

## **Vilmos Voigt, folklorist and semiotician (1940–2025)**

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### ***In memoriam***

Vilmos Voigt, a versatile and prolific scholar, contributed significantly to several disciplines, but his most outstanding impact remains in the field of folkloristics and semiotics. Born in Szeged, he moved to Buda during his childhood and later studied Hungarian ethnography at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University. He graduated in 1963 and began his career at his *alma mater*, rising through all academic ranks – from assistant lecturer to professor of Hungarian and comparative folklore, head of the Folklore Department, and director of the Institute of Ethnography. Vilmos Voigt was a frequent keynote speaker at international scholarly forums, and the geographic range of his academic travels was wide. He lectured at many universities across Europe and North America. He was an elected Fellow of the American Folklore Society. His first visit to Tartu took place in 1964, and he maintained strong ties to Estonia ever since (see Voigt 1995). In 2010, the University of Tartu awarded him an honorary doctorate in folkloristics (after Felix Oinas) and semiotics (after Thure von Uexküll and Umberto Eco).

His major theoretical works in folkloristics were collected in a monumental anthology of 409 pages, *Suggestions towards a Theory of Folklore* (Voigt 1999). He dedicated the volume to the memory of Alexander Veselovsky (1838–1906), expressing his appreciation for philological depth, comparative approaches, and the recognition of affinities between oral and literary creativity across genres. As a motto for the book, he chose the biblical passage: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted [...]” (Eccles. 3:1–2). In this short obituary, we seek to outline some of the qualities that defined the life’s work of Vilmos Voigt and to reflect on his legacy within its historical context and in light of the developments in the 21st century.

Vilmos Voigt entered the international academic world in the 1970s with publications on the aesthetics of folklore, capturing the innovative spirit of the decade. These were the years when the American folklorist Dan Ben-Amos proposed a new definition of folklore as 'aesthetic communication in small groups', laying the groundwork for performance studies. The 1970s also marked a rising interest in genre theory and structuralism, and Voigt soon joined these debates, showing in several articles that structural regularities determine the form and style of folklore.

His earlier works and PhD dissertation had focused on animal tales. From this foundation, he became one of the international leaders in fairy-tale studies, representing Eastern and Central Europe on the global stage during the Cold War. Communication across the Iron Curtain was complicated, but as Voigt demonstrated, it was not impossible. He initiated a series of symposia that brought together Finnish and Hungarian folklorists. In 1980, together with Lauri Honko, he published the landmark volume *Genre, Structure, and Reproduction in Oral Literature* (Honko, Voigt 1980), which included contributions from leading scholars in these two strongholds of European folkloristics. Voigt's own article in the book, "On the communicative system of folklore genres" (Voigt 1980), reflected his continuous engagement with theoretical questions.

Alongside these theoretical and methodological contributions, Voigt worked on a wide range of topics and case studies in Hungarian, Finno-Ugric, and European folklore and cultural history. His encyclopaedic knowledge found expression in hundreds of articles for multi-volume handbooks, such as *Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon* ('Hungarian ethnographic encyclopaedia'; Ortutay 1977–82). He knew and read in many languages – including German, French, Russian, and Finnish. The latter, due to its linguistic affinity, also enabled him to engage with works by Estonian scholars published in their mother tongue. His wide-ranging reading and profound knowledge of cultural history made him a philological expert of European traditions in their full variety.

One of his last works, *Európai folklór* ('European folklore'; Voigt 2020), published in Hungarian, reflects this breadth. The book discusses the origins and growth of European civilization and its literary and aesthetic traditions from prehistory and the Middle Ages to the present. It was the outcome of his legendary lecture course at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, which over many years inspired generations of students who would later become professional scholars.

Besides folklore studies, we must recall his contributions to semiotics. Vilmos Voigt represented what could actually be called the Golden Generation of semioticians who designed the Golden Age of semiotics in the 20th century. By this we can think of the re-discovery, re-vitalization and development of semiotics

as it vigorously re-emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Voigt, having started off logically from his so-to-speak home discipline, connecting folklore studies with semiotics, soon expanded his studies into the theoretical grounds of semiotics, as well as into ‘practical universal semiotics’. The latter can be seen in his contribution to nuclear semiotics and “Human Interference Task Force” which was a project initiated in early 1980s. The importance of this project is becoming to be recognized only today. In this sense, the scholar whose semiotic studies were born out of historical material, was certainly ahead of his time already then.

Voigt’s theoretical searches are manifest in his contributions to defining the principles and boundaries of general semiotics as such. Thus, he authored an excellent Hungarian-language textbook in semiotics, *Bevezetés a szemiotikába* (‘Introduction to semiotics’, Voigt 2008). Furthermore, we should recall his initiative in creating the whole field of ethnosemiotics (Voigt, Hoppál 2003) – an initiative that unfortunately is being somewhat neglected. And there is one more aspect of Vilmos Voigt’s theoretical journeys that should be remembered which took semiotic studies to a new level in connection with practical ethnosemiotic research. That might be called ‘glocal semiotics’ in modern language, and was, for Voigt, connected with the inspection of how an ethnos makes sense of the world, creating a “daily metalanguage” for that activity. This ethnosemiotic and theoretical work on ethnic semiotic vocabulary and etymology is in an explicit connection with his contribution to the institutional development of semiotics worldwide. He was a founder and president of the Hungarian Association for Semiotic Studies and a founder of the International Association for Finno-Ugrian Semiotics Studies (Randviir, Tarasti, Voigt 2000). His ties to Thomas Sebeok’s circle also deserve mention (Voigt 2021).

The impact of Vilmos Voigt was manyfold. As a mentor and inspiring teacher, he shaped the careers of many young scholars. As a researcher, he was an active participant in a wide range of disciplinary forums, and his writings appeared in publications far beyond the fields of folkloristics and semiotics. He also produced outstanding studies on religion – its manifestations, history, and lived experience. His way of extending the horizons of research without rigidly staking the ground offers a valuable scholarly credo for the 21st century, an age defined by the Internet, artificial intelligence, and other epistemic challenges. His articles – often laconic, sharp, and precise – remain excellent sources of inspiration. Voigt’s bibliography until 2014 comprises over 2,000 items and has been published in two volumes (Keményfi 2010, 2015).

The long academic journey of Vilmos Voigt has ended, but the time to harvest what he planted continues. There were Festschriften published for his 60th (Balázs *et al.* 2000), 70th (Filkó *et al.* 2010), 75th (journal *Shaman*, vol. 23(1/2), 2015),

and 80th (Molnár 2022) birthdays, and because of the breadth of the scope of his scholarship references to his work will certainly grow across a variety of disciplines even in the future. He will be remembered as a friendly conversation partner and a witty discussant whose *umwelt* was rich in humour (cf. Voigt 2009) among his colleagues in Tartu and in academic circles worldwide. As a thinker and comparative scholar with a profoundly theoretical outlook, he was truly outstanding, representing a unique constellation of knowledge that spanned ages, languages, and cultures.

What perhaps is a special thing to recall about Vilmos Voigt is the dedicated support he lent to early-career scholars. He was always helpful in introducing young students into the real world of semiotics and folkloristics, which whirled around important figures and themes. He settled several inconsistencies that existed between paradigms and persons. And, eventually – he was Vilmos to such a degree as even not to be remembered by his surname. Vilmos was Vilmos, Vilmos is Vilmos, and will be Vilmos, both in our memories and in his writings.

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