

## Passions and the Body: Semiotic Space in Seventeenth-Century Europe

### ABSTRACT

It is a shared impression among social historians and humanity researchers that 'passion' was one of the words which register something characteristic of 17th-century modernity. Passions then meant radically different from what they are to us in 20th century, since for us they are defined as a sort of residual margin outside of emotions, whereas for early moderns there was, strictly speaking, no such category as 'emotions.' Discourses of passions in the 17th century seem to indicate a symptom of the revival of a more 'psychologized' idea of passions in antiquity (compared with that of more neutral, omnipotent 'motions' in the Scholastic trend), in which they were conceived as some exterior powers that fall upon a human, and to which the person reacts only 'passively.' This process had vital consequences that led up to a totally new demarcation of the boundary (and the mastery of relationships) between the human subject and the outer world, between what is going on in the human mind and what are out there as objects. From this articulation emerged another conception of passions as signs/characters which are both inscribed in the mind and made legible through their appearance on the body, thus foreshadowing modern semiotic space that was to evolve later on. Taking up comparatively less-known figures in the field of sociology like Reynolds, Senault, Charlton and Bulwer, I sketch out some versions of the discursive treatment of passions in the 17th century, and thereby seek to reconstruct a specifically early modern semiotic space, in which the very figures of the body, characters, and passions are deeply implicated.

**Key words:** 17th-century modernity, the articulation of the inner/outer world, semiotic space