

Semiotics now

Kalevi Kull,¹ Ekaterina Velmezova²

Abstract. We present the results of a survey conducted among professional semioticians from around the world, who were asked to answer two questions: (A) what problems should semiotics solve in the near future? and (B) what are the most important publications on semiotics since 2000? The collection of 63 responses received provides a self-description of contemporary semiotics, as well as some material for scholars to learn from one another. In addition, we add responses from the latest versions of a large language simulator (GPT) as a characteristic feature of the current decade.

*But my personal concern is about
the development of a general semiotics.
(Eco 2018[2015]: 42)*

Semiotics is a research field as old as academia. However, the position of semiotics in academia has not yet stabilized. Is this because the role and place of semiotics are not yet understood well enough outside the discipline, or because semiotics itself has not demonstrated sufficient results, or because the self-description of semiotics has not been clear enough, or because such is the nature of semiotics, or because of some other reason?

The appeal of semiotics lies in the models it offers for understanding life and the problems these models make visible. What are the most exciting semiotic problems? How much do we share an understanding of our tasks? Our desire to exchange views on these questions led us to arrange the survey presented below.

In the summer 2024, we sent the following letter to 90 professional semioticians (or semioticists, or semiotists, as they are sometimes called):

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Dear colleague,

Before the World Congress of semiotics in 2014,³ we asked several semioticians from around the world, “What is the main challenge for contemporary semiotics?” The responses (from 38 semioticians) were published:

<https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/sss/article/view/SSS.2014.42.4.06/10833>

Now ten years have passed, understanding has developed, new generation of semioticians has grown up, and we would like to repeat this study, in order to understand what semiotics currently thinks about itself.

Thus, could you please respond to these two questions.

- (A) *What are the main (one or two) problems that semiotics should address in the near future? (Please limit to 200 words.)*
- (B) *Please name one to three most important semiotics articles or books published in the 21st century.*

With all best wishes

Kalevi Kull & Ekaterina Velmezova

P. S. If you prefer your answer not to be published, please indicate when responding.

An analogous survey had been carried out in 2014 (Kull, Velmezova 2014). From those who responded ten years ago, eight colleagues have passed away: John Deely, Umberto Eco, Jaakko Hintikka, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Gunther Kress, Solomon Marcus, Göran Sonesson. The others received our new letter. In addition, we posed the questions to the leaders of some semiotics research centres, the editors of some semiotics journals (*Acta Semiotica*, *Actes Sémiotiques*, *The American Journal of Semiotics*, *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, *Cognitive Semiotics*, *The International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, *Punctum*, *Semiotica*, *Semiotika*, *Signs and Society*, *Sign Systems Studies*, *Social Semiotics*, *Versus*), plus some active researchers and organizers, including several scholars from the new generation. And, as we feel ourselves belonging to the semiotics community, we also added the views of our own. So, the choice was arbitrary, but not random.

Below, we publish responses to the two questions from 63 scholars, in an alphabetical order. We were not strict if the response slightly deviated from our proposed format. The full bibliographic data of the publications mentioned in the response to question B are given in the list of references at the end of the article.

³ The 12th congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies – l’Association Internationale de Sémiotique (IASS-AIS), September 2014, in Sofia. In September 2024, the 16th congress of IASS-AIS took place in Warsaw.

Responses

Myrdene Anderson (Purdue University, USA)

The challenge remains silos – ours and others’ – and the illusion of hybrid vigour that might ensue, given intervention by inter-/multi-/cross-/meta-/trans- or some other disciplinarity. Perhaps semiotics might look to two sibling intellectual communities with passions for collapsing the nomothetic and the idio-graphic: the systems thinkers and the cyberneticians. Organizationally, we all descend from Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead!

B

I will mention transverse-disciplinarity, as now brought up in the International Society of Systems Sciences, that being the strategic coupling of disciplines, approaches, methods or methodologies, or even specific expertises.

Edna Andrews (Duke University, USA)

I believe the future of higher education is potentially under threat due to critical financial and cultural problems across the globe and misunderstanding the role of emergent meaning(s) and implicit bias of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models.

Jakobson, Lotman, Sebeok and others consistently wrote about the need to reimagine traditional discipline boundaries and empirically strengthen the fundamental notions underlying a semiotic approach to knowledge (not information).

B

Tamm, Torop (eds.) 2022, *The Companion to Juri Lotman*.

Sémir Badir (University of Liège, Belgium)

I would be hard pressed to identify a single and unified research topic that semiotics should tackle in the next few years. I cannot conceive of a research programme capable of rallying enough collective forces around it. The question would make sense if semiotics were a science, but it is not one and is not about to become one.

In fact, the issue it will have to face in the near future is simply that of its survival. In this respect, it is essential that semioticians acquire a better idea of its *raison d'être*, not in spite of the heterogeneity of the methods, objects, and academic affiliations, but precisely in accordance with, and even, dare I say, by virtue of this heterogeneity. Developing solidarity among semioticians should be made a crucial pragmatic problem – and not an easy one to resolve.

B

Rastier 2001, *Arts et sciences du texte*.

Groupe μ 2015, *Principia semiotica*.

Fontanille 2021, *Ensemble: Pour une anthropologie sémiotique du politique*.

Kristian Bankov (New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria)

The greatest challenge facing semiotics, which it shares with many other humanities disciplines, concerns its relevance and usefulness as a scientific method and educational discipline in a rapidly changing world. It would not be an exaggeration to say that classic semiotics currently serves as an academic refuge for traditional scholars who are hesitant to engage with the evolving realities around them. Conversely, the new generation of researchers has not yet matured enough to produce new, relevant models comparable to those of the classic theorists.

Interactivity, real-time experiences, sharing, augmented reality, and the unstoppable rise of Artificial Intelligence are features of the new digital culture. Currently, these elements are either forcibly squeezed into outdated textual or Peircean models by the old guard or are subjected to unstructured speculation and deductive wanderings by younger scholars.

One thing is certain: for semiotics to break out of this deadlock, it must decisively embrace the broader trend of interdisciplinarity. It needs to enrich its own theoretical framework through practical and successful empirical collaborations with new, technology-oriented disciplines.

B

Hartley, Ibrus, Ojamaa 2020, *On the Digital Semiosphere*.

Danesi 2016, *The Semiotics of Emoji*.

Denis Bertrand (Paris 8 University Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France)

I think that ‘*semiotics of scale*’ is a deep challenge. The problem of scale, measurement, excess and even the incommensurable is a central issue for semiotics. Firstly, because of its theoretical nature: according to what measure do we apprehend and analyse the meaning? How does it adjust to our perceptual scales? How do scales ensure that we are measuring “correctly”? Secondly, because of its cross-disciplinary nature: whether we are talking about the ethics of *mesure*, *juste milieu* or quantification to grasp the measurable, from the observable to the hypothetico-deductible, all disciplines are concerned, according to their own epistemology, by the question of scale. Lastly, because of its connection with the pressing issue of climate change: doesn’t ‘climate change’ imply a loss of measurement? New dimensions, obligatory confrontations and so many other aspects that have gone unnoticed until recently call for a new way of measuring.

Another issue for me is the semiotics of *instances in enunciation*. Building on and going beyond the work of Jean-Claude Coquet in this area, it seems to me that the “instantial” theory that ensures the richness and complexity of the enunciative compound remains to be explored: the part played by impersonal instances in the enunciative praxis, the status of the “thematic roles” that inscribe any instance in collectives, the part played by the sensitive body and the thymic relationship with the environment, the link between the enunciating instances and the political, all directions that, among others, seem to me to make this subject a question of the future for semiotics.

B

A difficult question. Nevertheless, I would say, spontaneously, in the French domain:

Coquet 2022, *Phénoménologie du langage*.

Zilberberg 2006, *Éléments de grammaire tensive*.

Anne Beyaert-Geslin (Bordeaux Montaigne University, France)

Semiotics has always followed the themes of its time and tried to respond to social needs. Since the turn of the century, it has been interested in video games, AI and robotics, and, more recently, generative AI. Today, at least in France, it has two main areas of research: AI and, to a lesser extent, the living world.

It is likely that interest in the living world will be greater and more enduring than that in AI, even if the questions raised by AI (the relationship to truth and belief, in particular) are essential, because it reflects a turn for Humanities and a different kind of social demand. The two major research themes of semiotics, AI and the living, charge it with an ethical dimension that has perhaps never been called upon in this way before. The critical dimension of these new fields of study could also be questioned. Could they lead us to pass value judgements on research that follows the social demand for consumption a little too closely, to question its usefulness and necessity?

B

For French semiotics, interest in the living world was triggered mainly by Philippe Descola’s book *Par-delà nature et culture* (2005), which opened up not only these subjects but also new relations with anthropology and sparked interest in researchers such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Clifford Geertz. For French semioticians, Descola’s work was a kind of premise that gave them access to biosemiotics which had been little known until then, which may seem surprising given the popularity of other works by the Tartu School (partial translation of Juri Lotman’s *L’Univers de l’Esprit* under the title *La sémiosphère* in 1999 and translation of *L’explosion et la culture* in 2004).

In this sense, if *Par-delà nature et culture* appears to be a fundamental book for the renewal of the human sciences, *L'explosion et la culture* claims more or less the same place for French semiotics by building a bridge between new branches of semiotics, new fields of study and new disciplines.

Amir Biglari (Sorbonne University and University of Picardy Jules Verne, France)

One of the main problems that semiotics should address in the near future lies in the need to consolidate its recognition and institutionalization, which requires strengthening cooperation with other disciplines. Currently, the situation of semiotics is paradoxical. Given the transversality of sign and meaning systems across all fields of knowledge, it not only has the potential to engage in dialogue with other disciplines but also to facilitate exchanges between them. However, this valuable advantage has become its Achilles heel: semiotics has encountered serious difficulties in asserting the legitimacy of its object of study and convincing specialists from other disciplines of the relevance of its methods and tools. To overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to develop interdisciplinary projects at the interface of semiotics and other disciplines and, more broadly, transdisciplinary projects where various disciplines would collaborate through the conceptual framework provided by semiotics. Alongside this external dialogue, an internal dialogue between different semiotic approaches proves just as essential: on the one hand, since signs and meanings are complex and multifaceted entities, no single approach can claim to grasp all aspects; on the other hand, these confrontations allow each approach to discover its own limitations and expand its perspectives. Thus, this double openness – external and internal – should appear among the priorities of semiotic research: not only does this approach ensure the evolution of the discipline, but it also contributes to resolving the problems of recognition and institutionalization that it faces.

Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)

To me, the main problem still is the lack of a permanent institutional presence for semiotics in academia. In some countries, semiotics is a recognized academic field. In many more countries, it is a kind of individual hobby pursued by a few faculty members. We badly need undergraduate classes in semiotics, postgraduate programmes in semiotics, faculty positions in semiotics. Probably not full undergraduate degree programmes in semiotics, since undergraduate degrees are often linked to specific professions, and it is hard at this point to imagine a profession of Semiotician comparable to lawyer, teacher, or engineer. But semiotics as a specific skill set is important in many professions, and should be a recognized part of the education for these professions. There is room for some umbrella structures (joint

courses, interdepartmental specializations, exchange programme) that would provide these skills and at the same time encourage collaboration between academic departments in which semiotics has a place, and hopefully lead to a more general recognition of semiotics as a field of study.

