wrapping Transcendence: The Semiotics of Reliquaries

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ABSTRACT

After pinpointing the semiotic mechanism of relics, this essay highlights the danger of their being turned into fetishes with reference to the *Tractatus Garsiae*, a hilarious medieval parody that wittily uncovers the semiotic proximity between the collection of fetishized relics and that of fetishized money. In subsequent sections I point out how reliquaries have been adopted as an antidote to the fetishizing of relics and explain how that works through a theoretical analysis of the human anthropology of wrapping. After indicating some possible directions for further analysis (in order to deepen the typological and comparative knowledge of reliquaries), I conclude the essay by focusing on a case study of a pragmatically felicitous instance of a reliquary: the semiotic "open work" of Francis Xavier's seventeenth-century reliquary in Goa.

Any relic of the dead is precious, if they were valued living.
—Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, chap. 13

One of the most effective ways to represent transcendence is to wrap it; this is, in a nutshell, the main contention of the present essay. "Wrapping transcendence" means evoking in the faithful the feeling of a beyond, of something that is not present and available to perception. It means urging the faithful to strive for the attainment of such a beyond, for the completion of that whole that is somehow hidden and out of reach. It also means constantly recreating the distance between the faithful and their transcendent horizon, continuously suggesting, at the same time, separation and the possibility of its removal. What ensues from this hypothesis is that there is no representation of transcendence without semiosis. What is a sign, indeed, if not the fun-

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damental mechanism through which humans intuit the potentiality of a beyond hidden behind the actuality of a sign? Students of Peirce have mostly "secularized" him—stripping his conception of semiosis of metaphysical and theological consequences and focusing on how the sign stands for something else. However, a vibrant vein of negative theology is detectable in Peirce's thought. The sign is not only what stands for something else, and so on; the sign is also what hides something else's wholeness, hinting at the human possibility of its completion and triggering that cognitive and emotional desire of achievement that ends up in the indefinitely delayed pleasure of unlimited semiosis (Leone 2012b). From the semiotic point of view, then, representations of transcendence are fundamentally those that bring about in human beings a transcendental dynamics of cognition, emotion, and imagination. It is the infinitude of semiosis that awaits human beings beyond the sign; pursuing its plenitude is the closest experience of transcendence they are given to experience. Then there is ecstasy, of course, but from the semiotic perspective it is an illusion, a religious habit (Greimas 1987; Leone, forthcoming b). Humans, on the contrary, relate to transcendence asymptotically in that they are given the chance and freedom to imagine what has been hidden.

A paradoxical consequence of transcendence being evoked as shadow, as the hidden face of the moon, is that no representation of transcendence is possible without materiality, that is, without an immanent counterpart. Unlimited semiosis needs to start from exceeding a *representamen*, from conceiving what this representamen is not, and from imagining and desiring what hides behind the materiality of the sign. But neither this imagination nor this desire would be possible without a screen, without the instauration of that veil of immanence that simultaneously hinders and triggers semiosis. I can turn a representamen into a sign of something else because it is not entirely mine—because something in it resists the exertion of my freedom, because something in the representamen is unredeemable actuality. Transcendence can, therefore, be intuited, or perhaps only emotionally experienced, as the light that is promised beyond the screen of a material, immanent, actual sign. The paradox is that nothing promises this light to us if not the sign itself. The materiality of the representamen is what both invites us to go beyond it and what prevents us from doing so. It is both the bridge and the broken bridge.

This is why the semiotician does not strictly need any church.[1] Those who read Peirce as one of the most sophisticated interpreters of the human ability

1. The term *church* here is used to refer to any organized religious collectivity.

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for the transcendental imagination of transcendence know that this ability is not confined in a temple. On the contrary, it is inescapably everywhere. Human beings are actually slaves to transcendence, meaning that their capacity of constantly transcending what is actual in order to freely imagine what is potential *is* their nature. Only culture, meant as socially shared conglomerate of habits, saves humans from the strain of transcendental imagination. The logical consequence of this perspective is that there is no religious culture that is not intrinsically fetishist: religious cultures turn the natural human strive for transcendence into devotional habits. They attract the faithful's attention toward the power of the representamen, toward its ability to say the infinite. No church could survive throughout history without the promise of revelation. All sorts of capitalization, from the symbolic to the strictly economic one, can result from the institution of a religious fetish. Whoever holds the ability to certify the correctness of a religious habit can exert an enormous power on human beings and can control their imagination and, more important, their freedom.

But religious cultures, as well as churches, are not only systems of habits. Were they merely administrators of fetishes, they would not survive throughout the centuries either. Indeed, religious cultures that have persisted through time and expanded through space are exactly those that, while constantly playing with fetishism, have never succumbed to it. In other words, successful religious cultures are always erotic. On the one hand, they administer the materiality a religious community makes use of in order to simultaneously hide and evoke transcendence. Sacred indexes, sacred icons, and sacred symbols: through different semiotic dynamics churches present them to the faithful as that predetermined way to transcendence without which many human beings would be at a loss, staggering in front of the perspective of the infinite. Churches bestow on the faithful a language, and this language is always, at least to a certain extent, a fetish.

From this point of view, the fundamentalist church is that which has voided its signs of all eroticism (Leone 2013b): *representamina* are perfectly adequate to represent transcendence.[2] They actually do not represent it anymore; they present it, they incorporate it as if there was no barrier, no discrepancy, no cleavage between the actuality of a sign and the potentiality of its semiosis. Transcendence shines in the materiality of the elected representamen, be it a sacred language or a holy icon.[3] Any thought of incompleteness is banned as

2. *Representamina* is the plural form of Peirce's *representamen*.
3. *Elected* here means "embraced as ontologically superior qua imposed by transcendence."

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heresy. The faithful are turned into habit machines, dehumanized. Even the most relentless fundamentalist, though, is unable to entirely thwart the human propensity for freedom, which is a counterpart of the human propensity for desire. Fundamentalist churches are indeed self-disruptive, meaning that, by claiming the end of history and the triumph of the elected representamen, they fetishize it to the point of inertia. Dull spiritual quietude is the consequence of fundamentalist orthodoxy.

But there is another way to annihilate the intrinsic eroticism of religion: it is the antifundamentalism stance that disrupts the very idea of church, the very idea of system of religious habits shared by a community of faithful (Leone 2012a). According to this stance, the representamen is not necessary. It is arbitrary to the point of disposability. What matters is the direct relation of the faithful to transcendence, whereas any material mediation of it is considered as fetish. But as the fundamentalist church kills the human instinct for transcendental imagination by fetishizing representamina, so the antifundamentalist church (which is not a church any longer, indeed) kills the same instinct by fetishizing the object of religious semiosis, that is, transcendence. The problem is that, as semioticians know, there is no object without representamina. Emphasizing the arbitrariness of religious representamina to the point of dismantling any religious habit is tantamount to disintegrating that asymptotic mechanism that is the only human way to transcendence.

Religious cultures that are not self-destructive, that keep the flame of transcendence alive, are therefore those that represent it through emphasizing neither the completeness of the representamina (fundamentalism) nor the completeness of the object (antifundamentalism) but rather the intrinsic incompleteness, and therefore the intrinsic completability, of the interpretant, of the erotic mechanism that shows the object through the representamen and simultaneously hides it—that shows it through hiding it, and through hiding it shows it. As the greatest theologians of all spiritual walks have intuited, there is no revealing without re-veiling, and no re-veiling without revelation (Leone, forthcoming a). But only the arrogant fundamentalist, or the arrogant antifundamentalist, could think that humans should escape from this ambiguous threshold and evade either in the fixation of an unshakable religious habit or in the deflagration of any religious habit. On the contrary, the salvation that religious cultures promise to human beings consists exactly in this encouragement to enthusiastically embrace the human paradox, that ungraspable interplay between the finitude of signs and the infinitude of semiosis that finds in language its most accomplished embodiment.

