

The concept of semiosphere – Wallis before Lotman and Hoffmeyer

Kalevi Kull¹

Abstract. This note records the early usage of the term and concept of ‘semiosphere’, which appeared in print already in 1961, employed by Polish aesthetician, art philosopher and semiotician Mieczysław Wallis (1895–1975). The term ‘semiosphere’ was also used by Walter Moser in 1979, yet it became widespread only when Juri Lotman introduced the concept in 1984. Jesper Hoffmeyer extended the scope of the concept to cover the biosphere.

In 1960, the 4th Congress of Aesthetics was held in Athens. This happened a couple of years before semiotics became highly attractive to the humanities, yet a semiotic approach to aesthetics was notably present already. In the congress proceedings, we can read:

It is [...] hardly possible to overestimate the role of signs in the human world. Incessantly we perceive and form signs, we “send” and “receive” them. By means of signs we communicate our thoughts, we perpetuate and transmit them through space and time. We live and move in the realm of signs, we are enveloped by a “semiosphere”. Without signs there would be no *Homo sapiens*. Man is a sign-making animal. Man is not only a sign-making, but also an art-making animal. [...] It is an important and attractive task both for semantics and for the science of art to explore the manifold relations and connections between these two great realms of human creativeness – the world of arts and the world of signs. It is necessary to investigate what are the functions of signs in the works of art. It is necessary to analyze the various forms and types of different arts from the point of view of semantics. It is necessary to explore the transformations of semantic structures in the history of various arts [...]. (Wallis 1962: 399–400)

¹ Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi St 2, Tartu 51005, Estonia; e-mail: kalevi.kull@ut.ee.

Sentences 3–5 of this text had been published in Polish as follows already in 1961:

Zyjemy i poruszamy się w kregu znakow, jestesmy spowici “semiosfera”. Bez znaku nie bytoby swiata ludzkiego, nie istniałby homo sapiens. Człowiek jest zwierzęciem znakotwórczym. (Wallis 1961: 52)

What is remarkable about these two quotations is that they include the term ‘semiosphere’, as publications concerning the concept virtually never refer to dates earlier than 1982 as the birth year of the term. They simply seem to lack information about it actually having been introduced earlier.

Juri Lotman coined the term ‘semiosphere’ in 1982² and published an article regarding this concept in 1984 (Lotman 1984³). Later, he elaborated the concept, turning it into a tool for general semiotics (see e.g. Lotman 1990), and it is via Lotman that it has become widely used and applied in semiotic works written since 1990s.

In addition, besides Wallis, also Walter Moser (1979)⁴ had used the term before Lotman did, and Jesper Hoffmeyer first employed it independently in 1992 (Hoffmeyer 1996, 1997).⁵ According to Hoffmeyer’s interpretation, all meaning-making processes (both in non-human and human beings) should belong to the semiosphere.

The above-mentioned publications by Wallis from 1961 and 1962 were not the only ones in which he applied the term ‘semiosphere’. Another book published in 1973 reads:

By means of signs we communicate our thoughts; we perpetuate and transmit them through space and time. Incessantly we perceive and form signs, we “send” and “receive” them. We live and move in the realm of signs, we are enveloped by a “semiosphere.” Without signs there would be no culture, no human world, no Man. (Wallis 1973a: 246)

Speaking of the origins of this publication, Wallis (1973a: 229) mentions in a footnote:

² See some details in Kull 2006.

³ Translations into English: Lotman 1989[1984]; Lotman 2005[1984].

⁴ I thank Katre Pärn for this reference.

⁵ See Kull, Velmezova 2025: 303 on some details pertaining to Hoffmeyer’s introduction of the term.

This essay is a revised and partly abbreviated, partly enlarged version of a paper in Polish under the same title [Wallis 1961]. A short English summary appeared under the title “The World of Arts and the World of Signs” in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress on Aesthetics* (Athens 1960) [Wallis 1962].

This means that next to its appearance in English, the term ‘semiosphere’ had appeared in the Polish version of the article (Wallis 1961) that was reprinted in a Polish-language collection of Wallis’ essays (Wallis 1983).

Some years later, Wallis proposed the term ‘sem’ (or ‘seme’) for the general concept of signs, and also used the terms ‘sem-sphere’ or ‘semosphere’ in this context:

I attempted to differentiate between signs and symbols – two significant areas of human creation which direct the thought of a recipient to objects different than themselves. If there were to be one term to encompass “sign” and “symbol,” I would propose the word “sem.” Semiotics, then, would be a study of semes, that is signs and symbols, it would deal with the “sem-sphere,” which would divide into the sphere of signs – “sign-sphere” – and the sphere of symbols – “symbol-sphere.” (Wallis 1977b: 12–13)⁶

The opposition between signs (as arbitrary) and symbols (as motivated), developed among others by Tzvetan Todorov, has largely become history for now – symbols are generally treated as a type of signs.

Publications quoting Wallis’ term ‘semiosphere’ have been extremely rare; even his biographers have not mentioned it. An exception in this respect is the reference made by Willem Elias (1997: 197); however, even Elias, while quoting the sentence which includes the term ‘semiosphere’, will not draw attention to this word. So it seems rather certain that semioticians simply never noticed Wallis’ use of this term which, interestingly, has been coined independently at least three times. Wallis himself used the term ‘semiosphere’ in at least three of his English-language publications (Wallis 1962: 400, 1973a: 246, 1975: viii, 102), as well as in his Polish-language publications (Wallis 1961: 52, 1983: 95). His contribution to semiotics, however, stretches much further than this.