If I had to pick a second problem, it would be language. We are dividing into national traditions on the basis of language. A systematic programme of translations (probably by necessity into English) would do wonders for communication between different schools and directions of research.

B

These choices obviously reflect my own field of interest. Effectively, I can only speak of what has been important to me in my own research, and what seems to me to be influential in the particular area that I share with other researchers.

My first choice would probably be Jacques Fontanille's *Sémiotique du discours*, but it was actually published in the last years of the 20th century. So, if we accept the requirement of publication in the 21st century, I would suggest Fontanille's *Pratiques sémiotiques* (2008).

My second choice would be Gianfranco Marrone's *Introduction to the Semiotics of the Text* (2022), in part because it is a translation. We badly need translations that make important work available to scholars who cannot all be poly-lingual. The book was published in Italian in 2011, so it belongs to the 21st century in both languages.

For a third choice, I would pick Jean-Marie Floch's *Visual Identities* (2001). Profoundly scholarly but also very accessible and in excellent translation.

Israel Chávez (Palacký University Olomouc, Czechia)

In my view, there are two main problems that semiotics is already facing. The first one has to do with semiotic theory; I believe semiotics cannot go too far without revising its whole conceptual apparatus and finding a common ground for all semioticians. The most challenging notions to define remain those of 'sign' and 'meaning'. This is urgent because the youngest generations approaching semiotics (I mean BA and MA students, who will eventually become the people keeping the discipline alive) often have difficulties in pointing at what makes, let's say, anthropology or sociology different from semiotics. I take this to mean that there is a big problem in how the very basics of our field are being conceptualized, and thus also taught. This reflects upon the second problem which has to do with proper semiotic research. The extremely general and overarching definitions of 'sign' and 'meaning' that are usually taught at schools often leave the impression that semiotics can be used for everything (and for nothing), both to students and to other researchers in adjacent fields. The diversity of subfields and theoretical

approaches within semiotics is, of course, always a good thing, but I believe we should aim for a kind of “constrained diversity”, and we should not be afraid of accepting and clearly stating the limits of our own field – I believe this to be the only way semiotics can be truly interdisciplinary and find its way back into mainstream academia.

B

The books I will list are not only semiotic books, except for the last title, but they are definitely important for semioticians.

Sériot 2014, *Structure and the Whole*. This book by Patrick Sériot is an excellent description of some problems faced by linguistic theory in some very specific spatiotemporal coordinates (early 20th century, Eastern Europe), however, the book itself can be seen as a kind of exercise in applied semiotics, at least to the extent that Sériot shows very clearly the interrelations between culture, ideology and science. If semiotics has anything to do with how different sign systems relate to each other, Sériot’s book certainly shows that in a very rigorous and illuminating way.

Joseph 2012, *Saussure*. What has been said about Sériot’s book applies to John Joseph’s as well. This one biography of Saussure, however, has the advantage of introducing in all detail the intellectual climate in which Saussure developed his theories, and it helps in demolishing old myths about what structural/Saussurean semiotics is supposed to be (a step that was already taken by Konrad Koerner many years earlier, and is a permanent task of most people currently working with Saussure, or Saussure-related theories). Although he is working on the history of linguistics, Joseph has made a great contribution to semiotics by giving us the most complete, to this day, intellectual biography of one of the founders of our field.

Jamin Pelkey *et al.* (eds.) 2022, *Bloomsbury Semiotics* (4 vols.). This anthology naturally reminds of the old anthologies edited and published by Thomas Sebeok, and is perhaps one of the most valuable publications in the recent catalogue of semiotics books. Semioticians from all over the world contributed with articles that explore specific subfields of semiotics, and thus the anthology is not only instructive for those interested in semiotics and its subfields, but it also helps semioticians see where we are now and how things have progressed. Some other attempts at this type of anthological work have either been recently published or are in progress. I would assume that this points to the strong need that contemporary semiotics has of producing a comprehensive self-description. Hopefully, this will only yield good results.

Paul Cobley (Middlesex University, UK)

I think one of the problems for semiotics concerns self-definition. In the face of a declining academy, if semiotics is to survive it needs to forgo potentially destructive indulgence in the narcissism of minor differences. Of course, events like the IASS Congresses help semioticians to assuage the problem of sectarianism; but we need to redouble our efforts, embracing ecumenicalism and inclusivity, avoiding the fetish of difference.

As the academy dwindles in size and influence, one problem for semiotics is to be relevant beyond the academy. It cannot simply be a honed method utilized in some future research institutes – although it might well become that if it is addressed to a narrow version of ‘texts’. In the past, we have run the danger of reproducing existing semiotic analyses or devising new analyses only in order to find the same answers. The alternative is to consider human endeavour and existence within the context of semiosis in the universe. Such an approach should aid critique, but precisely for the purpose of drawing out what will be beneficial to human cognition and the environment.

B

The 2001 *Semiotica* vol. 134: special issue on Jakob von Uexküll.

Hoffmeyer 2008a, *Biosemiotics*.

Deacon 2012, *Incomplete Nature*.

Kull 2009, *Biosemiotics: To know, what life knows*.

Stjernfelt 2014, *Natural Propositions*.

Vincent Colapietro (University of Rhode Island, USA)

At this time, questions concerning the *life* of signs seem not only the most pressing but also the most promising. These encompass above all questions immediately falling in biosemiotics (the signs of life, those integral to the functioning, reproduction, evolution, and flourishing of organisms).

Allow me two methodological comments, before framing three questions. First, the ideal would be for sign theorists to devote themselves to acquiring an indisputable expertise in one or more specific disciplines (say, a specific branch of marine biology or oceanography) and, on the other side, those trained in a discipline who have not yet done so to acquire a working knowledge of sign theory. Second, the collaborative yet agonistic model of experimental inquiry, in which exacting mutually accounted standards are instituted and practically honoured, should be manifestly evident in our work. To rescue semiotics from its continuing disparagement as a postmodern fashion remains a desideratum. (While it might properly understand itself as postmodern, our work as semioticians ought to be

as rigorous, accessible, and unpretentious as the work of those with whom we are trying to form alliances, including of course natural scientists.) Let me now turn to my questions.

Part of our task (what might be identified as a *phenomenological task*) should be offering even thicker descriptions of critical phenomena than any such descriptions yet available (critical in a twofold sense, that of utmost human significance and theoretical salience). The formation and collapse of, say, coral reefs or rain forests are examples of such phenomena. What thick descriptions of which phenomena most serve at this point the growth of knowledge?

Another part (the formally *theoretical task*) should be developing with greater detail, experiential traction,⁴ and categorial coherence, recursivity, and indeed elegance, theoretical frameworks adequate to the description and explanation of irreducibly complex phenomena (such as the biosphere as a semiosphere or, at a lower level of generality, an ongoing historical practice such as experimental inquiry, artistic figuration and abstraction in a visual medium, or the evolution of rites of passage in a given culture). A map can never be as large and detailed as the territory it purports to represent, but none of our maps provides the means for disclosing or illuminating the terrains with which the sign-theorists are preoccupied. The metaphor of cartography seems especially apt here. We need different maps for different purposes (on some, national boundaries are clearly demarcated, on others they are absent). What theoretical frameworks are fine-meshed and large enough to serve our various and exacting purposes?

Finally, the *empirical and experimental task* of engaging in specific studies recognizable from within established disciplines, especially scientific disciplines (though also such ones as art history, the human sciences insofar as they are not in the thrall of inappropriate scientific paradigms, and philosophical fields). Thick description and categorial theorizing are necessary but certainly not sufficient. Specific experimental investigations must be undertaken. The identification of these is best left to those experts in the relevant disciplines. Even so, I hazard as examples semiotically oriented studies of coral reefs and rain forests.

B

In the novel *The Mountain in the Sea* (2022), Ray Nayler quotes from a fictitious book by a fictional character (Ha Nguyen's *How Oceans Think*), consciously modelled on an actual book by a gifted anthropologist (Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*, 2013). *How Oceans Think* should be realized in fact, not simply conjured in a novel. Such a work would of necessity involve thick description, the

⁴ The categorial framework should be articulated in such a manner that it is maximally designed to assist in tracking experiential objects and events. Formal elaboration or articulation should always be cleared tethered to experiential disclosure and illumination.

critical deployment of a categorial framework and possibly the refinement of that framework in consequence of its deployment and, finally, of course experimental research. The three tasks identified above need not be undertaken simultaneously, however. I am only offering an example in suggesting a project entitled *How Oceans Think* – to be sure, a very ambitious project.

Life on Earth requires us to read keenly (if often unconsciously) the signs of life themselves. The life of signs itself requires elaborating in a more conscious, critical, and imaginative manner than anything yet accomplished distinct regions of the semiosphere and, ultimately, nothing less than the semiosphere in its cosmic scope (i.e. the universe as a “vast prefusion of signs”).

Marcel Danesi (University of Toronto, Canada)

There is perhaps no other area of greater concern today than the dangerous discourses that have spread throughout communicative spaces. It is imperative, in my view, to use semiotics as the theoretical tool to decode these discourses – a trend that has gained some traction in the last few years. Only semiotics has the ability to decode the discourses in terms of how they are interlinked linguistically, visually, symbolically, and in other sign-based ways. In this age of conspiracy theories and big lies, negatively impacting the cognitive and emotional wellbeing of individuals and entire societies, the need for semioticians to step up and show how these are corrupting meaning-making has become pressing. By unravelling the intents and forms of unethical discourses, semiotics can help solve the many ethical problems we now face as a species by raising awareness to the deleterious effects that falsehoods and meaning collapses can bring about through deceptive language and symbolism.

B

Campbell, Olteanu, Kull 2019, Learning and knowing as semiosis.

Pelkey (ed.) 2023, *Bloomsbury Semiotics*, vols. 1–4.

Bouissac 2024, *The Semiotics of Performances*.

Claus Emmeche (University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

In answering what main problems semiotics should address in the near future, emphasis can be put on ‘who’, ‘how’, or ‘why’. As to ‘who’: should they be solved only by (self-identified) semioticians? Not necessarily so. Lots of researchers in the social sciences and humanities, and a few in biology, are working on problems related to meaning, interpretation, communication systems, etc. without seeing themselves as semioticians (as one can be an interdisciplinary scholar, though indebted to semiotics). As long as the problems are intriguing, relevant, etc., then, say, cognitive scientists can be seen as trying to solve important semiotic

problems. As to ‘how’, I guess it is pragmatically rational to choose whatever methods are relevant to the particular problem in question, disregarding categorizing such methods as particularly semiotic or not. As to ‘why’, many scientific reasons (curiosity, knowledge production, theory development) as well as extra-scientific (social, cultural, etc.) reasons for solving problems can be mentioned. Why not start collaborative programmes for analysing the (eco-, bio-, and cultural) semiotics of (a) climate change, and (b) the uses and misuses of AI-based (and internet-dependent) tools for data analysis and generation of texts and pictures (also in research)?