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Is language the real religious arena of human beings? And are semioticians the true priests of human nature? Establishing a new religion is undoubtedly too ambitious a goal for this essay. What follows is, rather, an analytical exposition of the philosophical framework evoked in this first section. Probably in no other sign does the dialectics between the fetishizing of religious habits and the enlivening of the eroticism of transcendence show with more evidence than in the semiotic functioning of relics. That logically ensues from the semiotic natures of these signs, which is also what justifies and prompts their existence in the first instance. Being physically part of the sacred object they represent, relics more than religious icons and religious symbols lend themselves to be fetishized by fundamentalist religious esthetics into what presents the sacred without mediation. Symmetrically, they also immediately lend themselves to being stigmatized by antifundamentalists as the epitome of what transcendence is not: the fossilization of the sacred into utter materiality.

As the essay will try to show, long-lasting religious cultures neither worship relics per se, thus de facto hindering any imagination of what they simultaneously hint at and hide; nor do they ban them, thus depriving the faithful of any perception beyond which the imperceptible could be imagined. On the contrary, religious cultures that effectively administer the human talent for transcendental imagination tend to turn relics into signs that involve an erotic interpretant,[4] into a veil that is worshipped not only for the part it shows and presents but also for the whole that it hides and represents. Reliquaries (this is the specific contention of the essay) are the semiotic devices that some religious (and even some not strictly religious) cultures came up with in order to control, channel, and qualify the eroticism of relics. There are many kinds of reliquaries, but they all exploit in different ways the same semiotic mechanism: wrapping. By enshrining the relic, they implicitly invite the faithful to focus on the relation between content and container, encapsulating entity and encapsulated one, but also between representamen and object, between what is shown and what is hidden. In other words, they present the faithful with a material simulacrum of that same relation that the faithful is supposed to discover thanks to the relic: striving to perceive or imagine the plenitude of the relic beyond the screen of the reliquary, the faithful are encouraged to understand that the relic itself is not plenitude either, but a sign (i.e., both representamen and screen) of a more perfect, albeit ungraspable, whole. However, the paradoxical nature of religious semiosis being always at work, reliquaries,

4. Here *interpretant* is meant as a Peircean term.

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too, whose lavish materiality is meant to be, in principle, an antidote against the fetishizing of relics, can themselves be turned into objects of fetishism, admired, and even worshipped not for the unlimited semiosis that they are supposed to ignite, but insofar as they are transformed into new reified representamina of the sacred, as a hindrance more than an access gate to the triangulation between materiality of the representamen, freedom of the interpretant, and intuition of the transcendent object.

After pinpointing the semiotic mechanism of relics, I show the danger of their being turned into fetishes with reference to the *Tractatus Garsiae*, a hilarious medieval parody that wittily uncovers the semiotic proximity between the collection of fetishized relics and that of fetishized money. The subsequent section of the essay points out how reliquaries have been adopted as an antidote to the fetishizing of relics, whereas the fourth explains how that works through a theoretical analysis of the human anthropology of wrapping. After indicating, in the next section, some possible directions of further analysis (in order to deepen the typological and comparative knowledge of reliquaries), the essay concludes by focusing on a case study, which is also, according to the author, a pragmatically felicitous instance of reliquary: the semiotic "open work" of Francis Xavier's seventeenth-century reliquary in Goa.

Relics as Indexes

The history of relics and reliquaries stretches for millennia in many religious cultures. It runs through nonreligious cultures too, if the word *relic* is broadly defined. This essay does not survey this history, already explored in depth by historians and anthropologists of religion.[5] Rather, it points out that, despite such extraordinary historical and cultural variety, the semiotic principle of the relic is quite simple. It is basically the same from the "Mandylion" of Edessa to

5. On Christian relics, see Roncalli (1885) 2010; Braun 1940; Hermann-Mascard 1975; Geary 1978 (on stolen relics); Heinzelmann 1979; Bouza Alvarez 1990 (on early modern relics); Legner 1995; Snoek 1995; Angenendt 1997; Bozóky and Helvetius 1999; Canetti 2002; Bozóky 2006; Deuffic 2006 (on the Middle Ages); Gagneux 2007 (on modern Paris); Lombatti 2007; Sbardella 2007 (on the anthropology of Christian relics); Coppola 2008 (on relics in ancient Greece); Luscher 2008 (on relics and Protestant Reformation); Boutry, Fabre, and Julia 2009; Burkart 2009; Wortley 2009 (on Byzantine relics); Angenendt 2010; Bagnoli 2010 (catalog of exhibition); Green 2010 (on Orthodox relics); Neri 2010 (on relics in ancient Greece); Robertson and Jahner 2010 (a comparative perspective); Walsham 2010; Craughwell 2011; Freeman 2011; Scotto 2011; Toussaint 2011; Baert 2012 (on the relic of the head of John the Baptist); Beitia 2012 (on the relics of the Passion); on relics in Islam, see Wheeler 2006; on relics in Buddhism, see Strong 2004; Rajapakshe 2009; on secular relics, see Mengozzi 2008; Laube 2011; Radi 2011; Torres 2011; on Christian reliquaries, see Grimme 1972 (Middle Ages); Gauthier 1983; Diedrichs 2001; Kalinowski 2011 (Middle Ages); Robinson 2011 (the British Museum collection); Hahn 2012 (Middle Ages); Prochno 2012; on Buddhist reliquaries, see Jongeward et al. 2012.

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Elvis Presley's guitars. Relics are singled out, venerated, exposed, celebrated, protected, desired, sold, and even stolen because they are an index of the body of the saint (or of the sacred). Their semiotic value depends primarily on their having been in relation of physical contiguity with this body for a certain amount of time (Cousinié 2000). In Peircean terms, some relics can entail a symbolical dynamics too. When the blood of Saint Januarius (San Gennaro) melts each September 19 in front of the Neapolitan faithful, it signifies not only the relic's physical contiguity with the body of the saint but also his symbolical permanence within Naples's Catholic community (Giannino 2005). An iconic dynamics is there too: in Siena, the finger of Saint Catherine is recognized as both an indexical sign of her corpse and an image of one of her body parts. Yet these symbolical and iconic semioses are secondary. They depend on the fundamental semiotic dynamics of relics: the indexical one.

This is the reason why when iconoclasts of all times and religions have attacked the adoration of images, they have fought even harder against that of relics (Leone 2010c). In the first case, the risk of idolatry stems from the iconic relation between the sacred and its image: the latter might not be venerated as semiotic means of the former but as direct manifestation of it. In the case of relics, the risk is even higher. It stems from the indexical relation between the sacred and a piece of its "body," or between the sacred and an object whatsoever to which it was in a relation of physical contiguity during its immanent adventure. If the faithful are unable to distinguish between a sacred image and its sacred prototype, then the distinction is even harder for relics, where the representamen of the sacred and its object are literally made of the same substance. They can be told apart not because of the quality of the former in relation to that of the latter (as is the case of images: they signify bodies through pigments or other substances). Instead, they can be told apart in purely quantitative terms: the relic is a body exactly as the body that it signifies. The gap between the two is merely quantitative: the former is a fragment and a synecdoche of the latter.

Relics have always been considered a dangerous source of fetishism. When the faithful kneel in front of the holy shroud, they might easily end up worshipping it as such, and not as index of God's incarnation as Christ. Michael Jackson's fans, ecstatic in front of one of his jackets, might well end up cherishing it as such, and not as an index of an artist who made the history of contemporary pop music and performance. Fetishism is the way in which, according to the semiotic orthodoxy of a religious culture (including that which worships present-day pop myths), the sacredness of an object is wrongly attributed to its representamen, hence deconsecrating the former (Volli 1997).

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Relics as Fetishes: The *Tractatus Garsiae*

Critical, polemical, or even satirical literature on the danger of relics is abundant. On the easiness by which relics can be transformed from indexes of the sacred into sacrilegious fetishes, and then into merchandise, no text is more compelling than the *Tractatus Garsiae* (Thomson 1973).[6] This sagacious pamphlet is one of the most ingenious and elaborate among the antipapal parodies and other satirical writings that blossomed in Europe toward the end of the eleventh century.[7] It was probably written by a canon from Toledo or by a Spaniard affiliated with the local cathedral. The terminus post quem of its writing is the May 1099 visit to Rome by Archbishop Bernard de Sedirac's,[8] which provides the narrative basis of the story. The *Tractatus Garsiae*, whose text can be read in four German manuscripts (two in Cambridge and two at the Vatican Library[9]), bears the following long title: *Tractatus Garsiae Toletani Canonici de Albino et Rufino*, with Albinus and Rufinus the two saint subjects of the manuscript.