⁶ In Polish: “Gdyby ktoś chciał objąć jednym mianem ‘znak’ i ‘symbol’, proponowałbym termin ‘sem’. Semiotyka byłaby wtedy nauka o semach,, czyli znakach i symbolach, zajmowałaby się ‘semosferą’, która rozpadalaby się na sferę znaków – ‘sygnosferę’ – i sferę symboli – ‘symbolosferę” (Wallis 1977a: 99). The English summary of the same article writes: “Should anyone cover the terms ‘sign’ and ‘symbol’ by a single term, he could use the term ‘seme’. Semiotics would then be the science of semes, that is a science of signs and symbols; it would be concerned with the semosphere, which would consist of the signosphere and symbolosphere” (Wallis 1977c: 3).

Wallis (1895–1975) was a reputed scholar of the first generation semioticians of art in Poland and worldwide. He was professor of aesthetics and art history at the University of Łódź, Poland (see Pelc 1977, 1994; Najder 1990; Nowakowska 2001; Bokinić 2009; Pękala 2011; Zegzuła-Nowak 2014, 2016, 2017; Kazimierska-Jerzyk 2020). Wallis was exceptionally widely educated, and his interests ranged from the symbiogenetic theory of Konstantin Mereschkowski to the psychology of Harald Høffding and mathematical logic of Jan Łukasiewicz. He wrote a series of works on philosophy of aesthetics already since the 1930s (see Wallis 2009⁷), as well as several monographs on art history and aesthetics. He was an expert on Art Nouveau (Wallis 1974) and published important works on semiotics (Wallis 1970, 1977d), among them in publications edited by Thomas Sebeok (Wallis 1973b, 1973c, 1973d, 1975).

Wallis (1973c) proposed a sketch for a general theory of iconic signs (on this topic, see also Horecka 2010) and made a distinction between ‘schemata’ and ‘pleromata’ in order to characterize scales of iconicity (Wallis 1973c: 487). The importance of this distinction has been pointed out by Winfried Nöth (1990: 124) and, particularly, by Jaan Valsiner (2014: 239), who explains: “The immediate perception of an object can [...] become either *less* rich in detail (schematizing) or *more* rich (pleromatizing) in detail than its original object.”

An interesting detail to add is that Lotman had read the article by Wallis in which the term ‘semiosphere’ appears. In his book *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Lotman includes the following footnote:

In this respect one can quarrel with the classification of art proposed by M. Wallis in his informative article “Świat sztuk i świat znaków,” *Estetyka: Rocznik II* (Warsaw, 1961). The author divides the arts into semantic and non-semantic types, categorizing music and the nonrepresentational arts, including contemporary architecture, as non-semantic. Correctly stating that signs should convey ideas about “objects other than themselves,” the author goes on to assert that the structures of Corbusier or the preludes of Chopin are not signs (p. 39), that is they have no meaning. It would seem more accurate to speak not of the absence of meaning in such artistic structures, but of the relational nature of these meanings. (Lotman 1977: 36; original in Lotman 1970: 368, endnote from p. 50)

Here, Lotman is referring to the same article by Wallis (1961) in which the word ‘semiosphere’ first appears, which indicates that he had indeed read it. This is also confirmed by his handwritten notes on the pages of his copy of *Estetyka II* (1961),

⁷ Includes three essays: “On aesthetic experience” (1931), pp. 82–87; “The world of aesthetic objects” (1931), pp. 88–91; “Sharp and soft aesthetic value” (1949), pp. 91–96.

currently preserved at the Juri Lotman Semiotics Repository at Tallinn University. Can he have failed to notice the word, and later have forgotten about it altogether?

This need not have been the case, however, since there are no notes by Lotman on the last page of the article on which the word '*semiosfera*' appears.⁸

Boris Uspenskij, a frequent co-author of Juri Lotman, also knew Wallis' works and even met him. Uspenskij writes:

Yes, I met prof. Wallis in Warsaw. I was at his home, and we talked about semiotics of art. [*When was this?*] I think it was in the early 1970s. [*Did you know that Wallis was already using the term 'semiosphere'?*] No, I did not know that he was using that term. [*Could your meeting in Warsaw have taken place during the Semiotic Congress at the end of August 1968?*] I was not present at the 1968 congress.⁹

As far as Wallis was concerned, he was aware of Tartu publications on semiotics; for instance, he referred to Maria Langleben's work published in *Sign Systems Studies* 2, 1965 (Wallis 1973a: 248).

Indeed, Polish semiotics of the early 1960s was richer than Tartu semiotics at that time, and was highly valued in Tartu in the following decades. The collective manifesto *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures* by Juri Lotman and his colleagues was written for the 7th International Congress of Slavists that took place in Warsaw in 1973, and it was also first published in Poland (see Salupere *et al.* 2013: 5). There were several other points of contact between semioticians of Poland and Tartu (see, for instance, Lotman 2014; Panas 2014). Even more so in recent years.

Thus, '*semiosphere*' has several beginnings. It is just that this one had so far gone unnoticed.

⁸ Juri Lotman also owned a copy of *Semiotica* 28(3/4) in which Walter Moser's 1979 article with the word '*semiosphere*' in the title was printed. This copy, preserved at the Semiotics Repository in Tallinn, has no signs which would show that Lotman has read it.

⁹ Original: "Да, я встречался с проф. Валлисом в Варшаве. Я был у него дома, и мы с ним беседовали о семиотике искусства. [*Когда это было?*] Мне кажется, в начале 1970-х гг. [*Знали ли Вы, что Валлис уже тогда пользовался термином «семиосфера»?*] Нет, не знал, что он пользовался этим термином. [*Могло ли ваша встреча в Варшаве состояться во время Семиотического конгресса в конце августа 1968 года?*] Я не был на конгрессе 1968 г." (My translation, K.K.) Personal communication: e-mail correspondence between the author and Boris Uspenskij from 2–3 Jan. 2025.

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