Emanuele Fadda (University of Calabria, Italy)

I think a new question (not only for linguistic semiotics) is how artificial intelligence will impact on linguistic diachrony. AI can “remix” everything, but it lacks the spark of novelty (tychism, Peirce would say) that is within the reach of any speaker. (A partial counterbalance is provided by the endless work of prosumers in Internet 2.0.) More generally, semiotics needs to reconfigure itself as a “semiotics of culture” adapted to the rushing evolution of new media and to its impact on our lives. This does not simply imply sticking to the latest novelty each time, but rather a reconfiguration of the whole theoretical framework (actually, we are no more used to working on theory).

Finally, I believe that semiotics needs more philosophy. (Those who say they do not have a philosophy are hiding one – sometimes even from themselves.) The philosophical nature of semiotics is admitted only in the Peirce–Eco line. But there is philosophy also “on the other side”: Saussure comes, almost *malgré soi*, to reflect on his own position as speaker and linguist – and Barthes will radicalize this focus on the subject. (By the way, that is why semioticians should work more on “borderline” authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Ludwik Fleck, or Vilém Flusser.)

B

I had some trouble choosing some “classics” for the 21st century. There are many little good things, but maybe we really lack some actual “classic” or “canonical” work.

Deely 2009b, *Realism for the 21st Century* (Cobley, ed.).

Bellucci 2018, *Peirce’s Speculative Grammar: Logic as Semiotics*.

Joseph 2020, The agency of habitus.

Donald Favareau (National University of Singapore, Singapore)

Confining my remarks only to that area of semiotic study of my own concern, biosemiotics, I believe that its main challenge in 2024, as it was at its inception, is to develop a naturalistic understanding of *semiosis* that can productively inform

both biological and semiological understanding – and in so doing, provide a deepened and more accurate understanding of “life” itself and the ways in which it is “organized around a semiotic dynamic”, as Jesper Hoffmeyer would often say.

The work of establishing the reality of semiotic communication between living systems has come far since the time of Sebeok, thanks not only to the efforts of semioticians and biosemioticians, but also work done by more mainstream biologists and ecologists as well. Having more or less satisfactorily secured this beach-head, many of the more influential biosemioticians have been recently turning their attention back to the inquiry of semiosis at the level of the single cell. Such efforts to explicate the process of semiosis at its most absolutely fundamental level, I believe, will be critical to the well-groundedness and future development of both general semiotics and biosemiotics.

B

Accordingly, rather than trying to “name names” as to which publications have been most influential in this regard, I would simply prefer to say that those inquiries and analyses that have been focusing on articulating the structures and mechanisms behind such semio-biological processes as *semiorhesis*, *semio genesis*, *semio kainos*, *aneural cognition*, *fundamental semiotic agency*, *semiotic fitting*, and the naturalistic explication of the phenomenon of the *interpretant*, seem to me to be the most important undertakings in biosemiotics at this time.

Jacques Fontanille (University of Limoges, France)

Critical semiotics of diversity.

In my previous contribution to the same exercise, in 2014,⁵ I defended the idea that semiotics must adopt a strategy for dialogue with other disciplines, so as to be able to participate actively and fully in the major multidisciplinary research programmes which deal with major contemporary challenges.

But this approach carries some risks. Indeed, in dialogue with other disciplines, the main risk that semiotics runs is *scientific undifferentiation and trivialization*: confronting other research fields, semiotics may integrate their contributions so easily that it is no longer distinguishable; it can become a variety of biological theory, computer theory, cognitive and anthropological sciences; it merges with media analysis, with the ethological description of human or animal behaviour, with communication studies, with cultural studies, etc. How can we recognize semiotics in this intertwining of sciences of meaning to which it is assimilated?

Invoking, as in the previous contributions from 2014, the need for self-description to assert a scientific identity is no longer enough, because confusion and

⁵ Fontanille in Kull, Velmezova 2014: 541.

undifferentiation are still progressing. To exist in front of others, we must not simply absorb their contribution, we must begin by critically examining it. From its origins in Europe, well beyond its linguistic or philosophical roots, mainly in Barthes's and Greimas' works, semiotics is *a critical scientific project*. Faced with what other disciplines tell us about images, social discourses, human behaviour, climate transition or artificial intelligence, the first manifestation of the identity of semiotics will be the *critical examination* of what they propose. But to play its role fully, a critical science cannot wait until all the research from other disciplines is completed, because it would then be inaudible and always invisible. In multidisciplinary collaborative processes and programmes, *critical science is upstream, not downstream, science*.

Semiotics is a critical science because it targets the specificities of cultures and natures, even if it does not claim to be a science of culture or of nature in general. In the expression 'critical science' we must recognize a crucial capacity to generate alternatives, to imagine and generate the diversity of possible scenarios and stories. *Semiotic criticism is above all the search for the foundations of diversity*. Consequently, semiotics can regain its critical status by starting with the critical examination of its own diversity: in search of a clearer and better differentiated identity, semioticians will question what establishes the proper diversity of semiotics, instead of striving in vain to imitate the exact and experimental sciences which aim at the universal and universals, because it is in this universalizing tendency that semiotics loses its footing and degrades its identity.

The first challenge to take up in the future would therefore be research into the cultural specificities of semiotics in each of the continents and subcontinents found within the IASS, and, in each of them, in the historical depth where these specificities were formed. The first research to gather or initiate this would focus on the different conceptions or apprehensions of meaning which are and which have been at work in the world, and which today generate semiotic concerns and ways of doing semiotics which are very different in North and South America, Europe and Africa, China and South Asia.

We would then understand semiotics as a welcome plural, as many semiotics, and well beyond the sole confrontation between a small number of theoretical paradigms which compete for the paths to the universal, we would assume numerous semiotic practices inspired by a great cultural and anthropological diversity. *The epistemology of diversity is the hallmark of the human and social sciences of the 21st century*, for which contemporary sociology and anthropology have shown the way: under the banner of the epistemology of diversity, semiotics can also learn to know and describe oneself better, to found and maintain a critical dialogue, without allegiance or imitation, with the other sciences of meaning.

B

Groupe μ 2015, *Principia semiotica*.

Fabbri 2023, *La svolta semiotica*.

Jaworski, Thurlow (eds.) 2010, *Semiotic Landscapes*.

Petitot 2011, *Cognitive Morphodynamics*.

And also... Fontanille 2008, *Sémiotique des pratiques*.

Anne Hénault (Sorbonne University, France)

The main challenge for the contemporary “*sémiotique*” lies in its ability to pursue a coherent and powerful articulation and a correct description of its immanent forms. The challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence render each day more necessary a demonstrative development of Semiotics of passion, now that Semiotics of action is totally absorbed and implemented by contemporary expressionism.

Barend van Heusden (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)

I take semiotics, rather straightforwardly, to be the scientific study of semiosis. Insofar as semiosis and signs constitute the building blocks of human culture, semiotics is also the scientific study of culture, or, in other words, scientific humanities (cf. Eco in Kull, Velmezova 2014: 539).

Semiosis is human cognitive behaviour, which means that semiotics builds on, and is firmly nested in the sciences of the (cognizing) brain, of (learning) behaviour, and of life (memory; interaction with environment).

As is the case for all scientific disciplines, semiotics has its forerunners in philosophy – from Aristotle via Poinot and Locke to Peirce and Cassirer. Unfortunately, the transition from philosophical to scientific semiotics – i.e. the transition from conceptual discourse to the observation of structures in nature – has not, as yet, occurred (Lagopoulos, Boklund-Lagopoulou in Kull, Velmezova 2014: 533–535, 546).

Philosophical, conceptual definitions of the sign abound, but they are, without exception, circular. The *definiendum* pops up in the *definiens* time and again. To paraphrase a famous line by Gertrude Stein: “A sign is a (form and) meaning, is a text, is an interpretation, is a reference, is a symbol, is culture.”⁶

The movement of *structuralist semiotics*, which took off in the early 20th century, held the promise of a scientific humanities. This promise was not fulfilled, however. Due to the dominant tendency in the humanities, which is toward hermeneutic practice, semiotics was encapsulated and turned into a pseudo-scientific nomenclature for what has remained a practice of interpretation.

⁶ “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (“Sacred Emily”, 1913).

In reaction to the demise of structuralism in the 1980s and 1990s, and the advent of the many new brands of poststructuralism, the ‘structuralist’ project was taken up in the social sciences (mainly anthropology, cultural evolution), the cognitive sciences, and the life sciences (biosemiotics). These approaches, however, instead of trying to explain the *differentia specifica* of semiosis, starting from fundamentals (life, cognition, behaviour), tended to “explain away” the semiotic by simply identifying it with their object of study: ‘life is interpretation’, ‘cognition is meaning making’, ‘culture is learned behaviour’.

Semiotics is now at a standstill: the mix of philosophical discourse, hermeneutic nomenclature, and science without theory results in a situation where progress cannot be made (cf. Uspenskij in Kull, Velmezova 2014: 532).

To develop into an empirical humanities, semiotics will have to build on the sciences of life, behaviour, and cognition, but it will have to add to those a science of the *structure(s) of semiosis*, which generates empirically testable hypotheses (cf. Sonesson in Kull, Velmezova 2014: 540). It should offer explanatory hypotheses about the *evolution*, the *development*, the *history*, and the *actuality* of the semiotic process. This approach will be interdisciplinary, combining knowledge about culture from the humanities with insights from biology (the body), neuroscience (the nervous system), and empirical psychology (learning behaviour).

B

Groupe µ 2015, *Principia semiotica*.

François Jost (Sorbonne Nouvelle University, France)

The production of images has undergone a considerable change over the last decade. However, the semiology of moving images and the semiology of cinema and television have not yet taken sufficient account of these transformations. These transformations require us both to reopen issues that we thought were outdated, such as the link between the statement and the shot, and to find new issues that take account of the paradox that images generated by artificial intelligence use photographic and cinematographic codes and yet produce new images. The question of fake news that arises from this also needs to be considered. It is also important to think within a pragmatic framework that is adapted to a variety of contexts.

The time has also come to draw on the results of semiology to forge an ethic of representation.

Robert Junqueira (University of Coimbra, Portugal)

The overriding problem our field has to face in the near future remains that of its unification. At the outset, two things should be borne in mind. First, be suspicious of our disunity, for we are easily drawn to oppose our coevals along the lines

of matters of personal animus. Secondly, it is worth understanding that unless the field enjoys the stability afforded by a unifying general *doctrina signorum*, resistance to professionalizing the practice of semiotics and to the field's institutionalization will fail to be counterbalanced. Though there are definitely more ways forward to unite our scientific movement, awareness of the field's history can help us build momentum for the unity of our community. As semioticians recognize our shared roots and intersecting interests, plus the links between events, personalities, and cultural settings, it will become possible to move towards a sound sense of purpose, belonging, and mutual recognition. Poor historical awareness has led to a splintered self-understanding of the field, with researchers acting solo or divided into intellectual silos. By emphasizing the tight-knit nature of knowledge and the way human understanding evolves throughout the ages, the history of semiotics can serve as a vehicle to unblock the road to unity.