The *Acta Sanctorum*, however, devote no space to the two pious characters. They are, indeed, imaginary. The *Acta* do record, however, a Roman martyr named Albinus, whose relics were transferred to Colonia under Empress Teophanu between 983 and 991.[10] The date of the transfer and the nationality of the manuscripts might suggest that this historical episode inspired the author of the *Tractatus*. In any case, the names of the two saints hide in their Latin etymology the names of as many colors: *albus* 'white' and *rufus* 'tawny'. The reason is simple: playing with the false pretenses of the saints' relics, Garsia intends to dwell on the immoderate love of the Catholic Church for the white metal (silver) and for the tawny one (gold). The incipit of the *Tractatus* reads: "At the time when Urban, most greedy pontiff of the Roman Church, translated to Rome the bodies of the most blessed martyrs, Silver and Gold, collected from the French churches, and while he was interring them most gloriously

6. See the two previous editions, both in German, in Julius von Pflugk-Harttung, *Iter Italicum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1883), 439–52; and in Ernst Sackur, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Lib. de Lite* (1892), 2:423–35 (appearing with the title *Tractatus Garsiae Tholetani canonici de Albino et Rufino*). See also the Spanish edition *La garcineida* (Pérez González 2001; bibliography at 353–63); Yunck 1961; Higashi 2001; and Morris 2001.

7. Lehmann 1922; Benzinger 1968.

8. Also known as Bernard of Agen or Bernard d'Agen (ca. 1050—1125), he was metropolitan archbishop of Toledo from 1086 and first primate of Spain from 1088 until his death.

9. Cambridge: Gonville and Caius College 427 (G), fols. 134v-143v, first half of the twelfth century, English provenance; and Trinity College R. 3.56 (T), fols. 37–44, second half of the twelfth century, English provenance; Rome: *Vat. Pal. Lat. 242* (A), fols. 65–70v, early twelfth century, German provenance; and *Vat. Reg. lat.* 1911 (B), fols. 91v-95v, mid thirteenth century, French provenance.

10. Probably Constantinople, about 960; Nijmegen, the Netherlands, June 15, 991.

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with his own hand—as a religious man—in gold-embroidered purses, Grimoard, archbishop of Toledo, discovered by chance some of these martyrs' relics. He decided to transfer them carefully to the shrine of S. Cupidity, and thinking that they would please the Roman pontiff—for he knew the man's compunction—he brought them with him to Rome" (Thomson 1973, 15).

In the parody, relics are no more indexical signs of a saintly body but objects of corrupted and unlimited trade within the Roman curia. *Symbolon* and *diabolon* are inverted (De Certeau 1982).[11] The story of the *Tractatus* goes that the Toledo's Archbishop Grimoard, who has found the precious relics of the two martyrs, aspires to the benefice of Legate of Aquitania, which the pope usually offers to Toledo's prelates. It is a shame—indeed, the anonymous author argues, a crime—that a person of such weight, so fleshy, so plump, so delicate as Grimoard, be denied the dignity maintained by his predecessors. The Latin text contributes a moral description of the wannabe legate:

> But, for the rest, although he could drain a full bowl (for he was a brave wine-drinker), although he snored day and night (for he could not keep himself awake), although he had a true bishop's belly (his distended stomach protruded not a little, since he usually put away a whole salmon at a sitting), although he made it his religious duty to condemn the innocent, persecute the upright, deceive the poor, and cheat orphans of their patrimony by violence, although he took every opportunity to lie (since sometimes he had reason to fear the truth), although, I say, he abounded in these virtues, and in those others which advance the fattest prelates of our time, yet he had no chance of becoming a legate of the Roman Church, unless he presented the Roman pontiff with the precious relics of these martyrs. (Thomson 1973, 15, 17)

The author demonstrates in-depth knowledge of Christian texts and Latin classics. He frequently quotes from the Bible as well as from Terence. At the figurative level of narration, Grimoardus's body, deformed by vice, matches the fake body of the relics, the access key to the kingdom of the powerful.

11. In Michel de Certeau's analysis of the mystical discourse, *diabolon*, that is, what is diabolical, is etymologically defined through opposition with *symbolon*, which is not simply what is symbolical but also, etymologically as well, what reunites two parties allowing their mutual recognition. The word *symbol* derives from Greek *symbolon*, which means "token" or "watchword" (from *syn-* 'together' and *bolé* 'a throwing, a casting, the stroke of a missile, bolt, beam'). In De Certeau, discursive productions that aggregate a religious community are symbolical, while those that lead to its fragmentation are diabolical, meaning that they break the fundamental pact of trust thanks to which members of a spiritual group acknowledge each other's adhesion to it.

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When the Toledan hero, equipped with his relics, is announced to Pope Gregory of Pavia, the pontiff proclaims, "Whoever wants to see the pope may freely do so—at the introduction of S. Silver" (17). Then Grimoard is ushered into the curia. Here the pope, clad by lavish drapes and velvets adorned by precious stones, sits among the fattest cardinals ever. Four of them hold in their hands a golden basin of impressive size, full of the best wine. The cardinals and the pope himself exhort the guest to drink from the wine with no moderation, among quotes from Terence and Horace. The pope, in particular, exclaims: "For the god has cursed abstainers—nothing in their lives goes right" (Horace, *Carmina* 1.18.5) (19). Then he reads a homily from the Anti-Canon, or *Exterminator* (a parody of liturgical book):

> O how precious are the martyrs Gold and Silver! How much to be proclaimed! How greatly to be praised! Sinners who possess their relics are perpetually justified, made fit for heaven from being earthly, turned from impiety to innocence. We have seen, we have seen simoniac bishops, sacrilegious, and dissipators of their churches, come to the pope, cleansed with the apostolic blessing on account of these martyrs' relics, no longer enmeshed in crime, not retaining any of their old blame, return home renewed and as if reborn. Whoever, therefore, is infected with an adulterer's lips, whoever is guilty of murder, whoever is polluted with the crime of fornication, whoever is grown pale from the disease of envy, whoever has a perjurer's reputation, in short, all sacrilegious, scandal-mongers, wine-bibbers, thieves, misers, quarrelers, bestial, traitors, contentious, thugs, impious, liars, ill-willed (what more?), all detestable, condemned, infamous, criminals, deportees, sentenced, indeed, all sinners who have offended God in word or deed; let them not hesitate to approach the lord pope bearing the relics of these most precious martyrs, that they may be absolved of all. (19–21)

The parody goes on subtly, without ever turning into overt invective. At every moment the reader can decide whether to believe in the existence of the holy martyrs or in their relics' power to redeem the ungodly, as in the following passage: "Ask therefore through Silver, and you shall receive, seek through Gold and you shall find, knock through either martyr and it shall be opened unto you" (21).

The hyperbolic prosopopoeia of the martyrs/precious metals continues through a crescendo of hilariousness as the pope launches an encomium of his predecessor, Pope Urban. He, through ineffable suffering, would heroically

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gather the martyrs' relics, scattered throughout the Christian world: "With such stones was the Roman pontiff stoned, with such swords was he cut, with such malignant spirits was he tempted, with such wounds was he slain; he was faced with perils of lampreys, perils of salmon, perils of carp, perils from over-feeding, perils from over-drinking, not to mention those other things which threaten the inner man, the Roman pontiff's daily anxiety for all possible lusts" (25).

