

Introduction

This issue of *Sign Systems Studies* includes twelve papers on semiotics of resemblance. Readers competent in semiotics may argue that there is no such field as semiotics of resemblance and they would indeed be right. In this case, resemblance should be considered to be an umbrella term that covers various concepts, such as iconicity, iconic signs, similarity, analogy, categorization, metaphors, mimesis, mimicry, onomatopoeia, and others. These terms are used in different fields within and outside of semiotics. Accordingly, semiotics of resemblance should be treated as a possibility for establishing commonalities between different paradigms, from aesthetics to evolutionary biology and from theoretical semiotics to literary studies. We find that this property of resemblance that links together various approaches in cultural semiotics as well as biosemiotics, is highly beneficial and a major motivation for compiling this special issue. The members of this family of concepts of resemblance appear to refer to primitive and intuitively graspable phenomena in different fields that are, at the same time, essential for the functioning and understanding of more complex semiotic processes. This also relates to the capacity of resemblance to be effective in crossing semiotic borders between different cultures, discourses and species, as is apparent, for instance, in mimicry relations between species and in imitation in postcolonial cultures.

Resemblance as a distinct topic has never gained full focus in semiotics, nor in the academia in general, yet it has always been

present in different variations, and has helped in establishing a certain archaic, intuitive connectedness between seemingly different phenomena. Among the classics of semiotics, the problematic of resemblance is most clearly present in the legacy of Charles S. Peirce. In contrast to the Saussurean tradition of semiotics, where the relations between the signified and the signifier are generally thought to be arbitrary, Peirce develops a view of motivated relations between the sign and its object. Resemblance in a sign is expressed in Peirce's concepts of icon and iconicity, although the relationship between these two concepts remains ambiguous. This fundamental problem of the motivatedness of signs also relates to the disputes of *iconophiles* and *iconoclasts* in aesthetics and art theory, in their alternative explanations of the representative function. Another root for the semiotics of resemblance, much older in the history of culture and philosophy, is the concept of *mimesis*, beginning with the dialogues of Plato and Aristotle and later forming the entire tradition of thought relevant for understanding performance arts and artistic expression in general (Gebauer, Wulf 1995; Halliwell 2002; Melberg 1995).

In psychology, resemblance appears in studies of interpersonal imitation in the framework of developmental psychology and in the process of categorical perception, especially in its more recent ramifications, such as the concepts of prototype resemblance (Rosch 1973) and family resemblance (Wittgenstein 1976; Rosch, Mervis 1975). In the semiotic theory of arts, Nelson Goodman (1969) has demonstrated that (pictorial) resemblance is not a necessary condition for representation, and distinguished between different structures of similarity. Resemblance can also be perceived as the major underlying principle of our cognitive organization, as argued in theories of metaphorical and analogical reasoning by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Fauconnier and Turner (2002), Holyoak and Thagard (1996), and many others. Other authors have also considered *mimesis* to be an organizing force in literary expression (Auerbach 1988; Girard 1978). In human language, resemblances are present either explicitly in the

form of onomatopoeia and sound-symbolism, or as hidden into the potentiality and inner poetics of language (Benjamin 1999). Imitation and mimesis are also relevant topics in anthropology, especially for articulating the relations between different cultures. This approach has been especially popular in postcolonial studies (Bhabha 1994; Taussig 1993). In postmodern thinking, Baudrillard (1988) has argued that in contemporary society, mimesis in the form of simulation and simulacra has come to replace reality.

In biosemiotics and biology in general, resemblance is usually related to the question of affinity between different species, and the associated issues of taxonomy and evolution. Some resemblance between individuals is required for recognition between members of the same species, it being thus an important factor in speciation, as for instance in the species concept based on recognition (Paterson 1985). In biological systematics, different types of similarities have proved to be a puzzling problem for biologists; these are traditionally articulated in terms of analogy and homology. From an evolutionary perspective, secondary acquired resemblances, such as those of convergence and mimicry (Wickler 1968), have become important. In Neo-Darwinian thinking, the topic of resemblance becomes relevant as an essential characteristic in memetics (Blackmore 1999). Frequently, analogy-based modeling is the method employed for understanding and relating to a foreign realm, which may lead to circular dynamics between natural sciences and cultural understandings (Komárek 2009). On the other hand, likeness in the form of empathy can also have crucial ethical implications, accentuating the relevance of the concept for ecosemiotics and nature philosophy.

All of these concepts and approaches appear to be either implicitly or explicitly semiotic. This is so for the reason that resemblance cannot be perceived or articulated outside the wider sphere of semiotic or communicative processes. Thus resemblance appears not to be such a primitive phenomenon after all. Resemblance requires that the semiotic realm be present and active, either in the form of *Umwelt* on

the biological level or semiosphere on the level of culture. Furthermore, as we can see in several papers in this special issue, resemblances may appear in higher symbolic levels of culture in great complexity and hybridization.