B

Deely 2009a, *Purely Objective Reality*.

Deely 2010a, *Medieval Philosophy Redefined [As the Latin Age]*.

Favareau, Copley, Kull (eds.) 2012, *A More Developed Sign*.

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (University of Liège, Belgium)

There are two urgent priorities:

(i) Intensify dialogue with the natural sciences. These, along with neuroscience, are already concerned with meaning. As far as the human sciences are concerned, semiotics is in the best position to sustain this dialogue, as it is already doing with biosemiotics, cognitive semiotics and semiogenetics. But these currents need to be strengthened and given greater legitimacy.

(ii) Study the impact of artificial intelligence. We are obviously thinking of its technical impact, on the production and reception of linguistic or visual messages, but I would put more emphasis on its societal impact. AI raises in new terms questions that classical philosophy had already addressed, such as those of truth and plausibility, ethos and pathos, manipulation, fiction and emotional discourse. It is, moreover, one of the tasks of semiotics in general to examine the societal impact of symbolic productions, a task it does too little of.

B

Finol 2021, *On the Corposphere*.

Groupe μ 2015, *Principia semiotica*.

Evangelos Kourdis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)

In my opinion, the most important problem that semiotics will face in the future is the delimitation of its object, which must be the recognition of signs in everyday

cultural reality that are not necessarily nonverbal. Semiotics has defined its field as the study of signification, which is quite legitimate; however, in the consciousness of the international academic community, semiotics is inscribed as the discipline that studies cultural meaning. In my view, we need to reduce its scope within the cultural framework – which is also immense – to help consolidate it, and then let researchers broaden the field of study. Furthermore, semiotics continues to provide the various disciplines with conceptual tools and methods, as it was perhaps the first field of research to take an interest in what is mistakenly considered the most important weapon in everyday communication, namely non-verbal communication. It may have unwittingly allowed linguistics to take over the semiotic study of language. Yet the study of everyday communication cannot be done without also studying the contribution of language, in the context of the synergy of semiotic systems and human senses in the production of cultural texts. As these cultural texts are translated, transformed and multiplied, the contribution of semiotic theory to their study functions in an equally multiplicative way.

B

Fabbri 2008, *Le tournant sémiotique*.

Lotman 2013, *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*.

Dusi 2015, Intersemiotic translation.

Kalevi Kull (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Semiosis itself – as the fundamental process of meaning making and interpreting – is not yet properly understood. Since semiosis is a real process, it should be possible to give a clearly delimited account and definition of it. As a process, semiosis is strange, since it includes a logical paradox in itself, of absence and presence in simultaneity, which implies that semiosis should be understood as occurring in the subjective Now. It is also necessary to clarify the connection between semiosis and umwelt, sign and sign types.

Another important task is explication of the methodology of semiotic research, that is: how one can properly study systems consisting of interpretation and its various forms, given the limited access and fundamental individuality of these systems.

And thirdly, a general semiotics capable of linking together various schools and directions of semiotics is absolutely necessary for semiotics as such to take a permanent place in education and science.

B

Cobley (ed.) 2010, *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*.

Eco 2014, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*.

Hoffmeyer 2008a, *Biosemiotics*.

Ludmila Lacková Bennett (Palacký University Olomouc, Czechia)

The main issue facing the humanities today is the technocratization of academia, where higher education is treated as a business, prioritizing profit over traditional academic values. Paradoxically (as Kalevi Kull once said, semiosis is about paradox), semiotics is maybe the only discipline with the potential to address this problem. I propose two solutions:

- (1) Biosemiotics. By integrating empirical evidence and grounding its theories in the organic, biosemiotics meets scientific standards while maintaining a non-mechanistic approach, bridging humanities and natural sciences.
- (2) Commercial semiotics. This is the biggest paradox, but think about it. Engaging directly with the business world, the driving force of modern society, can allow for impactful changes. By infiltrating this sphere, semiotics can influence significant issues such as environmental and humanitarian crises from within.

B

Peirce's book *Chance, Love, and Logic* (ed. by Ketner, 1998; Fig. 1) embodies these two solutions. Studying Peirce's published works is crucial, especially as focus shifts to his unpublished manuscripts. This book exemplifies scientific semiotics, embracing evolutionary love, and boasts a strong marketing potential due to its catchy title. Indeed, Vít Gvoždík used this book title to create an advertisement (Fig. 2) thanks to which I heard about semiotics for the first time in my life and immediately fell in love.

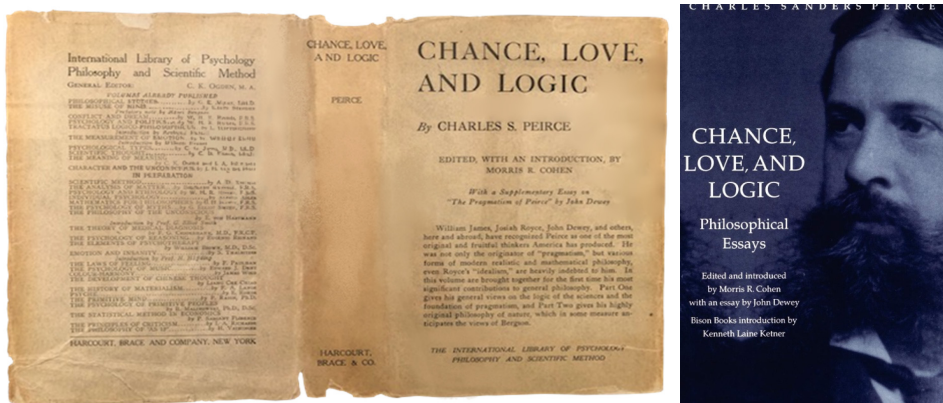


Figure 1. First edition of Peirce's, *Chance Love, and Logic*, 1923 (picture taken from the Institute for Studies in Pragmaticism, Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas), and the edition by Kenneth Ketner from 1998.



Figure 2. Advertisement for study programmes at Palacký University in Olomouc by Vít Gvožďiak: *Náhoda, Láska, Logika* is Czech translation of *Chance, Love, Logic*.

Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)

I believe that there is a general problematic in our field revolving around two axes: (1) the creation of a sound theoretical system, and (2) the promotion of semiotics in the academic and public spheres. I shall refer below to these two axes.

(1) Our field is deeply divided into two radically different perspectives: the Saussurean, of scientific origin, and the Peircean, of philosophical origin. Attempts at partly combining them are condemned to failure, because these two paradigms are structurally asymptotic. This division was aggravated in recent decades because of further elaborations, extending to domains outside the original formulations.

The main issue is not theoretical unification, but reflection on the part of theoreticians, which implies two prerequisites. The first is to follow the principles of scientific validity. A well-formed theory includes four levels: starting from the epistemology on which it is based, it constructs its theoretical field, creates a methodology to apply the theory, and needs techniques to apply methodology. Without this last level, neither the application of a theory nor the feedback for the improvement of theory are possible. The second prerequisite is to come out from isolation and compare the theory to the other theories of the field.

(2) There are already many proposals for the reinforcement of semiotics in the academic sphere. So, two words about the public sphere, a proposal following from my position above. To compete with other specialists, such as media specialists, semiotics needs the above full package, with emphasis on techniques,

since these are the key for application. Also, for this practice, a semiotician needs something neglected even in semiotic education and theories, namely a sound background in the cultural sciences and some of the social ones, such as anthropology and sociology.

B

I believe that the most important book of this century is, without any question, and independently from my personal semiotic choices, the publication of Saussure's *Écrits de linguistique générale* in 2002.

Eric Landowski (French National Centre for Scientific Research, France)

Thanks to its conceptual apparatus and its methods of analysis, semiotics could (in principle!) fulfil the essential social function of sharpening the eye and critical sense to push beyond what is obvious and disseminated by the media and social networks, offering alternative ways of thinking about the problems of the present time, which, for the most part, are problems of loss of meaning.

Alas, this is not the case: semiotics monologues into a void. Obscure in the eyes of cultured circles, it remains unknown even to researchers in other social sciences. Greimassian, Peircean or Lotmanian, it is lost in epistemological refinements so impenetrable that most practitioners who would like to be able to draw inspiration from it for analytical purposes give it up and fall back on the most eclectic communication approaches. The unintelligibility of what is most frequently published under its name discredits its theoretical claim to increase the intelligibility of the world.

What is to be done?

- (1) A metalanguage is necessary, but it should be limited to the essential.
- (2) Teaching that is systematically oriented towards analysis would be possible.
- (3) Publications in a language accessible for analysis and accompanied by proposals responding to the quest for meaning of the present time would revitalize the discipline and finally give it a place in the intellectual field.

B

Petitimberty 2023, "Mehr Licht"! [A reflection on the problems of meaning of the present time and on the untapped potential that semiotics offers in the face of the expectations of younger generations.]

Landowski 2005, *Les interactions risquées*. [A renewal of the semiotic view of the world.]

Fontanille 2019, *La coopérative, alternative sémiotique et politique*. [An example of an analysis leading to proposals relating to a social problem.]

Richard L. Lanigan (International Communicology Institute, USA)

Semiotics has urged its addition as both a name and a method of science and technology, but this emphasis does an injustice to the rich heritage in European human science philosophy, both classical and contemporary. The provocative heritage of the *Trivium* (Logic, Rhetoric, Grammar) and the *Quadrivium* (Mathematic Space and Time) inform our contemporary understanding of human communication grounded in the work of Peirce, the linguistics of Jakobson and Greimas, and the rhetoric of Juri Lotman. These authors narrate a humanistic account of contemporary Communication Theory (Norbert Wiener's additive algorithm) and Information Theory (Claude Shannon's subtractive algorithm) that grounds the very base of technology, especially in its variations as "artificial intelligence". While no longer with us, the voices of Umberto Eco and John Deely still call us back to this Scholastic tradition.

B

Lowe 2006, *The Four-Category Ontology*. [Current model of philosophical metaphysics.]

Lowe 2008, Tropes and perception.

Osgniach 2014[1938], *The Analysis of Objects or the Four Principal Categories*.

Massimo Leone (University of Turin, Italy)

Human language is simulated in an increasingly proficient way by artificial intelligence; semiotics will have to face a world in which the distinction between which meaning comes from humans, which from AI, and which from a combination of both, will become more and more blurred.

Also as a consequence of technological development, and mainly of the advances in the artificial production of meaning, new forms of socially disruptive behaviours will emerge, often intertwined with the resurgence of pre-modern irrational ideologies; semiotics will have to face a new digital Middle Ages.

AI will also reveal the "natural world" and its meanings under a different light, which semiotics will be crucial in understanding.

B

All, or at least most, published semiotic articles and books are important, for we grow as a community of scholars and not as individuals in competition with each other for the first prize. I am not particularly fond of the ideology of the continuous ranking of human activity.

