

Editors' comment

When Umberto Eco pointed to Juri Lotman's claim: "The opposition of exact sciences and humanistic sciences must be eliminated" (Eco 1990: x) and John Deely (1990: 3) wrote: "For the first time in perhaps three hundred years, semiotic makes possible the establishment of new foundations for the human sciences, foundations making possible in turn a new superstructure for the humanities and the so-called hard and natural sciences alike", neither meant exactly the same thing. However, the search for relationships between living organisms and sign processes would belong to several research programs.

This is far from the first time in the history of *Sign Systems Studies* that the 'biosemiotic turn' in semiotics has left its marks on these pages. Our late and deeply-missed friend and teacher, Thomas A. Sebeok, a member of the editorial board of this journal, who passed away suddenly at the end of 2001, characterized this 'turn' with the telling title of his last collection of essays, *Global Semiotics*. This turn is a series of steps encompassing several senses of the word 'global', the most important being that semiotics can no longer deal exclusively with sign systems as if they were wholly self-contained within an exclusively human sphere of signification, because this sphere has ramifications in the larger world of natural history and embodied meaning.

This is "the first year of 'semiotics without Sebeok'", as John Deely has written. It seems illogical that the influence of one person can be omnipresent, *passim*, particularly in a field as large and diverse as semiotics. However, the behaviour of a tiny ganglion in an organism can be felt by every single cell, unconsciously as cells are.

The international conference *Biology and Linguistics* that took place in Tartu in February 1978, (organised by biologists and semioticians of St. Petersburg, Tartu, and Moscow), and the international workshop *The Linguistics of Biology and the Biology of Language* in

Mexico 20 years later (organised by Mexican and American linguists and biologists),¹ — as far as these were from each other (both in a periphery, in a sense) — belong to the same trend. A few other meetings — in Russia, Denmark, Estonia, and of course in Glottertal, Germany, at the beginning of 1990s developed a network of people and a research agenda towards a semiotic biology. However, we still tend to assume that the series of international meetings under the title *Gatherings in Biosemiotics*, started jointly by Danish and Estonian biosemioticians, marks a crucial point in the contemporary history of the field (Emmeche 2001).

We have edited the present volume with the aim of giving a more detailed picture of this turn in semiotics, showing the diversity within the semiotic globe of approaches by the growing community of biosemioticians, many of whom were present at the “Gatherings in Biosemiotics 1” meeting in Copenhagen, May 24–26, 2001.

At the meeting in Copenhagen, Myrdene Anderson made an informal comment on the title we had chosen for this new series of meetings, *Gatherings in biosemiotics*, a comment that seemed a little discouraging at first. She pointed out that the term ‘gatherings’ has many connotations in English, one of which alludes to the kind of things which might otherwise be called stores, reserves or cache or even remains or leftovers. This was not at all meant as an unkind remark, in fact Myrdene assured us she appreciated that such a connotation should be association with the project. We must admit that for our part this possibility was unintentional. However, on further reflection it appears that Myrdene may be right that this connotation may not be so bad after all.

Everybody who cares to read the papers presented at this first *Gatherings in Biosemiotics*, now assembled and supplemented with the additional articles in this volume, must agree that the project of finding a strong unified semiotic perspective on the life sciences is still in a very initial and explorative phase. In other words, we are still fumbling around, gradually assembling pieces of insights from here and there, and trying to see how the basic structure might best be raised. If we consider biosemiotics to be a new field, it is a field that has not yet been decently fenced or cultivated. The scene is still open

¹ See <http://itzamna.cifn.unam.mx/ComputationalGenomics/history/w98/>.

for creativity at the most fundamental level, what endures and what is discarded remains to be seen.

The versatility of approaches taken and the commitment exhibited by the speakers were perhaps the main causes for the rather unequalled pleasure most or all participants took from being present at the occasion of the first gatherings meeting. In addition, many of us were pleasantly surprised to find that so many other serious researchers shared our vision, i.e. the vision of a semiotic transgression of dominating explanatory strategies in theoretical biology.

Still, the interface between nature and culture remains to be an unexpectedly difficult thing.²

References

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- Deely, John 1990. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. 2001. *Global Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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² We like to see the current issue as a marking of the *sexagenarian* Jesper Hoffmeyer, a leader in the biosemiotic search. [Note added by C. E. and K. K.]