But the previous pope endured all these misfortunes, collecting the relics of Albinus and Rufinus throughout the churches of France. And when fat bishops and abbots rushed from various kingdoms and distant lands to offer to him the relics of those martyrs, he, giving thanks, accepted them, receiving them with great devotion of the heart and compunction of the soul. Nevertheless, each time he would prefer to be offered more for, the text continues, he would be still dissatisfied had the sands of the Tagus and of the Sarabat turned into martyrs' relics. Hence Pope Gregory of Pavia encourages the devout faithful to donate the relics of the two saints, for as many as they can be found: "I say, go in peace, and if there is any remnant of the innards of Silver or the guts of Gold, be it stomach, bowels, buttocks, nails, shoulders, heart, ribs, neck, collar-bones, arms, backbone (what more?), or any limb of the two martyrs, duly present it to us" (27).

The homily deeply affects the listeners. So the pope, satisfied, avidly grabs a cup of wine, while the archbishop of Toledo praises the saints Albinus and Rufinus, thus receiving the pope's pleased approbation. Finally, the moment of offering comes. After questioning him on the destiny of the Church of Spain, the pope asks the devout Toledan bishop whether he is in possession of any relics. It is the apex of parody:

> "Brother, have you not found some relics of the blessed martyrs Silver and Gold, on whom Rome dotes?" Then the archbishop offered him an immense weight of relics, namely: innards of Silver, ribs of Gold, and his heart, arms, and left shoulder, which the Roman pontiff bore to the shrine of S. Cupidity next to the chapel of her sister S. Greedyguts, not far from the basilica of their mother, S. Avarice. There he interred them most splendidly with his own hands, with the sweet savor of good will and the incense of devotion. This was done, with all speed, on the 1 May. (31)

The pope is pleased with the enormous quantity of relics accumulated in the curia and addressing the cardinals exclaims: "Take heart, take heart, my blessed cardinals; truly, blessed are they who suffer drunkness for righteousness's

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sake" (31). Garsia, who accompanies the bishop of Toledo, duets then with the pope with comic theatricality, in a play of reticence and misunderstanding that would deserve an in-depth semiolinguistic analysis (see Leone 2004). The little *Tractatus* ends in an exhilarating climax of colossal drinking, counterpointed by quotations from the Bible and from Terence. An exchange between two prelates of the curia concludes the parody (45):

John: To drink is human.
Teuzo: We are but men.

The Antidote: Reliquaries

Reliquaries come into play in order to prevent such heterodoxy: the turning of the indexical signs of the sacred into fetishes and merchandise. In the framework of Algirdas J. Greimas's generative semiotics,[12] reliquaries are communicative devices that topologically "enshrine" relics, thus predisposing their enunciation and specifying their meaning. The semiotic functioning of reliquaries can be compared with that of other "encapsulating devices," such as the covers of books (Leone 2011b). The practical function of book covers and reliquaries is essentially the same: protecting the "encapsulated" entity and easing its transportation, fundamental in the case of both words enshrined in books and relics treasured in reliquaries. However, the semiotic function of the two "encapsulating entities" is diametrically opposite. The book cover eroticizes the symbolical or iconic content of the book through hiding it, whereas the reliquary de-eroticizes the indexical content of the relic through showing it (Volli 2002).

Such discrepancy of semiotic functions is the result of complex historical and cultural processes, but also of the essential semiotic difference between the entities encapsulated by book covers and those enshrined in reliquaries: the former, that is, words and images contained in books, can be indefinitely reproduced, at least since the invention of modern press. The latter, however, by definition cannot be reproduced. They are unique. If the eroticization set off by book covers seeks to return to books that aura of uniqueness that they were

12. Greimas adapts the term *generativity* from Noam Chomsky's linguistics: in structural semiotics, what is of interest for a cultural artifact whatsoever is not its historical genesis, but rather its logical generativity, that is, all the operations that must be presupposed in order to explain how it signifies (Greimas and Courtés 1979, s.v. "parcours generatif" [generative path]).

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stripped of since the era of their "mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin 1939), the de-eroticization brought about by reliquaries aims at voiding relics of that same aura, at diminishing their intrinsic fetishist potential. This is why it is not difficult to imagine a fetishist of book covers, uninterested in what they enshrine while desiring them purely as encapsulating entities. On the contrary, it is hard to conceive of a fetishist of reliquaries, unconcerned by relics while attracted by their encapsulating entities only. Relics, unlike words, are already fetishes. But fetishism for what enshrines other fetishes is not fetishism raised to the second. It is not metafetishism. It is, rather, depotentiation of fetishism, de-eroticization of the fetish.

It might be objected that it is indeed reliquaries that bestow on relics their status, that is, that turn them into indexes of the sacred. This is true if the etic perspective of structural semiotics is adopted (Pike 1967). From the emic point of view of the faithful, it is not the reliquary that creates the relic, but vice versa. The Neapolitan faithful will never be persuaded that Saint Januarius's coagulated blood is a relic only because it is enshrined by a specific monstrance, which constructs the relic's sacred indexicality together with the multifarious types of discourse that regulate its liturgical use. The faithful will object that Saint Januarius's coagulated blood is a relic independent from its reliquary, adducing as evidence that the monstrance that has encapsulated the relic throughout the centuries has changed, and so have the complex rituals orchestrated by the church in order to regulate the difficult process of removal, transportation, liquefaction, display, recoagulation, transfer, and recollocation. Indeed, what brings about the relic as an erotic index of the sacred, as the object and place of ambiguous interplay between valorization of the representamen and referral to the object, is not the reliquary per se, but the fascinating semiotic dynamic that it suitably embodies: *wrapping*.

The Semiotics of Wrapping

The gesture, the act, and the practice of wrapping are everywhere (Leone 2010a). Garments wrap human bodies, and even hands, arms, and legs can be used as screens for other body parts (Leone 2012c). In the Bible, the inception of the damned but autonomous path of humanity significantly coincides with an instance of wrapping. Symmetrically, human existence begins with an act of unwrapping from the placenta (Sloterdijk 1998, excursus 3) but immediately proceeds with a practice of rewrapping: in many cultures, swaddling babies introduces them to society (Leone 2010b). And objects are wrapped, from the microscopic molecular wrapping of nanotechnology to the macroscopic

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wrapping of palaces in contemporary art (Hendry 1995).[13] One of the obsessions of semiotics, which is also its greatest advantage, is to look transversally at reality and meaning, finding oblique common points among phenomena that other disciplines consider separately. What lies behind all these gestures, acts, and practices of wrapping from a semiotic point of view? The woman who covers her face with a veil and the sculptor who, with a drape, hides a statue before its inauguration; the cover of a book and the multifarious wrapper of thin plastic that, under the name of packaging (Volli 2005), enshrines and at the same time hides a bunch of cookies: do they share perhaps a common logic of meaning?

Covering, coating, wrapping, cladding, veiling, masking, screening, enveloping: from the oblique perspective of semiotics, all these expressions, and many more, do nothing but articulate the several nuances of the same "isotopy,"[14] that of encapsulation. Greimas and generative semiotics have intuited the existence of this semantic field and sought to define its nature through the plastic opposition /encapsulating/ versus /encapsulated/ (/"*englobant*"/ vs. /"*englobé*"/) (Greimas 1984). The morphology (expressive plane) and the semantics (content plane) of wrapping would, therefore, be a hyperdetermination of the topological dimension:[15] every time that the look of the analyst interacts with reality and singles out a text into it, it will seize not only vertical elements as opposed to horizontal ones, central elements as opposed to peripheral ones, right-handed collocations as opposed to left-handed ones, but also encapsulations where enshrining elements are opposed to enshrined ones, covering entities to covered ones, wrapping objects to wrapped ones.[16]

As the other topological oppositions, so also that between encapsulating items and encapsulated ones immediately prompts the construction of an *observer actant*:[17] the semiotic dynamic through which a text presents a dialectics

13. See also Valeri 1985, 301, and Tcherkezoff 2008, chap. 10.

14. For an explanation of this concept, see Leone 2013b.

15. In generative semiotics, textual manifestations that exert a "reality effect" (Barthes 1968) on the receiver can be decomposed into two levels: a figurative level, which borrows its figures from the "macro-semiotics of the natural world," and a plastic level, whose abstract configurations of shapes (eidetic dimension), positions (topological dimension), and colors (chromatic dimension) compose the inner structure of figures, and simultaneously convey an autonomous meaning. The distinction between figurative and plastic levels was introduced mainly to semiotically seize the meaning of nonfigurative art: a painting by Kandinsky does not signify through showing some figures of the world (figurative level) but by playing with the plastic elements into which these figures can be decomposed according to the artist's own creative grammar.