Many thanks! We don't mean nomination for ranking, we mean the semiotics work(s) of the 21st century that influenced you or what you'd suggest to be read by semiotics students or scholars. What do you think?

The answer would implicitly single out some texts, which would also likely be of living authors, to the detriment of others; I would prefer not to act as a testimonial and invite students and young scholars to find their own influential texts the nature of which of course depends a lot on the kind of research being carried out. So very politely and with a lot of respect, I would decline your invitation to explicitly mention any works.

Youzheng Li (China and USA)

Semiotics is only a name that can be used to refer to any chosen subjects. So the semiotic spirit and the current professional activities named as semiotics are separate matters. Semiotic spirit should be performed in theoretical interdisciplinary operations in human sciences, while the current academic ecology is formed in a variety of disciplinary specialties. This self-contradiction at both operative and epistemological levels implies the basic dilemma of semiotics today. The fact is: the current humanities are dominated by the professional utility that is contrary to the free mind for searching truths. The title 'semiotics', because of its historical reputation (as a trademark), is employed merely to profit from the work. The semiotics practitioners would perhaps gain a collective vain satisfaction owing to the academic establishment.

B

Because my reading range of semiotics publications is quite limited, I am unable to say anything in this regard. By the way, the question itself seems less meaningful when related perspectives are so very controversial.

Lauri Linask (Tallinn University, Estonia)

- (i) Semiotics should (re-)argue and (re-)establish the central core of its identity.
- (ii) Semiotics should (re-)argue and (re-)establish its foundational position among the humanities and its relationship to (other) sciences.

B

Short 2007, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*.

Stjernfelt 2014, *Natural Propositions*.

Deacon 2011, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*.

James Jakób Liszka (State University of New York at Plattsburgh, USA)

A continuing problem for semiotics is recognition in the academy, indicated by the lack of *undergraduate* programmes in semiotics. I say this because all flourishing disciplines have undergraduate programmes whose faculty have doctorates in that discipline. Although many universities offer *courses* in semiotics, globally, there is only a handful of undergraduate *programmes* – the University of Tartu

being an example – and only a few doctoral programmes in semiotics. Unless graduates find university employment, the programmes will struggle, and administrators will find little reason to support them. Anthropology departments might offer courses in semiotics but would likely prefer a hire with a PhD in anthropology, who might also have some semiotics expertise.

There is a lack of semiotic undergraduate programmes because it is interdisciplinary. Given the tendency for disciplinary silos in the academy, interdisciplinary programmes tend to be suspect. There are a few, such as gender and women's studies, that do fairly well as undergraduate programmes. One reason is their political support among students, faculty and administrators. Nonetheless, those majors tend to be double majors, the other being the student's breadwinner.

Although there is more interdisciplinary research, specialization is still the coin of the realm. Specialists from different disciplines may work together on a research project, but this is different than researchers who may have done research in more than one discipline.

Although, certainly, all levels of programmes in semiotics should be encouraged, the focus should be on the further development of semiotic centres, where scholars can come to gain some expertise in semiotics that informs their discipline.

B

Short 2007, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*.

Anna Maria Lorusso (University of Bologna, Italy)

Problem of *simulation*, that does not mean just AI, but also forms of double coding, misinformation, merging between reality and fictionality...

Problem of *cultural translation*: our world demands that we delve deep into this problem, for example in translation and dialogue among migrant communities, with their different memories etc. ...

B

Landowski 2004, *Passions sans nom*.

Katarzyna Machtyl (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland)

On the level of semiotics itself. Semiotics needs to be aware of its universalizing capacity and make a proper use of it. In my view we should get back to Peirce's idea he borrowed from Kant of semiotics as an architectonic system of knowledge encompassing the entire reality. By auto-reflective efforts semiotics should revise its general theory and in so doing make itself both more internally consistent and externally flexible. By the former I mean taking care of the coherent grounding of semiotic theory, and by the latter – openness towards other disciplines. Like a Möbius strip, semiotics needs to be sufficiently consistent and open at the same time.

On the level of the scientific field and subject of studies. I myself stick to the idea of bridging the gaps between disciplines (humanities and sciences) and the subjects of research (culture and nature). In contemporary humanities the non-anthropocentric view is being applied more and more often but with no reference to semiotics, whilst biosemiotics on the one hand and Sebeok's global semiotics, developed further by Petrilli and Ponzio, on the other hand, introduce great concepts and methods enabling more sophisticated studies in this field. Semiotics has a great potential for providing the very basis for such study.

B

Magnus, Kull 2012, *Roots of culture in the umwelt.*

Petrilli 2010, *Sign Crossroads in Global Perspective: Semioethics and Responsibility.*

Tarasti 2015, *Sein und Schein: Explorations in Existential Semiotics.*

Rocco Mangieri (Los Andes University, Venezuela)

In this post-pandemic phase, semiotics has, in my opinion, at least three fundamental tasks:

(1) The first has to do with the epistemological and methodological level in terms of revision and internal reorganization of its general models: the fundamental objective is to become an *inter-* and transdisciplinary space of greater reach and effectiveness in order to increase its intensity of convocation and agency.

(2) The second task refers to the growing need for integrated theoretical spaces such as ecosemiotics, biosemiotics or socioanthropology, as well as the update and reorganization of the semiotics of culture and a process of revision of the structuralist and post-structuralist model that still prevents us from describing phenomena and events based on the continuity, flow and semiosis of living presence. These are tasks and an ethical commitment whose common goal is the expansion of life forms' meaning of life as highly complex ecological environments.

(3) The third task is of a deeper nature and refers to the commitment to creating a space for a semiotics of the social bond in the sense proposed by Eliseo Veron and Gregory Bateson. These three tasks have several connections.

B

Anderson 2009, *Affective atmospheres.*

Fontanille 2021, *Ensemble: Pour une anthropologie sémiotique du politique.*

Maran 2020, *Ecosemiotics.*

Özsari (ed.) 2023, *Geleceğe Göstergelikle Bakmak* [Looking at the future through semiotics].

Verón 2013, *La semiosis social, 2.*

Kobus Marais (University of Free State, South Africa)

I think one of the main problems that semiotics needs to address is the ecological crisis, which it is doing but should keep on doing. This can only be done, in my view, if biosemiotic insights into the links between humans and other animals make inroads in both ecology studies and the humanities broadly speaking. I think that biosemiotics is uniquely situated to address the materiality of human existence without submitting to either reductive materialism or idealism/constructivism. In fact, I think it can successfully amend the idealism/constructivism that underlies the view in the humanities that humans exist in a symbolosphere only. In this sense, a lot of work remains to be done to introduce biosemiotics into the humanities and social sciences.

B

For me, the two most important semiotic works of the 21st century would be Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding*, and Deacon's *Incomplete Nature*. I also think Timo Maran's work *Ecosemiotics* and Kalevi Kull's articles on the basis of semiosis in living organisms are foundational.

Gianfranco Marrone (University of Palermo, Italy)

I believe that semiotics must take up, discuss and translate the so-called "ontological turn" into its categories. In the last two decades, that is, roughly since the beginning of the new millennium, some anthropologists (Viveiros de Castro, Descola, Ingold and others) and some philosophers and sociologists of science (Stengers, Latour etc.) have argued quite convincingly that the semantic opposition between Nature and Culture has no reason to exist. This dichotomy, dating back to the early 19th century, does not belong to very many societies on the planet, and even our Western modernity has never actually practised it. Rather, each culture has its own way of discriminating itself from a supposed natural basis, thus its own specific ontology. Hence two consequences. First, if the opposition between the natural and cultural sciences is to be overcome, where does that leave semiotics? Saussure argued that semiotics lies in a third area, which is that of signification. Second, with respect to the challenges of the climate crisis, what is the role of an ecological semiotics?

B

Fabrizio 2024, *Proposte d'adozione: Problemi di semiotica generale*.

Bertrand 2024, *La générativité est-elle soluble dans le sensible?*

Alonso 2023, *La tension politique: Pour une sémiotique de la conflictualité*.

Dario Martinelli (Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania)

Semiotics, in its golden years, has distinguished itself by a progressive, even revolutionary, paradigm and scholarly attitude. In the hope of recovering that nowadays-mostly-forgotten identity, I believe that a current imperative, seen from any aspect – social, political, economic, ethical, etc. – is the *ecological crisis*: climate change, consumerism, animal abuse, overpopulation... I look forward for semioticians to concentrating more of their efforts on the analysis and interpretation of progressive and ethically-sound policies and lifestyles, instead of conservative and often reactionary ones. A good example is the area of food semiotics: my hope is to witness more work on topics like plant-based diets, food localism, anti-corporate food activism, etc.

With the same progressive spirit, I also hope there will be more room for semiotic analyses of how language and discourse are developing (sometimes forwards, sometimes backwards) in the context of *digital age and all its branches*, fully including Artificial Intelligence, of course. Phenomena like post-truth, vulgarization and trivialization of communication in the social media (the famous “legions of imbeciles” Umberto Eco warned us about), and also a certain algorithm-based standardization of modes of expression and interaction (fuelled by AI itself), are all themes that deserve proper scholarly attention from our community.

B

Provided that my choices are entirely subjective, based on what I have mostly enjoyed and/or found useful for my research, rather than the result of an appropriate assessment of popularity, impact and the likes, my titles are:

as a pedagogical tool for introducing semiotics to students, I have found Volli's *Manuale di Semiotica* (2003) extraordinarily clear and informative;

as a contribution to general semiotics, considering that most masterworks have been written already in the 20th century, Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) stands out for an almost-unique perspective and for the monumental research work behind it;

as a specific monograph in one of the fields I work with, I consider Tagg's *Music's Meanings* (2013) one of the most important contributions to musical semiotics in general, not only in the present century.

Irina Melnikova (Vilnius University, Lithuania)

I think that the main problem that semiotics should address is related to the issue of communication in human society, which has created and is improving artificial intelligence, the technology of both unprecedented creative opportunities and fakery. The issue of AI as a tool for fakery and a mark of our entrance into the “realm of the absolute fake” has already been outlined by Leone (2023). Leone

articulates the essential tasks of the semiotics of artificial intelligence. A starting point is ready, but further and broader exploration is required. Alongside this, familiar and common issues of communication (perception/understanding/interpretation/meaning) – not only within human society – remain equally important.

B

I can hardly name the most important books or articles for all the fields of semiotic studies, yet within my field of research and, for me personally, among the most important publications were such books as Johansen's *Literary Discourse* (2002), Stjernfelt's *Diagrammatology* (2007), Bellucci's *Peirce's Speculative Grammar* (2018).

Tiziana Migliore (University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Italy)

The art of social care.