Looking at previous semiotic titles that are dedicated to the concept of resemblance or some aspect of it, we will find a mild but constant interest. The collection *Iconicity. Essays on the Nature of Culture*, dedicated to the 65th birthday of Th. A. Sebeok, is probably the most voluminous title (Bouissac *et al.* 1986); *Diagrammatology: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology, Ontology, and Semiotics* by Frederik Stjernfelt (2007) and *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* by Umberto Eco (1999) need to be mentioned as well. Over the years, the publisher John Benjamins has been putting out the series *Iconicity in Language and Literature* that includes valuable volumes, such as *Limiting the Iconic: From the Metatheoretical Foundations to the Creative Possibilities of Iconicity in Language* by Ludovic De Cuypere (2008), and several edited collections, such as *Naturalness and Iconicity in Language*, edited by Willems Klaas and Ludovic De Cuypere (2008); *Form Miming Meaning* (1999) and *The Motivated Sign* (2001), both edited by Olga Fischer and Max Nänny. A few separate collections relevant for this topic have been published as well, such as *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory. Mimesis. Semiosis. Power* edited by Roland Bogue (1991). The number of individual papers written on the topic of iconicity and resemblance or their expressions in figurative art, on metaphors, similes and analogies, imitative magic and theatre performances, mimicry and camouflage, is too large to be listed here separately; the intellectual and academic background of the topic of resemblance is indeed rich and has a myriad of relevant aspects.

In organizational terms, compiling this special issue has not been a single event, but has been related to research activities of the Estonian Science Foundation grant no 6670 “Theory of mimicry and eco-semiotic approach to imitation”, allocated to the Department of Se-

miotics, University of Tartu. As part of this research project, an international seminar *Resemblances in Nature and Culture: Theoretical and Semiotic Perspectives* was organized in Tartu on November 8–9, 2008 by the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu and by the Estonian Naturalists' Society. The sixteen presentations given by scholars from Estonia and abroad formed the future core of this special issue. Yet at the same time the authors present in this issue are not limited to the participants of the seminar. More than half of current authors responded to a separate call for papers. The editorial process has been supported also by ESF grant no 7790 and by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Center of Excellence CECT).

This special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* offers both theoretical accounts on the semiotics of resemblance as well as practical applications and case studies in cultural semiotics and biosemiotics. The first four papers by Göran Sonesson, Floyd Merrell, Guido Ferraro and Ester Vösu provide different theoretical perspectives on the semiotics of resemblance. Göran Sonesson's paper focuses on iconicity with respect to pictorial representations, and demonstrates that iconic representation is a much more complex phenomenon than is generally assumed. Guido Ferraro develops a perspective on analogical relations in the framework of Saussurean semiotics. Floyd Merrell shows that in linguistic communication resemblance should be considered as a dynamic phenomenon, and that the interrelated interactive relations based on the principle of similarity can produce a whole new array of expressions. Ester Vösu focuses on analogical reasoning in social sciences based on theatre metaphors such as "social drama" and "dramaturgy of everyday life" in Victor Turner's and Erving Goffman's works. All four papers form a part of a much larger body of research of their respective authors.

The next group of papers develops historical and cultural perspectives on the concept of resemblance. Massimo Leone's paper tracks down the roots of the concept of camouflage in Antiquity, and

its relations to the imaginaries and practices of invisibility. Paola Ghione presents a concrete analysis of relations between Hesiod's and Homer's texts that represent shields, and discusses ekphrasis and analogies in these. Jelena Melnikova-Grigorjeva's and Olga Bogdanova's paper studies the motive of "owl" in the works of Hieronymus Bosch and traces its relations to blind foresight, mirroring, and communication over the borders of everyday reality. On the basis of personal experience, Farouk Seif describes mimetic and hybrid strategies used in creating architectural forms that would establish a dialogue between distant cultural heritage and modernity as well as between culture and the environment. Christina Ljungberg addresses iconicity and resemblance in literary texts, with emphasis on the performative dimension, and reveals the role of visual resemblances in the works by Virginia Woolf, W. G. Sebald and Reif Larsen. Felix Ahlner and Jordan Zlatev present both a theoretical overview and a specific case study on the phenomenon of sound symbolism, with special focus on perceived resemblance between expressions and content across different sensory modalities.

The final two papers in this special issue address the role and functioning of resemblances in the biological realm. Timo Maran continues his studies in semiotics of mimicry by proposing a semiotic methodology for analyzing specific instances of mimicry. Karel Kleisner discusses the independent emergence of similar features in species and groups that are phylogenetically distant, and proposes a model of threefold origin of similar features in unrelated organisms as stemming from intrinsic, extrinsic and semiosic causation.

All in all, this special issue comprises analyses from many different perspectives and on different materials, united by a shared attention to resemblance and similarity in semiotic processes. An attentive reader may also notice certain dialogic encounters between different papers, as for instance the differences in interpreting Peircean semiotics or in approaches towards mimicry. At the same time, there are also several shared ideas that echo through different papers. One such shared

aspect is the proliferation and ramification of resemblances in cultural and natural processes; it seems that resemblance as a general form is open to various functions, depending on any given situation. Another connecting idea is the relation between resemblance and the undefined, either in the form of invisibility, a gap in meanings, or a connection with something beyond the border of culture. It appears that as the opposite of resemblance and iconic expression we do not find arbitrary forms and symbolic expressions, but rather nothingness, a lack of meaning altogether.

Not all topics of resemblance and similitude that are relevant for semiotics are covered in this special issue: for instance, semiotics of translation and semiotics of photography are unfortunately not represented. The editors of this issue hope that the collection of papers presented here stimulates future interest in this topic, which in our time of growing specialization perhaps has the capacity to establish cross-disciplinary contacts and synthesis.

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