16. In structural semiotics, indeed, meaning is always "differential," so that also at the plastic level of a text it emerges from the contrast between opposite elements.

17. In generative semiotics, the way in which a text conveys its meaning is described through a multilayered metalinguistic device, the "generative path," on whose several levels the textual elements are disposed and

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between covering and covered entities is intertwined with the semiotic dynamic through which the same text institutes an observation point, a potential eye that distinguishes not only between top and bottom, right and left, and center and periphery, but also between objects that are covered and objects that cover them.

Greimas's choice to situate the opposition /encapsulating/ versus /encapsulated/ among the other topological oppositions makes sense exactly insofar as they all stem from the installation of an observer actant that, constructed with and by the text, orients its spatial reading. However, this choice must be qualified as regards a characteristic that is specific to the opposition /encapsulating/-/encapsulated/: it coincides by nature with a "modal arrangement." In other words, when the observer actant distinguishes between encapsulating entities and encapsulated ones, such distinction coincides with that between entities that *must* be perceived and entities that, on the contrary, being encapsulated by the former, *cannot* be perceived.

Whereas all the other topological oppositions offer themselves to the observer actant as copresent, and therefore according to an essentially syntagmatic disposition (and-and), the encapsulating/encapsulated opposition offers itself to the observer actant as coabsent, and therefore according to an essentially paradigmatic disposition (or-or). It is, in reality, a nuanced difference more than a sharp one. In the instauration of the observer actant of a visual text like a painting, for instance, several textual strategies prompt the gaze of the spectator to focus first on the right and then on the left, first on the center and then on the periphery, first on the top and then on the bottom, and so on. However, whereas in these cases the observer actant sends out visual *invitations*, in the case of the topological opposition /encapsulating/-/encapsulated/ it essentially sends out visual *interdictions*. The encapsulated entity not only *may not* be perceived (freedom of the gaze); it *must not* be perceived (prescription of the gaze). Vice versa, the encapsulating entity not only *may* be

analyzed depending on how abstract they are. According to Greimas, texts are narrative machines that turn oppositions among abstract values into anthropomorphic narrative structures. The main protagonists of such narrative macrostructures are called "actants," so as to distinguish them from actors, that is, the more specific configurations of narrative meaning actants turn into at a more superficial level of the generative path (the one that is occasioned by enunciation and precedes textual manifestation, where actors become in their turn "characters"). Whereas all the actants singled out by Greimas (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, opponent—these last two having been subsequently absorbed in Greimas's theory of modalities) mainly derive from Propp's narrative functions and mainly deal with the pragmatic dimension of traditional narration, the observer actant has been introduced in order to describe the meaning of modern narration, where the cognitive dimension often predominates over the pragmatic one. In particular, the observer actant is the narrative macrofunction that presides over the circulation of information in a text. In a visual text, therefore, everything that predisposes the gaze of the observer toward the text itself is considered as part of the cognitive strategy embedded in the observer actant.

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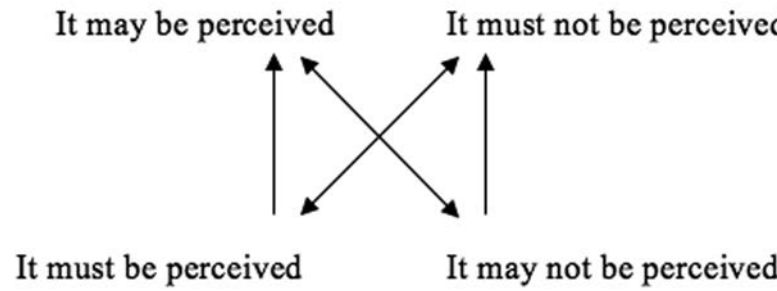


Figure 1. Semiotic square

perceived (freedom of the gaze); it *must* be perceived (prescription of the gaze). The semiotic square depicted in figure 1 visualizes this articulation.[18]

Whereas the encapsulated entity mostly relates to the term /it must not be perceived/, the encapsulating entity relates to the contradictory subcontrary term /it must be perceived/. However, a tensive diagram should replace this semiotic square so as to take into account a fundamental aspect of the opposition /encapsulating/-/encapsulated/: the textual manifestation of such opposition, and particularly its expressive substance, has an impact on the dialectics between what /must be perceived/ and what /must not be perceived/.[19] Depending on the materiality of the encapsulating entity, and essentially according to its degree of transparency, the dialectics /encapsulating/-/encapsulated/ entails a certain degree of perceptibility/imperceptibility of both the enshrining and the enshrined entity. The tensive diagram in figure 2 visualizes the codetermination between transparency and perceptibility. This tensive diagram visualizes two fundamental semantic paths: one that, through an increase in transparency of the encapsulating entity and a consequent increase in perceptibility of the encapsulated one, moves from covering to uncovering through more or less gradual stages of unveiling; and one that, through a decrease in transparency of the encapsulating entity and a consequent decrease in perceptibility of the encapsulated one, proceeds from uncovering to covering through more or less gradual stages of veiling.

Two further points: first, the dialectics between transparency and perceptibility, between encapsulating entities and encapsulated ones, does not concern

18. For a description of the semiotic square, see Leone 2013a.

19. French semiotician Claude Zilberberg developed "tensive semiotics" as an alternative to Greimas's structural semiotics. Differently from the latter, the former does not emphasize the discreet character of meaning, but its characteristics of continuity. Tension therefore becomes more central than difference, and tensive diagrams replace semiotic squares. For an introduction to tensive semiotics, see Zilberberg 2006.

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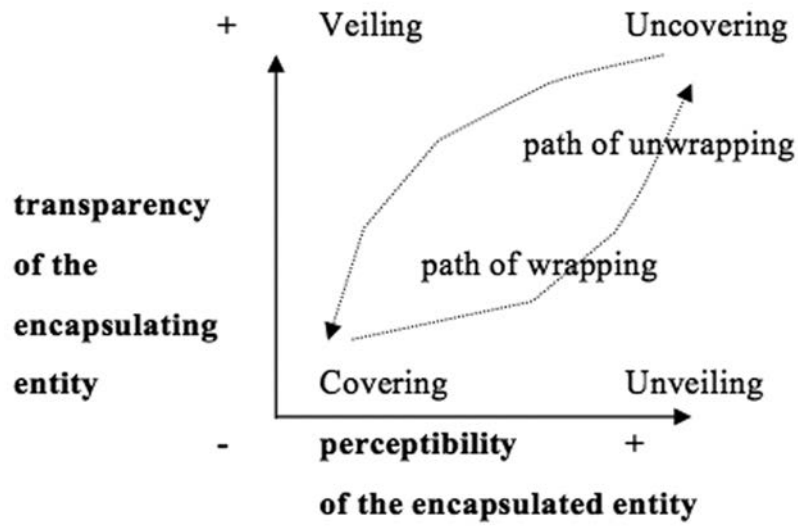


Figure 2. Tensive diagram

only the expressive substances of the visual manifestation but also those whose manifestation addresses other senses. In a symphony, the sounds of some instruments can "wrap" those of others, so preventing their perception; vice versa, through the gradual growing dim of the former, the latter are little by little "unveiled" and "reveal" their sound. Also, in a dish, the flavor of some ingredients can cover that of others or, on the contrary, bring out their perception; and so on also for tactile and olfactory sensations, as well as for the synesthetic ones. More abstractly, the dialectics between encapsulating and encapsulated entities reproduces at the level of manifestation that between paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes, potentialities of a semiotic system and actualization of a process. In the actualization of a process, the actualized entity more or less effectively encapsulates the potential ones, which remain as hidden behind the former, or beyond the expressive substance that manifests it. However, the more this substance becomes diaphanous, the more the actualized element tones down and disappears into the background of potentialities from which it emerged, allowing other potentialities to emerge to the surface of manifestation. From this point of view, all devices of veiling are forms of *débrayage*,[20] whereas all those of unveiling are forms of *embrayage*. The former