Reading those who have preceded me in pointing out “what the main challenge for contemporary semiotics is”, one constant becomes clear: the need to *reposition* our discipline among the social sciences, the natural sciences and the humanities, and to distinguish it through a *precise definition of its own Identity*. We often have to explain to people ‘Semiotics’, since it is not taught in schools. And the major research funding bodies, such as the European Research Council, neither contemplate nor mention semiotics, whereas they include panels such as “Symbolic Representation” or “Intellectual History”. It is a symptom of a lack of recognition of semiotics. Few are able to grasp what semiotics is: does it deal with signs? With languages? Society? Or communication? Its confusion with other disciplines excludes semiotics from all fields of knowledge. Indeed, analytical philosophy already studies signs, on the assumption that they stand for objects, better than we do; sociology has always been concerned with society and communication; linguistics and philosophy of language investigate language in its properties and in a philosophical sense. The domain of *signification* remains uncovered. Today's very serious social crisis, ecological, diplomatic, intercultural, gender-related, due to the incapacity and unwillingness to read and understand collective and individual processes, calls us to *return to the front line*, as *scientists* that analyse *meanings* and *significations* not for the sake of mental lucubrations, but for and with people, especially with those who need to defend themselves.

In 1975 Umberto Eco institutionalized semiotics at the University by cultivating the “*thinking of the public*”, by placing *knowledge* and *methodologies* on this side of the barricade, where the messages arrive. Following Paolo Fabbri, semiotics is an *ars interveniendi* that helps to dispel the fog, to clarify, to assign the right priorities in the scales of values. In order to indicate a problem that semiotics should address in the near future, I believe that our discipline must *take care of*

what happens. The nexus between *semeiotics (medicine)* and semiotics, namely the relationship between the manifestation of physical symptoms in the human (and animal) body and signs in everyday life is long-established, is historicized. But we probably still have to realize the reason of this connection.

In my view semiotics too should practise an *art of care*, by highlighting symptoms of well-being and malaise in social corporeity, analysing them and finding remedies. Regardless of which currents we belong to and which authors we draw inspiration from, the descriptive science that is semiotics can aspire to be a “*therapeutics of the social*” (Greimas), i.e. “knowledge” and “action on the state of things” not in the abstract, but to play the role of *mediators*, of intercessors of the others. Actually, local populations, all over the world, do not wait for the “experts” from above to teach them how to behave (good manners and conduct!). They instead need to engage with theorists and regain a *responsibility* that has been taken away from them.

Semiotics will only be able to be socially recognized if their various currents do research in the field and commit themselves to publishing also in the press, about social phenomena of common interest and critical issues. Working together, mutually translating our cultures, devoting articles, books, seminars and conferences to concrete topics – public soil, for how it is conceived by different states; weapons; food waste; digital control and surveillance; social inequalities; money and other forms of economic exchange... – is, according to me, the way. Let’s put ourselves in a position publicly to answer the question “*what is semiotics for?*”

B

Fabbri 2023, *La svolta semiotica*.

Latour 2018, *Down to Earth*.

Ingold 2021, *Correspondences*.

Ivan Mladenov (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria)

Back in the 1990s, while preparing the first two-volume collection of semiotic works in Bulgarian, I asked myself a similar question: “Is semiotics in danger of dissolving among some more fashionable disciplines?” My negative answer then envisaged semiotics’ inherited aptitude to elevate itself by one level of abstraction above the rising danger, thus assimilating it. The best example was a branch of ‘cognitive sciences’, where semiotics simply replaced ‘science’, turning it into ‘cognitive semiotics’. The contesting disciplines at the time were not many, so it was still possible to face them one by one. Today’s challenge is the ubiquitous presence of AI, which threatens to dismantle all-encompassing theories such as semiotics. However, challenge does not imply a fight only, so, would it not be better to consolidate the new endeavours? In today’s atomized world semiotics has another

precious property to offer, which secures its indisputable need for re/cognizing an object. It is mediation, taken as a 'Third,' which forms the sign's wholeness. We simply have to recall why Dewey called Peirce "a philosopher's philosopher". He argues that Peirce's ideas will reach the general public only through the mediations and translations of others. So, time to reconcile the sign with digital reality. As a 'cybersign,' maybe?

B

It seems to me that the beginning of the 21st century has not brought along ground-breaking ideas in semiotics. There are plenty of clarification works: companions, handbooks, compilations, in short – works based on previous achievements. Following my considerations in the above paragraph, I would expect that a fresh, insightful work could come from a different discipline, digital reality, for example, but it might still be early. Nevertheless, I would mention Nubiola and Barrena's 2009 article "Charles Peirce's first visit to Europe, 1870–71", followed by a series of articles on the same topic, which marked the advance of Peirce's thought in new geographical territories. Book: Short 2007, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*.

Mihai Nadin (University of Texas at Dallas, USA)

Two characters inspire my view on what semiotics should address: Monsieur Jourdain and Niels Bohr. The first priority should be the development of the undergirding understanding of automated syntax engine. Indeed, there is more semiotics than ever – and even a semiotics-informed new profession: prompt engineer. But it all goes the way of Molière's Monsieur Jourdain: "For forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it." None of the AI "geniuses" have any semiotic competence. Like Monsieur Jourdain, they speak about intelligence as though there is intelligence not semiotically expressed. Automated syntax engines are changing science, politics, medicine to an extent never before experienced. Unfortunately, semioticians are spectators to a change in which their competence could have made a difference.

A second priority relates to Niels Bohr, but not for his Nobel-prize physics. My reference is to the Principle of Complementarity: the unity between pairs of properties of what cannot be simultaneously assessed. The orgy of measuring everything stays in contrast to the decreased interest in the meaning of what is measured. In the absence of the awareness of meaning, which is the knowledge domain of semiotics, humankind continues blindly on the path of unsustainable progress. Meaning should become the focus of semiotic activity. Semioticians: stop following in the footsteps of positivist sciences. Affirm meaning as essential to our future.

B

Biglari's edited *Open Semiotics* (2023, four volumes, 141 chapters, 171 scholars). Contributions range between excellent and miserable – but it is a must for those active in semiotics. My own chapter (“Meaning and semiosis: To know is by necessity purposeful”) makes a reference to publications I considered important (as they relate to my work).

Winfried Nöth (Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil)

I am divided, for questions of ecosemiotics are certainly among the most topical and pressing ones of our times, but since my present field of academic teaching and research is in the one of Artificial Intelligences, my answer is:

The most challenging topic for semioticians is currently the study of nonbiological semiotic agency in processes of semiosis and the need to place the foundations of general semiotics on a new non-anthropocentric basis.

B

I find the second question too difficult to answer for three reasons: (1) I am convinced that the most important book published in the 21st century in the field of semiotics has not yet been written; (2) since my interests in semiotics are plural or pluralistic, I feel that semiotic research is a collective endeavour and does not permit to highlight a single book as the most important one; (3) since semiotics is a transdisciplinary endeavour and the disciplines involved are too different but have all equal right to be studied, I feel that it is impossible to highlight one specific book in the diverse fields of semiotic research (such as biosemiotics, ecosemiotics, semiotics of law, semiotics of social networks, etc.) because doing so you risk marking one branch of semiotic research as more important than another.

Maarja Ojamaa (University of Tartu, Estonia)

From my point of view, one of the main problems that semiotics needs to address is that of noise and semiotic debris (brought about by the data deluge) that interferes with meaning-making in our lifeworld. This pertains mostly to the digital realm, but has significant repercussions outside of it as well.

B

Hayles 2002, *Writing Machines*, and/or Hayles 2012, *How We Think*.

Neyla Graciela Pardo Abril (National University of Colombia, Colombia)

One of the fundamental problems of contemporary society that semiotics should address systematically and with clear commitment refers to discursive polarization as a strategy in which false information and forms of hatred are constructed, war is encouraged, and in general, serious ruptures in social coexistence

occur. A second problem, related to the first, points to the need to make scientific reflections that contribute to the solution of the most structural problems of society such as poverty, racism, xenophobia, social exclusion, all of which are installed sign-discursively in human life.

B

Kress, Leeuwen 2020[1996], *Reading Images*.

Bateman 2008, Multimodal documents and their components.

Tarasti 2002, *Signs of Music: A Guide to Musical Semiotics*.

Jamin Pelkey (Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada)

Two urgent problems for semiotics that also happen to be tangled up with each other are the need for reorienting to experiential meaning writ large (i.e. meaning of life) and the need for integrating insights from Saussurean structuralism and Peircean pragmatism (i.e. general semiotics). As I detail further in my Preface to the four-volume major reference set *Bloomsbury Semiotics*,⁷ semiotics is uniquely positioned to speak to contemporary crises of meaning, but in order to do so, we need strong emphases on both ideology critique and evolutionary modelling. The former has long been the specialty of (post)structuralist approaches. The latter has long been the specialty of pragmatist/pragmaticist approaches. Many have called for the two to come together, and it seems that we can no longer afford to keep them apart. I suggest that the most important bridging element between the two is the role that embodied cognition, or *umwelt* phenomenology, plays in shaping our feelings, images, and conceptions.

B

Two key books to help with these reorientations are Deely's *Purely Objective Reality* (2009a) and McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* (2019).

Alain Perusset (University of Warwick, UK)

As with all contributors to this article,⁸ my response is not based solely on the immediate and future context but also draws on my personal experience and the semiotic tradition that has shaped my way of thinking: Greimassian semiotics. A first response, likely shared by many others, concerns the role that semiotics will need to play in addressing the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, robotics, and new technologies. These fields will inevitably transform our modes of interaction, becoming sources of new meanings and new worlds. The second response, more political, relates to the pedagogical role that semiotics must or should play in

⁷ See Pelkey 2022: 1–15 (Introduction: Signs of meaning in the disciplines).

⁸ Cf. Kull, Velmezova 2014.

a globalized world, where ideologies and discourses of all kinds are in conflict. In this context, semiotics (particularly the post-Greimassian tradition with its conceptual models: from Landowski, Fontanille, Zilberberg, Rastier...) should help to convey that our representations and attitudes are partly culturally constructed, and that different or even opposing representations and attitudes can also be legitimate. This is particularly important for raising awareness and educating younger generations, so they become more receptive to otherness, more enlightened, and more tolerant in societies that will probably become even more cosmopolitan.

B

Landowski 2004, *Passions sans nom*.

Landowski 2005, *Les interactions risquées*.

Fontanille 2008, *Pratiques sémiotiques*.

Jean Petitot (School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, France)

I believe that the main theoretical problems posed by contemporary semiotics will come from neurosemiotics, i.e. the exploration of the neural correlates of the many semiotic phenomena already studied in great detail on the basis of the great semiotic theories of the 20th century.

B

You know the most important texts in this area better than I do. :-)

Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio (Bari University, Italy)

Morris claims that “semiotic” is unique among the sciences, not merely as “a science among sciences” but as an “organon or instrument of all the sciences”. These words evoke Peirce from a letter to Welby: “the only natural lines of demarcation between nearly related sciences are the divisions between the social groups of devotees of those sciences”, “the cenoscopic studies” “of all signs remain one undivided science”, a conclusion reached before knowing Welby, “but which the warm interest that you and I have in each other’s researches in spite of the difference in their lines, decidedly confirms” (CP 8.342). During a lecture delivered at Bari University, Sebeok discussed the expressions ‘domain’ and ‘field’ envisaging biosemiotics as an open and dialogic domain where the human and natural sciences, culture and nature, humanities and life sciences communicate with one another beyond separatisms and specializations. So, the problem is to foster meta-discourse (metasemiosis) beyond artificial boundaries on continuous semiotic fluxes; hence the distinction between ‘semiosis’ as subject matter and ‘semiotics’ as knowledge developed through the study of semiosis; and need for interconnections among discourse genres; for dialogue between scientific discourse and discourse in the humanities.

