

Discovering ecosemiotics

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Ecosemiotics (or ecological semiotics) is the study of sign processes in the interaction of humans with their natural environment. This semiotic field at the crossroads of nature and culture is closely related to its neighbouring fields of biosemiotics and semiotics of culture, but semiosis in the relation between humans and nature is also of concern to aesthetics, the visual arts, literature, hermeneutics, and theology. Aspects related to ecosemiotics have also been studied in human ecology, cultural geography, ecopsychology, and ecolinguistics.

There are two different conceptions of the ecological aspects of semiotics: (1) *Ecological* refers to all environmental information except for the one communicated by humans or in the case of other organisms by conspecifics. In this sense, there is ecological semiosis in all organisms, and ecosemiotics comprises a large part of biosemiotics.

(2) In a narrower sense *ecological* refers to the environment of humans only. Accordingly, human environmental problems, when treated semiotically, belong to the field of ecosemiotics. In this sense, ecosemiotics is a part of anthroposemiotics, and more strictly, of the semiotics of culture. Four major models of the relationship between humans and their environment can be discerned in the history of culture: the pansemiotic, the magical, the mythological, and the one of the natural sciences (see also Nöth 1998; 2000: 251–252).

Due to these two different meanings of ‘ecological’, there have been different definitions of ‘ecosemiotics’. For instance, Tembrock (1997) follows the first, whereas Kull (1998) follows the second definition.

First outlines of ecosemiotics and semiotic ecology can be found in the special issue of *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 18(1) entitled ‘Natur, Umwelt, Zeichen’ (1996) or in the papers by Nöth and Kull in *Sign Systems Studies* 26

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(1998). Other special issues of journals dedicated to the topic are *American Journal of Semiotics* 11(1/2), entitled 'Refiguring Debris' (1994), *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 19(1/2), entitled 'Zur kultursemiotischen Funktion von Gärten und Parks' (1997), and *Sign Systems Studies* 28 (2000), with two articles on the topic. As a university course, ecosemiotics has been included into the curriculum of Tartu University (since 1998) and of the Estonian Agricultural University (since 1999). As an applied field, ecosemiotics may have a growing importance for landscape planning and for environmental studies in general (see, e.g., Böhme 1997, Cantrill and Oravec 1996, Larsen and Grgas 1994, Posner 1990, Schempp *et al.* 1997, Simmons 1993, Wrede and Adams 1994).

A workshop on *Ecosemiotics: Studies in Environmental Semiosis* has been held in the framework of the Nordic-Baltic Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies at Imatra, Finland, on June 16–17, 2000. Considering the potential importance of this new field of semiotics and its potential for bridging the cultural and scientific aspects of ecology, it seems worthwhile to point out few details of this event as one of the first meetings in the field.

The contributions to the workshop were subdivided in three parts:

Theoretical Foundations:

Winfried Nöth (Germany) — Introduction to ecosemiotics: studies in environmental semiosis;

Kalevi Kull (Estonia) — Inter-species relations in change: an ecosemiotic analysis;

Søren Brier (Denmark) — Cybersemiotics, biosemiotics and ecosemiotics;

Solomon Marcus (Romania) — The semiotics of ecology in a mathematical perspective;

Andreas Weber (Germany) — Turning the inside out: natural forms as expression of intentionality.

Cultural Ecosemiotics:

Osmo Kuusi (Finland) — Ecosemiotics of materials;

Christina Ljungberg (Switzerland) — (Mis)reading the signs: problems of interaction in contemporary Canadian fiction;

Hannele Kerosuo (Finland) — Border zones as places of change;

Peter Schulz (Switzerland) — Subjectivity in an semiotic perspective;

Alexander E. Sedov (Russia) — New Russian myths concerning genetic research in the mass-media and in the common mind;

Dario Martinelli (Italy) — To beast or not to beast? That is the question;

Tuomo Jämsä (Finland) — Ecology of the human nature.

Verbal and Nonverbal Ecosemiotics:

Zdzisław Waśik and Elżbieta Waśik (Poland) — On the ecological properties of languages: searching for a descriptive model in the domain of external linguistics (on the basis of Aroumunian and Frisian);

- Isabelle Guaitella (France) — Rôle du geste et de la voix pour l'expression des attitudes dans l'interaction;
- Serge Santi (France) — Fondations sensori-motrices des relations voix/gestes dans la communication;
- Albert Di Cristo (France) — Une grammaire écologique comme cadre interprétatif de la prosodie de la parole;
- Riste Keskaik (Estonia) — Semiotics of garbage in Estonian press;
- Magnus S. Magnusson (Iceland) — Genes and the music of human interactions.

The abstracts of the papers were published as a booklet (*Abstracts — Nordic-Baltic Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies*. Imatra, 2000) for the participants. The session included a general discussion about the relationships between ecosemiotics, biosemiotics, and semiotics of culture. Despite some overlap between these fields, there remains much to be explored.

An important challenge for ecosemiotics will be a systematic analysis of models of semiotic relationships between humans and their environment, both in historical and in contemporary cultures (cf. Böhme 1996, Bouissac 1989, Hornborg 1996, Krampen 1989, Nöth 1998, Oelschlaeger 1991, Rapp 1981, Warnke 1998). This work has only begun.

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