20. In Greimasian semiotics, *débrayage* is the semiotic operation by which discourse is enunciated as an actual process out of a system of potentialities, through the construction of specific space, time, and actors; just

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hides what is but does not appear, while the latter shows what does not appear but is. Hence, the tensive diagram of perceptibility and transparency of the textual manifestation is a dynamic hyperdetermination of that of verisimilitude. Wrapping is that textual enunciation that leads from truth (what is and appears) to secret (what is but does not appear), whereas unwrapping is the textual enunciation that leads from secret (what is but does not appear) to truth (what is and appears).[21]

The dialectics between transparency of the encapsulating entity and perceptibility of the encapsulated one can be further articulated depending on the plastic category to which it applies. In general, whereas decrease in perceptibility of the encapsulated entity consists in its more or less progressive defiguration, increase of such perceptibility results in its more or less gradual refiguration. However, both processes can take place in different ways depending on how the encapsulating entity has an impact on the plastic level of the encapsulated one. When Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrap a monument, they defigure it essentially along the chromatic dimension, whereas the eidetic and the topological ones remain largely unaffected: the shape of the monument is still visible; its positional features are unvaried. Actually, the success of the installation/performance depends exactly on the interplay between the plastic elements that the wrapping defigures and those that, instead, still belong to the figurative structure of the encapsulated entity.

When the encapsulating entity decreases the chromatic perceptibility of the encapsulated one, it brings about a defiguration that, without altering the perceptibility of either form or collocation, results in an effect of decoloration. A tight pair of black leather trousers does not have an impact on the form or the topology of the encapsulated entity (the legs), but rather solely on their color. When the encapsulating entity diminishes the eidetic perceptibility of the encapsulated entity, it causes a defiguration that, maintaining the perceptibility of both color and position, brings about an effect of fragmentation. A transparent skirt does not affect the color or the topology of the legs underneath, but only their form. Finally, when the encapsulating entity decreases the topological

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the opposite, *embrayage* is the semiotic operation by which a return to the potentialities of a semiotic system is simulated within an enunciated process.

21. Greimas elaborated the semiotic square of verisimilitude (*carré sémiotique de la véridiction*) in order to articulate two semantic categories: that of immanence (/being/ vs. /not being/) and that of manifestation (/appearing/ vs. /not appearing/). By articulating together these two categories, the square of verisimilitude singles out the four semantic positions of truth (what is and appears); falsity (what is not and does not appear); secret (what is but does not appear); and lie (what is not but appears). This square is useful especially because modern narration frequently revolves around oppositions of epistemic values.

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perceptibility of the encapsulated entity, it leads to a defiguration that, while the perceptibility of both color and form stays untouched, occasions an effect of delocation. Crossing one's legs does not alter either the color or the shape of the encapsulated entity (again, the legs), but simply its topology. Figure 3 offers a visual synthesis of this plastic typology of wrapping. This schematic must be further complicated taking into account that defiguration rarely affects one of the plastic dimensions of the encapsulated entity without minimally altering the others. The case of various combinations of decoloration, fragmentation, and delocation is more frequent. A second source of complication is that decoloration, fragmentation, and delocation can at any moment be counterpointed by operations of coloration, reunification, and recolocation that, by increasing the transparency of the encapsulating entity, increase also the perceptibility of the encapsulated one, so bringing about its refiguration according to the chromatic, eidetic, and topological dimension. Furthermore, these operations must be reconceptualized depending on the particular expressive substance to which they apply. Sounds can be defigured according to the features of height, intensity, or tone; and the same should be taken into account as regards gustative, olfactory, tactile, or synesthetic sensations. Finally, this complex mereological system should be not always discreet but open to continuity. It should, hence, be combined with the tensive diagram (fig. 4) of transparency and perceptibility described above. This tridimensional tensive diagram visualizes how values of chromatic, eidetic, and topological transparency and perceptibility vary for the semantic paths of wrapping and unwrapping, encapsulation and deencapsulation. The introduction of a fourth plastic dimension—texture, for instance—would complicate the formalization of the dialectics /encapsulating/-/encapsulated/ even further.

Since topological oppositions like bottom/top, right/left, center/periphery, and background/foreground are syntagmatic, whereas the topological opposition encapsulating/encapsulated is paradigmatic, an essential difference arises

	Plastic dimension that is encapsulated and de-figured		
Type of de-figuration	Chromatic	Eidetic	Topological
De-coloration	X		
Fragmentation		X	
De-location			X

Figure 3. Plastic typology of wrapping

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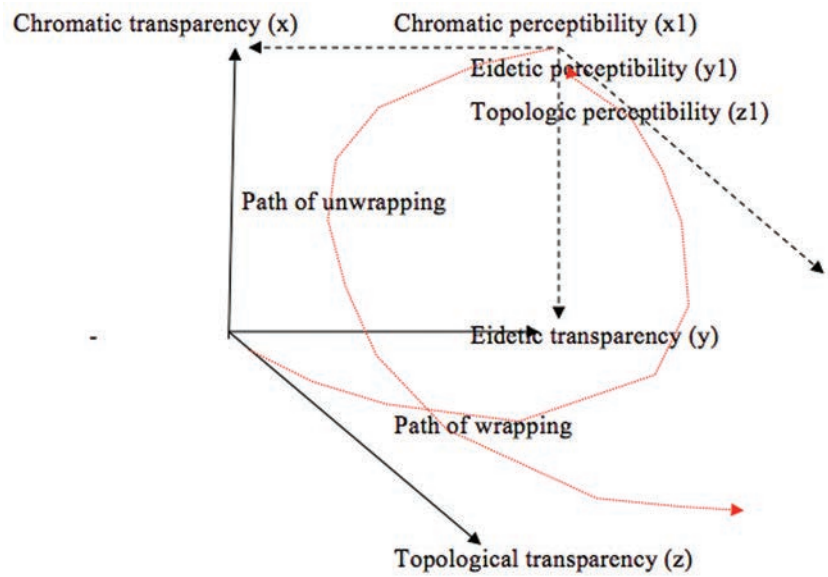


Figure 4. Tridimensional tensive diagram

between the former and the latter: consisting in the actualization of two potentialities of a system in a relation of copresence along the axis of process, the former are endowed with an extrinsic narrative potential, which depends on how these empty, syntactic positions are filled by a text, for instance, in semisymbolical microsystems (Leone 2004).[22] The latter, however, which results from the actualization of two potentialities of a system in a relation of coabsence along the axis of process, is endowed with an intrinsic narrative potential independently from how these positions are filled by the text. They are already full of agency, as is evident also from their being lexicalized through verbal forms: /encapsulating/ versus /encapsulated/.

In simpler words: every time that, in a text, an encapsulating entity wraps with its more or less opaque materiality an encapsulated entity, so hindering to various extents its perceptibility, this dialectic is already and immediately a

22. Semisymbolical systems are the third category of sign systems envisaged in Louis Hjelmslev's glossematics: contrary to semiotic systems, which entail nonconformity and commutability of the planes of expression and content, and to symbolical systems, which entail conformity and noncommutability, semisymbolical systems entail both conformity and commutability, since they generally oppose couples of elements (like in the famous study by Roman Jakobson (1972) on gestural systems of affirmation and negation in Bulgaria). Generative semiotics has long explored the hypothesis that many kinds of mythical discourse, including the artistic one of abstract painting, might indeed rely on semisymbolical systems.