The problem of communication among different disciplines, dominions and fields involves communication among different “objects” of study, different types of semiosis, so that semiotics is called to “listen” to the state of semiosis in its different manifestations on the planet. If we accept that semiosis and life converge, the semiotician’s responsibilities to semiosis *alias* life constitutes another central problem.

As the general sign science semiotics today must address the problem of “communication” at a planetary level under a double aspect: the socio-economic in the current context of globalization; and, considering how semiosis is inextricably connected with life, the globally semiosical. As evidenced by the destructive character of the globalized socio-economic system, these two aspects are interrelated. As ‘global semiotics’ (Sebeok), semiotics is called to address the interconnection among all types of semiosis on the planet, their interdependency; entanglement among different types of semiosis, different lifeforms, evidencing dangers and searching for remedies. We have denominated this orientation in semiotics concerned with the health of life, human and nonhuman, in all its aspects, ‘*semioethics*’.

B

Sebeok 2001, *Global Semiotics*.

Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014, *Opere 1919–1930*.

Barthes 2002, *Comment vivre ensemble*.

Ott Puumeister (University of Tartu, Estonia)

To put it briefly, it is necessary for semiotics to continue becoming nonhuman, not only in biosemiotics (but there is still some way to go in that direction as well), but also when dealing with politics, media, technology, culture, etc.

B

These might not belong to the institutional discipline of semiotics, but there have been two great books in the tradition of (post)structuralist semiotics and anthropology that trace potential trajectories of this becoming-nonhuman:

Viveiros de Castro 2014[2009], *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

Descola 2013[2005], *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

João Queiroz (Institute of Arts and Design, Brazil)

What is cognition made of, and how does it work? In Peirce’s pragmatism and semiotics, cognition is composed of sign action, or semiosis – an embodied, situated, and distributed process that integrates signs and inference, dynamic situated relations, artefact manipulation, and culture and communication. I refer to this view as ‘active semiotic externalism’. What I call ‘mind’ is semiosis – a temporal process of signs in action. Peirce’s anti-Cartesian philosophical agenda has two

complementary theses: mind is semiosis; semiosis is temporal – a time-dependent process. I think with what we find around us: signs in action. I think with signs that we design and find to think with. In my opinion, the semiotic issues with the most significant consequences across various domains (cognitive science, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence) are related to ‘active semiotic externalism’ – how can we model (and computationally simulate) the external action of signs?

B

Clark 2008, *Supersizing the Mind*.

Tiit Remm (University of Tartu, Estonia)

Inside the field and internal communication something to work on would be understanding and accepting what is common to different approaches and authors and what their differences are. How and where do they appear and why? For example, while most basic ontological premises might be shared, further steps relying on methodologies and objectives might already be incongruent to the extent that scholars presume there is nothing in common. In other cases, connections and disconnections might be in other places. Without this understanding – and, most of all, without a will to accept the possibility of shared premises and crucial meaningful differences – the dialogue and the orientation in the field remains superficial. In a sense there still is, or always will be, a need to address the basics, the methodologies, and reflect on one’s own motivations.

Regarding the problems as relevant topics in the broader world, I would point out the need to tackle changes in semiotic mechanisms that come with the loss of textualization and of enunciation in culture – a tendency that can be seen accompanying technological and social changes.

B

In a way, works of most general importance turn out to be those providing a common ground, and legibility, by connecting diversity. Therefore, I would add to the list of most important articles this systematizing overview of textbooks:

Kull *et al.* 2015, A hundred introductions to semiotics, for a million students. It does have its problems, but is also of an immense importance to the field.

Claudio J. Rodríguez Higuera (Palacký University Olomouc, Czechia)

Addressing the vague explanatory level assumed (but not spelled out) within biosemiotics. Biosemiotics encompasses many possible areas of research and makes claims at many levels, staking the language of signs as both methodology and explanation. For biosemiotics to raise explanations contingent on securing meaning-making as a causal factor, it needs to delimit where and which claims it

can make. This problem ought to be addressed meta-methodologically if we are to accept biosemiotics as indeed securing biological explanations on non-physical causal factors.

A secondary problem that stems from the first one is that the dominance of the sign parlance built from the Peirce hybrid ever-present in biosemiotics does not distinguish between its existence as a method, a radical theory, or a kind of explanation. Finding alternatives to this parlance (and its presuppositions) should be a crucial step forward in biosemiotics.

B

Favareau 2008, The evolutionary history of biosemiotics.

Hoffmeyer 2008b, Semiotic scaffolding of living systems.

Kull, Deacon, Emmeche, Hoffmeyer, Stjernfelt 2009, Theses on biosemiotics.

Farouk Y. Seif (Antioch University Seattle, USA)

Over the last ten years, new and deep understanding has emerged to not only mitigate the past challenges that semiotics confronted, but also to view semiotics as a transdisciplinary framework for understanding current reality and envisaging a desired future. One of the most intriguing developments is the notion of ‘de-sign’ as the fusion of design and semiotics which has the potential of augmenting a major shift in human perception and experience of reality beyond absolute-ness. What is imperative now is to transform our outdated habitual state of mind and blind beliefs into a transparent integral consciousness that is at ease with the immateriality of intentionality and the indeterminacy of ‘de-sign’ outcomes. It is never enough to merely cope with a complex and ever-changing world characterized by artificial intelligence among other technological developments, but rather to engage in a ‘de-sign’ approach that allows us to learn how to navigate through our *Lebenswelt* imaginatively and resiliently. Based on this point of view, I offer my most recent publications.

B

Seif 2019, *De-Sign in the Transmodern World*.

Seif 2020, De-sign as a destiny of negation.

Seif 2022, De-sign agency as the envoy of intentionality.

Seif 2023, Navigating the labyrinth of de-sign.

Eero Tarasti (University of Helsinki, Finland)

The main problem is to develop semiotics in the theoretical sense towards new models of analysis and reflection – I do not mean just their application to what the media and technology offer us, but such theories which would grow from the long tradition of classic semiotics and philosophical thought.

B

I hesitate to answer to this since of course I would like to mention some of my own, say, for instance the anthology *Transcending Signs 2023*. It might be inappropriate to foreground one's own work in this manner!

Daina Tetters (Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia)

Semiotics as a scientific discipline has partially lost or, more honestly, has not yet acquired, some holistic systematicity in its training, disciplinary retrospective scope, or approach to scientific research. Different research communities still follow divergent paradigms of sign theories, treating them as the only correct ones. This forces semiotics to remain relatively marginalized and, from the point of view of scientific logic, to play an inadequate role in the system of sciences, remaining subordinate to either linguistics, communicology, or philosophy.

The problem will not solve itself because it is deepened by the accelerated disappearance of important semiotically relevant ideas and their authors from the collective memory, which will linearize and shorten the history and theory of semiotics.

Since all good things come in threes, I would like to mention one more problem caused by the popular scientific teaching of the basics of semiotics. This simplifies semiotics in its various applications, but not in a good sense.

B

Gorlée 2020, *Wittgenstein's Secret Diaries*.

Groupe µ 2015, *Principia semiotica*.

Peirce 2025, *Logic of the Future: Correspondence*.

Gian Maria Tore (University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg)

Semiotics should be the science that undoes both generalities and the anecdotal. To counter the anecdotal, we need a much broader view: the generic horizon. An object or a fact is not absolute or totally unique; it must be understood as part of a whole. Against generalities, fixed wholes, a much more precise view: the finesse of the singular. An object or a fact is in no way an illustration of something that is already given without it; it must also be understood for what it teaches us that we would not have thought without it.

Semiotics is thus a true science of difficulty. On the one hand, it is a challenge to the easiness of approaches that have already been made, and then are doomed to be droned on about, lessons repeated on the pretext of this or that case study. On the other hand, a challenge to easiness of approaches that glorify themselves with such and such a phenomenon brought to the pinnacle.

Semiotics has to be a permanent sensitization to problematics. Half epistemologist, constructing problems (as opposed to anecdotes); half aesthete, committing and re-motivating (as opposed to generalities). But, unfortunately, semiotics has become academicized. To get away from the fatal conservative tendency, it has to go back to its founders: it has to invent itself through a form of writing that does not yet have a pre-established format, so original is it (Hjelmslev, Barthes, etc.), or that hesitates every time it has to write, so teeming is it with ideas that are never set in stone (Peirce, Saussure, etc.), so humble and brilliant at the same time.

B

Fontanille 2003, *Sémiotique du discours*.

Cadiot, Visetti 2001, *Pour une théorie des formes sémantiques*.

Jaana Valsiner (Aalborg University, Denmark)

I can see two:

(1) Turning semiotics into a developmental science. Here of course there already exists the history of developmental biology that has substantively fed into biosemiotics. But the social side of semiotics has remained largely ontologically focussed. The emergence of sign mediation in irreversible time requires further investigation in practice (theoretically, of course, the idea has been around).

(2) Getting rid of the archetype of the Shannon-Weaver model of communication. It does not fit semiosis as it rules out generativity in the process of semiosis.

B

Cannot answer – my reading of the range of semiotics books of today is limited.

Ekaterina Velmezova (University of Lausanne, Switzerland; University of Tartu, Estonia)

It is hardly possible to speak about one single problem (even the “main one”), but in the first place I would put the problem of clarifying the relationship of semiotics, its kind of “communication” with other (“related”) disciplines. This in no way means drawing any strict boundaries in our interdisciplinary age: the solution may (and should) be different. Solving this problem would make it possible to strengthen the reputation of semiotics in the scientific community, since until this is done, scientists who *de facto* study semiotics may simply not recognize this. In this way, semiotics would be promoted and more valued. This problem is partly related to both the problem of self-determination of semiotics and the problem of defining the object of semiotics. In addition, attempts to solve this global problem would partly “discipline” semiotics, allowing different schools to know one another better, and therefore “dialogue” better.

Already simple attempts to solve this problem would, in turn, contribute to finding solutions to other problems facing semiotics: namely, to improve teaching of semiotics at the university level, as well as to ensure a more attentive attitude of semioticians to the past of semiotics. This, in turn, would also help modern semioticians become better acquainted with the numerous schools and directions that exist today, respect and appreciate them.

B

Several good books have been published. However, I would like to put semiotic journals in the first place – publications that not only carry new information today, but also unite many researchers, often belonging to very different generations and schools. These journals continue to be published today despite numerous difficulties. Their publication (which is sometimes based only on the enthusiasm of our colleagues) is a noble cause, and often it is precisely the nobility that is lacking, unfortunately, in modern academia. I will therefore limit myself to mentioning three journals with which I had (and have) the pleasure of collaborating:

Sign Systems Studies: the oldest semiotic journal with a general semiotic orientation;

Semiotica: a journal publishing articles which once again allow us to think about the relationship of semiotics to other disciplines;

Acta Semiotica Estica: an Estonian (more precisely, Tartu) semiotics journal, published in Estonian, and thus nobly maintaining the tradition of the Estonian semiotics language against the backdrop of the ever-increasing transition of semiotics to international English.