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narrative mechanism. Wrapping, in all its forms, is nothing but the topological manifestation of narrativity. It embodies the dialectics between an encapsulating agency, which aims at distancing the observer actant from the perception of the encapsulated entity, and an encapsulated entity that, instead, aims at the reconjunction of the observer actant with the same perception. The encapsulating entity and the encapsulated one are, therefore, nothing but figurative embodiments of two opposite modalities, that of the *inability* of perception (the encapsulated entity) and that of the *obligation* of perception (the encapsulating one). Describing the topological dialectics /encapsulating/ versus /encapsulated/ as a narrative dialectic between modalities explains how it constructs the observer actant as a subject of desire (Volli 2004). The impossibility of perception of the encapsulated entity triggers the *desire* of perception of the observer actant. This is the abstract narrative mechanism according to which, faced with a veiled body, a wrapped gift, a packaged product, a barely visible image, a scantly audible sound, an impalpable flavor, one does not only ascertain the impossibility of perception, but desires also to pass from this imperceptibility to its perception. Hence stems the pragmatic effect of the narrative dialectic /encapsulating/ versus /encapsulated/: impossibility of perception results in desire of perception that results in its turn in the elimination, or at least in the attenuation, of the encapsulating entity, and therefore in the reconjunction of the observer actant with the perception of the encapsulated entity.

Such elimination, such unwrapping, can be real or imaginary. On the one hand, there is the real gesture that unveils a body, unwraps a gift, removes the packaging from a product, scratches away the patina of a painting during its restoration, turns down the volume of a radio during a conversation, rinses the mouth between the degustation of two wines. On the other hand, there is the virtual gesture that imagines the silhouette of a body underneath clothes, intuits the nature of a gift in a wrapper, prefigures the quality of a product beyond its packaging, mentally completes a semihidden image, a muffled sound, a fleeting flavor, and, yes, worships with infinite grace a hidden transcendence. In other words, the figures of encapsulation often turn, from the point of view of the observer actant, into figures of aposiopesis (Leone 2011a): by hindering the perception of the encapsulated entity, the encapsulating entity prompts its own elimination, be it real (through a gesture of physical removal) or virtual (through a practice of imaginary completion). Persuasive communications of all kinds exploit the link between the impossibility of perception (that ensues

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encapsulation) and the desire of perception (that results in the elimination or attenuation of wrapping), constructing encapsulating entities whose main purpose is, in reality, increasing the appeal of the encapsulated entities.

Desiring transcendence would be impossible without its veil. However, while they weave this veil, religious cultures must also prevent the faithful from turning them into an object of worship—hence the necessity of wrapping, and hence the reliquary: by encapsulating the relic, the reliquary must defigure it, decolor it, fragment it, delocate it. It must persuade the faithful that, as perceptual imagination is required to refigure the relic beyond its screen, so metaphysical imagination is demanded to recompose transcendence beyond that indexical fragment of it that is the relic itself.

The Language of Reliquaries

Roaming over the many diocesan museums of Europe might lead to the opposite conclusion: the pomp of extravagant shapes and precious materials of most reliquaries tends to increase the faithful's veneration toward the relic, with the consequent risk of idolatry. That is certainly true in some cases, and especially in those historical periods and cultural contexts in which Christianity was confident about the legitimacy of relics and the orthodoxy of devout practices concerning them. However, in most cases, this first impression is due to the present-day visitor's scarce familiarity with the semiotic codes that composed the reliquaries. Retrieving these codes, and applying them to deciphering the discourse of reliquaries, suggests that all this sumptuousness of shapes and materials does not merely seek to bring out the cult of relics but also to qualify it, to channel the adoration of the faithful within the doctrine, and to divert it from any trespassing into fetishist idolatry. This is the case especially in those historical periods and religious contexts where the trust of Christianity in the legitimacy of relics was shaken by both internal and external attacks. Many examples could support this hypothesis about the semiotic nature of reliquaries. Within the limits of this essay, only the most significant ones will be pointed out.

The isotopy of encapsulation is constant not only in the phenomenology of reliquaries, but also in the literature that accompanies and guides their semiotic functioning. The *Liber Pontificalis* reports how already the Emperor Constantine had the corpses of Saints Peter and Paul covered (*recondit*) with bronze (Duchesne 1955–57, 1.176ff.),[23] a fragment of the wood of the cross

23. See also Grabar 1972, 204–313; and Krautheimer, Corbett, and Frazer 1937–80, v.

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enshrined in gold adorned with precious stones (1:179ff.),[24] and the tomb of the Lord protected by a rotunda (*anastasis*).[25] A later text, Dagobert's *Gesta* (end of the first third of the ninth century), reports that the king not only had the remnants of Dionysius, Rusticus, and Eleuterius translated into the newly reconstructed church of Saint-Denis, Paris, but that he also had them enshrined through a triumphal *mise en abyme* of encapsulations:

> He fabricated the mausoleum of the saintly martyr [Dionysius] and, underneath it, a marble ciborium,[26] a marvelous work of gold and precious stones, as well as the ridge and the fronton; and he covered with gold the wooden balustrade around the throne of the altar and, on top of the balustrade, placed round golden pommels, adorned with gems. By the same care, he coated the lectorium[27] and the gates with silver metal and covered also the roof that sheltered the throne of the altar with pieces of wood clad in silver. And he also built a *repa* on the place of the ancient tomb and fabricated an altar outside of it, at the feet of the saintly martyr.[28]

Covering, cladding, coating, encapsulating, building layer after layer of forms, materials, and colors that divide the faithful from the relic, that interpose the sumptuous discourse of a mausoleum reliquary between the index of the sacred and its devout fruition: on the one hand, each new layer of this interposition seems to magnify the role of the powerful in acting as a mediator between the sacred and the faithful. On the other hand, each new enshrining entity seems to distance the risk of idolatry by symbolically reminding the faithful of the impossibility of grasping transcendence. After each mental unwrapping of this monumental encapsulation of the relic, the faithful will not find the transcendent object that they long for but another wrapping, whose unwrapping will lead to another wrapping, and so on and so forth ad infinitum because the relic itself is nothing but encapsulation of an ungraspable transcendence. In this dance of the infinite veils, the faithful therefore strain to purchase transcendence asymptotically, both aroused and frustrated by each wrapping in their desire of completion. The enshrining, however, aims not only at a deferral of the relic's intrinsic eroticism, but also at its qualification. On the

24. See also Frolow 1961, 177 n. 27, and 1965.

25. See also Biddle 1999, 65.

26. An ornamental canopy over an altar, usually supported on columns, or a similar form over a tomb or throne.

27. The site in a Christian church where parts of the scripture are read.

28. *Vita S. Eligii*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 4.688; trans. mine.

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one hand, the reliquary prevents the relic from being perceived as simple piece of the body, that is, with morbidity and a taste for the macabre. It is clearly stated in the long dissertation on reliquaries that Thiofrid of Echternach includes in one of his treatises:[29]

> God, having foreseen that men cannot see and touch without nausea and disgust the putridness of a human body that rots, in the same way in which he veiled his sacred body and blood with the veil of bread and wine . . . , so has he persuaded the children of the Church to wrap and enshrine the relics of the saints' blessed flesh in gold and in the most precious among the material objects.[30]

On the other hand, the reliquary qualifies devotion anagogically, as Abbot Suger suggests very clearly:

> When, in my love for the beauty of the house of God, the multicolor splendor of gems sometimes distracts me from my external preoccupations and an appropriate meditation urges me to reflect on the variety of saintly virtues, transferring me from the material things to the immaterial ones, I have the impression to find myself in a distant region of the terrestrial sphere, which does not lie either entirely in the mud of the earth nor entirely in the purity of the sky, and to be in the condition to be transported, by the grace of God, from this inferior world toward the superior world, following the anagogical way.[31]

The pomp of the enshrining entity aims at bestowing on the observer an ecstatic modality, according to which one does not dwell on the adoration of the relic but goes from the veneration of the fragment to that of the whole to which it is both part and index. The reliquary therefore signifies as a symbolical reference to that celestial Jerusalem to which the relic is an indexical representamen.

A Typology of Reliquaries

This essay's main hypothesis is that reliquaries essentially work as complex discursive devices seeking to guide the veneration of the faithful, aiming at diverting them from idolatrous fetishism and reorient them, instead, toward anagogic devotion. However, this hypothesis is still too unrefined. It must be

29. Died in 1110.
30. Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum* 2.3, pl. 157, col. 347; trans. mine.
31. Gasparri 1996, 134–39, translation mine.

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articulated along several directions. First of all, the specificity of the different kinds of reliquaries should be taken into account. In Christianity, one should distinguish the *chasse* (from Latin *capsa*) (in some contexts also called *fierte*, from the Latin *feretrum*), the casket or *lipsanotheca*, the monstrance, the *topique* (or topical reliquary, such as chest reliquaries, head reliquaries, arms reliquaries, etc.), the *staurotheca*, the *regalia*, the shrines, the *filatori*, the *feretra*, and so on. All these reliquaries differ not only in shape, dimension, color, historical era, religious and cultural context, and so on, but also in their semiotic relation to the relic: they imitate its shape, they remind the faithful of its function, they hide or display its features, and so on.

Second, the study should also consider, in a comparative perspective, not only non-Christian reliquaries, abundant in various types in many religious cultures, but also not strictly religious reliquaries, starting from those that enshrine memorabilia of all kinds in the world museums and collections. The four floors of the Korea University museum contain historical and artistic items from the prehistory to the contemporary era, disposed from the first up through the last floor. A section of this last floor is devoted to the "Relics of the Sponsors" (fig. 5), that is, objects, normally of quotidian use and with no artistic value, that belonged to the generous patrons of the university. The architectural space of the museum; the disposition of cases, plaques, and captions; lighting; spatial relations with other memorabilia: all this complex system of signs turns into a sort of contemporary and "secular" reliquary, meant to enshrine, but also to enunciate, the relics of the new saints, that is, the university's donors.

Devices of museum exhibitions are a secular variant of religious reliquaries, but they are not the only one. Contemporary packaging is another one. Several present-day forms of wrapping and enshrining attract widespread fetishism: on eBay, one frequently comes across ads that do not sell simply an iPhone, but an iPhone whose packaging is perfectly pristine, thus turned into a reliquary that is itself desired as fetish (fig. 6).

Also, in the most recent trends of contemporary packaging, wrappers tend to act exactly like Catholic Reformation reliquaries, almost "vanishing" in a play of transparency and imperceptibility so as to bring out, instead, the product, the prototype of the merchandise, so as to "naturalize" it (Marrone 2011). Another instance of the same trend is the London Museum of Packaging, where wrapping turns from shrine of merchandise into relic, attributed a sacred aura to the point of fetishism in its anagogic ability to bring consumers back to remote eons of consumerism, which were thought inexorably lost.

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Figure 5. Plaque in the Museum of Korea University, Seoul, pointing to the "Relics of the Donors." Photograph by the author.

This research program is too ambitious to find space in a single essay. After pointing out how semiotics offers a new, productive perspective on the dialectics enshrining/enshrined—on the way in which this abstract semiotic mechanism underlies both the semiotic functioning of reliquaries and that of the many wrappings through which the world offers itself as an object of perception and signification—we will now turn to a specific case study: the semiotics of the sarcophagus/shrine of Saint Francis Xavier in Goa.

A Case Study

When Goa celebrated the canonization of Francis Xavier, the "Apostle of Asia," in 1624, a procession transported his body through the city, enshrined in a precious silver sarcophagus. According to the printed program of the cele-

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Figure 6. Picture advertising for the "perfectly pristine" packaging of an iPhone on eBay

bration, the reliquary, whose fabrication had cost more than six thousand *pardaos* or scudi, weighed about a hundred kilograms, and was adorned by many precious stones and several scenes from the life of the saint. The printed program describes the sarcophagus as "executed with exceptional art, so that no human hand was able to make a drawing of it, no human language was able to describe it" (Schurhammer 1965). In 1635, Marcello Mastrilli, a rich Neapolitan who the year before had been miraculously healed from an incurable disease—apparently thanks to an apparition of Francis Xavier, who had visited him in the guise of pilgrim—went to Goa in order to pay homage to the "Apostle of Asia," saw his sarcophagus, and deemed it too little and not worthy of the saint. He therefore suggested to replace it with a new reliquary, perfectly identical to the first, but doubled in its dimensions. The project immediately gained general approval, so that on April 9, 1636, soon before Mastrilli's departure for Japan, he was able to examine the drawings for the new monument. After twenty months of uninterrupted work, the new sar-

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cophagus was completed and inaugurated on December 2, 1637, on the occasion of the festivity of Saint Francis Xavier. It weighed about three hundred kilograms and cost 12,000 scudi, a huge amount of money for the time. The precious reliquary can still be admired in Goa, in the Jesuit Basilica of Bom Jesus (fig. 7).

Although the iconography of the first sarcophagus of Francis Xavier cannot be studied directly (it was probably melted down to fabricate the second), it can be analyzed indirectly, for the iconography of the latter is probably a magnified replica of the former. Some parts of the monument have been lost: the six kneeling angels that supported the sarcophagus, as well as the reliefs that represented the main virtues of Francis Xavier as a member of the Society of Jesus and as an Apostle, together with those depicting his four gifts of wonderworking, prophecy, glossolalia, and incorruptibility of the corpse.[32] In its original form, Francis Xavier's silver sarcophagus was decorated with two series of reliefs, surmounted by a filigreed cover. Each of these two series consisted of sixteen engravings (fourteen on the long side, two on the short side), small and octagonal in the lower range, bigger in the higher range, separated by fourteen columns topped by angels (fig. 8).

From a semiotic point of view, and for the purposes of this essay, a feature of this monument is particularly relevant: the silver engravings of the higher range are removable and underlain by a glass panel, so that their shifting allows the exhibition of Francis Xavier's body, as has been the case during periodical ritual displays. Francis Xavier's reliquary in Goa embodies and represents for the devout spectator, with typically baroque ambiguity and theatricality, the virtuous circle between the body of the Saint and its representations: images of Francis Xavier's life prepare the faithful for the exhibition of his corpse, whereas the exhibition, in its turn, confirms the veracity of the images, in particular of those concerning the incorruptibility of the missionary's corpse. That the engravings can be easily reassembled in a different and chronologically wrong order has often brought about confusion in the visual narration of Francis Xavier's life. However, this mechanism has also transformed the Goa sarcophagus into a sort of "open work" (Eco 1962): episodes from the life of the saint have been removed by the original narrative sequence and placed in the atemporal heaven of Catholic sanctity, often proposing new relations, consciously or not, among these episodes. The linear narration of the life of the

32. According to Schurhammer 1965, many of these decorative elements were melted to fabricate coins. See also Xavier 1859.

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Figure 7. The silver shrine of Saint Francis Xavier in Goa, courtesy of Fr. Kevin Monteiro, SJ

Saint has been, therefore, turned into a sort of network, into a hypertext *avant la lettre*.

In the theoretical frame exposed in the first part of the essay, Francis Xavier's Goa sarcophagus is an exemplary case study. So that it may be perceived as a reliquary, the sarcophagus must entail a modality of encapsulation that feeds the dialectical tension between the presence of the enshrining entity and its removal. It is only this borderline condition, indeed, that arouses the desire of observers, specifically embodied in the possibility of removing the silver engravings of the sarcophagus so as to let the corpse of the saint be visible through the undelaying glass panel. Observers want to achieve the vision of the saintly corpse because this vision is possible by virtue of the semiotic construction of the reliquary. Nevertheless, the reliquary does not merely construct this erotic desire of vision. It also channels it, it determines it according to a discourse that superimposes on the erotic charge of the enshrined relic the de-eroticizing and didactic matrix of images.[33] This seventeenth-century

33. For an in-depth analysis of the reliquary and its iconography, see Leone 2010c, 446–57.

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Figure 8. Decorative engraving of the sarcophagus reliquary of Saint Francis Xavier in Goa, courtesy of Fr. Kevin Monteiro, SJ.

sarcophagus reliquary perfectly embodies the liturgical conception of the reliquary as a symbolic-iconic discourse meant to spiritualize the sacred indexicality of the relic by turning it from mere object of devotion, always at risk of idolatry, into (both metaphoric and material) narrative support of a devout collectivity. The faithful reveal the corpse of the saint through removing the silvery cover that enshrines the sarcophagus, but in doing so must dwell on the meaning of this removal and, above all, on that of those images that, wrapping their iconography around the relic, filter its scabrous potential of erotic idolatry. The icons wrap the index, and together they wrap the intangible object of transcendence.

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