Several articles published in these journals in the current century contain germs of ideas that, I am sure, will be soon developed into books and monographs.

Andreas Ventsel (University of Tartu, Estonia)

In the past decade, we have faced a series of crises, including the European migration crisis, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, and the escalating climate crisis. Every crisis is also a communication crisis, where awareness or ignorance of cultural contexts can either resolve or exacerbate issues. Modern communication largely occurs through various media platforms, which shape the public opinion by emphasizing certain aspects of identity and cultural memory. Therefore, I consider it crucial to study the conflicts and threat discourses emerging in (social) media by integrating approaches from political and security studies, as well as cultural, political and biosemiotics, and media semiotics. This interdisciplinary perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how narratives are constructed and contested in the public sphere. From a theoretical-ontological perspective, semiotics appears to offer a nuanced understanding of the logic of

contingency and a relational approach to developing research methodologies. This framework allows for a flexible and dynamic interpretation of meaning-making processes, essential for addressing complex and evolving social phenomena.

B

I focus on books that could serve as foundational resources for the development of the research directions that I mentioned. Valsiner's book is one of the best, in connection with semiotics, for studying contemporary (social) media communication that emphasizes quick reactions and emotional responses. There are certainly many other significant contributions, but this selection provides a focused lens for investigating how semiotic frameworks can be applied to current communication patterns, especially in response to urgent social and political issues.

Hoffmeyer 2008a, *Biosemiotics*.

Maran 2020, *Ecosemiotics*.

Valsiner 2014, *An Invitation to Cultural Psychology*.

Anne Wagner (Lille University, France)

One of the primary challenges for legal semiotics in the near future is understanding and addressing the implications of digitalization and AI in law. The rapid integration of artificial intelligence in legal processes, such as predictive analytics in case outcomes, automated contract analysis, and decision-making assistance, requires a semiotic examination of how these technologies influence legal interpretation and meaning-making. Semiotics must delve into how AI systems encode, interpret, and represent legal norms, and whether these representations align with human legal reasoning and ethical standards.

Another critical issue is the semiotic analysis of digital legal texts and the transformation of legal communication in the digital realm. With the proliferation of online legal documents, court records, and legislative texts, we need to understand how digital formats alter the interpretation and accessibility of legal information. Legal semiotics should explore the impact of digital media on the structure, presentation, and reception of legal texts.

Additionally, visual legal semiotics is increasingly more important as it deals with non-verbal cues and visual elements in legal contexts, which are challenging yet crucial for comprehensive legal analysis. Addressing these issues will help ensure that technological advancements in law enhance, rather than undermine, the integrity and fairness of legal systems.

B

Wagner, Marusek (eds.) 2023, *Research Handbook on Legal Semiotics*.

Leone 2024, *Semiotic Ideologies*.

Wong 2019, *Multimodal Communication*.

Stéphanie Walsh Matthews (Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada)

The interdisciplinary nature of semiotics is one of its great strengths. Semiotics can work alongside or merge completely with many different fields and sciences, perspectives and approaches. We see this in the competing taxonomies and genealogies that provide newcomers to semiotics with a guiding map to its principles and provide those well acquainted with the science of signs with an update on semiotic trends and debates.

Questions such as ‘is anthropology in fact semiotics? Or should we specify anthropo-semiotics, or is this redundant, etc.’ are perhaps considered harmless inquiries. However, discerning the order of class between biosemiotics and evolutionary semiotics, or cognitive semiotics from anything else, can at times impede the actual opportunity for thinking semiotically. Debates focus on ‘form’ rather than ‘matter’ and general semiotics is suffocated rather than energized.

The current problem for semiotics has already been stated by contributing authors to *Sign Systems Studies* in 2014. I reiterate that we must insist on a *general semiotics canon and study*. We should invite all fields and perspectives to become acquainted with this science and engage – not in silos – but in lively interactions thus supporting the continued growth of the semiotic studies web.

B

O’Neill 2008, *Interactive Media: The Semiotics of Embodied Interaction*.

And: Pelkey *et al.* 2022, *Bloomsbury Semiotics* 4-volume set.

Jordan Zlatev (Lund University, Sweden)

In my humble opinion, semiotics (proper) needs to get out from its ivory tower and address the nature of different kinds of meaning(fulness), in close cooperation with sister fields such as philosophy (especially phenomenology) and cognitive science (especially the so-called “enactive” approach). Biosemiotics is doing this to some extent, but it would be great if it could proceed without isolating itself from the above. There are optimistic signs that this is underway, also with the help of cognitive semiotics. In the latter, the issue of the ongoing Meaning Crisis has been topical (see the recent 5th conference of the International Association for Cognitive Semiotics), and it would be great if semiotics could address itself to this as well.

B

My two favourite books in cognitive semiotics from this century are:

Donald 2001, *A Mind So Rare*.

Sokolowski 2008, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*.

And: Tallis 2011, *Aping Mankind*.

In addition, there were some respondees who preferred to stay **anonymous**. Their suggestions on publications are listed below in alphabetical order.

B

Biglari (ed.) 2023, *Open Semiotics* (4 vols).

Coquet 2007, *Phusis et Logos*.

Danesi 2016, *The Semiotics of Emoji*.

Favareau *et al.* 2017, How can the study of the humanities inform the study of biosemiotics?

Fontanille 2008, *Pratiques sémiotiques*.

Hoffmeyer, Stjernfelt 2016, *The Great Chain of Semiosis*.

On 14 September 2024 we also asked the same two questions from a **large language simulator**, namely the latest versions of generative pre-trained transformers (GPT) developed by OpenAI – GPT4o (released 13 May 2024), and o1 (released 12 September 2024). The GPT was given the same letter as our colleagues above, as well as the 2014 article referred to in the letter (in pdf). The results are given below, without editing from us.

GPT4o

Main problems for semiotics in the near future:

Integration of Interdisciplinary Insights: Semiotics should focus on integrating insights from rapidly evolving fields such as cognitive science, neurosemiotics, and artificial intelligence. As technology continues to shape communication, semiotics must examine how digital and virtual interactions influence meaning-making processes.

Relevance and Application: Another major issue is the relevance of semiotics in addressing contemporary societal problems. Semiotics should expand its applied fields, especially in media, technology, and global culture, ensuring it remains an instrumental tool for understanding social and cultural shifts.

B

Important semiotics works published in the 21st century:

John Deely's *Semiotics Seen Synchronically: The View from 2010* (2010) – A foundational work emphasizing the need for semiotics to overcome resistance in academia and demonstrating its interdisciplinary power.

Torkild Thellefsen & Bent Sørensen's *Charles Sanders Peirce in His Own Words* (2014) – A compilation that revives Peircean thought and highlights its relevance in modern semiotic discussions.

Mihai Nadin's *Reassessing the Foundations of Semiotics* (2012) – A critical work that explores the foundational aspects of semiotics and its potential to redefine research agendas.

o1

One of the main problems that semiotics should address in the near future is the integration with digital technology and artificial intelligence. As communication increasingly occurs through digital platforms, understanding how signs and meanings are created, transmitted, and interpreted in virtual environments is crucial. This includes the semiotics of social media, virtual realities, and AI-generated content, which are reshaping human interaction and cultural norms.

Another significant challenge is the development of ecological semiotics to address global environmental issues. Semiotics can play a vital role in understanding how cultural signs influence perceptions of nature and environmental responsibility. By exploring the sign systems that shape human relationships with the environment, semiotics can contribute to more effective communication strategies in promoting sustainability and ecological awareness.

B

Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication by Gunther Kress (2010). Kress explores how multiple modes of communication – visual, textual, auditory – interact to create meaning in today’s media-saturated world, offering a framework for understanding contemporary sign-making practices.

Global Semiotics by Thomas A. Sebeok (2001). Sebeok expands semiotic theory to a global scale, integrating biological and cultural sign systems. He emphasizes the interconnectedness of all forms of communication across species, contributing to a holistic understanding of semiotics.

Biosemitotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs by Jesper Hoffmeyer (2008). Hoffmeyer bridges biology and semiotics by examining how living organisms use sign processes. His work offers insights into the foundational role of semiosis in life itself, influencing both scientific and philosophical perspectives.

Commentaries and conclusions

Paul Bouissac (2000: 7) has observed: “Semiotics is perhaps the only discipline which fosters an exigency of self-questioning since any inquiry into the nature of communication and meaning ultimately bears upon its own process and discourse.” This certainly serves to justify our survey. In addition: “Because semiotics remains by and large free from institutional constraints, semioticians enjoy a greater degree of speculative freedom.” (Bouissac 2000: 18)

We received responses from 63 semioticians (among them 21 of those who responded to our earlier survey ten years ago) representing 26 countries. What can be concluded from this?

The distribution of views is in itself an aim and a value of the present account; thus, it allows us to consider the set of answers as an integral whole – a self-description of semiotics.

The purpose of this survey was to bring the world's semioticians closer together, and it is nice to see that, judging by the fact that from the works highlighted as important almost 30% were mentioned repeatedly, they turn out to be not so different and scattered at all.

The bibliography formed from the responses can serve as a valuable list of recommendations for all university libraries. It includes some reference volumes (Cobley, Pelkey, Wagner), but mostly consists of monographs on various general topics of semiotics. We can find works that have appeared only in French, Italian, Spanish or Turkish. This may hint at a certain role of the language barrier in influencing the integration of semiotic theory.

With our first question we tried to find out what it is that we still do not know in the semiotic field, what the gaps and the unsolved semiotic problems are. However, the predominant point seems to be an invitation for consolidation of semiotics – both at the levels of theory and of organization. Nevertheless, a few unsolved problems are brought out that concern semiosis, scaling, design, etc.

As regards thematic nodes, the importance of focusing on the changes resulting from simulated intelligence and large language models were expressed by several respondents. Indeed, an explosive distribution of texts generated by large language models is a mark of these years, and they are developing rapidly. Notice that the text by GPT4o above refers to three sources taken from our earlier article (Kull, Velmezova 2014), while the more advanced version o1 seems to be more independent in its text-generation.

Of course, all the answers are worth careful study and analysis – which, we hope, will take place in the near future. However, we could pay attention to one detail now.

It is interesting that the answers we received reflect not only the current state of semiotics itself, but also the state of the modern world in which semiotics and semioticians live and develop. Judging by the responses, ten years ago, in 2014, the world was a much more peaceful place. Nowadays, many colleagues mention urgent problems such as wars, the climate crisis, the Covid pandemic, living (surviving?) in a world of artificial intelligence, etc. It is worth noting that seeking answers to pressing problems actually related to the survival of humans as a species may involve turning to semiotics. This means that the status of

semiotics – including its academic status – remains high, that semiotics remains trustworthy, which cannot but make us rejoice.

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