

Enchantment of the past and semicide. Remembering Ivar Puura

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When someone close to you passes away, a world ceases to exist. A semiotician would say it is an *umwelt*, a subjective world with all the richness of sign patterns, personal memories and stories, nuances of expressions and habits that disappears. A countless number of semiotic connections are severed.

Ivar Puura (b. 1961) died unexpectedly on July 20, 2012. Ivar Puura was a supporter and a good dialogue partner of the Tartu semiotic community for more than twenty years (for a more detailed biographical overview, see Kull 2012). A geologist by training and an active proponent of environmental education and protection, Ivar Puura often brought fresh perspectives into semiotic debates. He also acted as a long-time chair of the Theoretical Biology Division of the Estonian Naturalists' Society, was the main organizer of the annual Spring Schools in Theoretical Biology, and an editor of many thematic volumes of the Society. Especially remarkable were his views on temporal processes, development, and evolution, as well as his interest in semiotics of time (including the new field of *paleosemiotics* envisioned by him). Although Ivar Puura published little in the field of semiotics, he gave a number of presentations on various topics related to semiotics, among others “Memory and subjective time: how the story of time is created”, “Domesticating the unknown”, “Time, chronesthesia and memory”, “From mirroring nature to distorting nature: models, myths and manipulations”.²

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² The original titles and occasions of Ivar Puura's semiotics-related presentations are the following: “Mälu ja subjektiivne aeg: kuidas luuakse aja lugu?” [Memory and subjective time: how the story of time is created] presented at the seminar “Isiklikud loodused” [Personal Natures], November 25, 2002; “Tundmatu kodustamine” [Domesticating the unknown] at the conference “Semiootika piirid” [Boundaries of Semiotics], November 24–25, 2006, see also Puura 2006; “Aeg, kronesteesia ja mälu” [Time, chronesthesia and memory] at “VIII semiootika sügiskool: Semiootika metodoloogia” [VIII Autumn School of Semiotics: Methodology of Semiotics], November 3–5, 2006; “Looduse peegeldusest looduse väänamiseni: mudelid, müüdid ja manipulatsioon” [From mirroring nature to distorting nature: models, myths and

In this volume of *Sign Systems Studies* we publish a translation of Ivar Puura's essay "Nature in our memory", which originally appeared in Estonian in *Eesti Loodus* [Estonian nature], a popular journal of biological sciences (Puura 2002). The essay revolves around two intrinsically semiotic principles: first, every living being is connected to its environment by semiotic relations that accumulate in time; and second, to be human is to be aware of our continuity in time which in turn entails a capacity to predict future, to manipulate temporal phenomena and to provide narratives about time. The first principle unites us with other animals since all biological organisms rely on natural sign relations and semiotic affordances³ of the environment. The second property is rather a peculiarity of the human species that opens up a rich world of imagination, but also places upon us an ethical responsibility not to misuse our abilities. By introducing an important concept of *semicide*, Ivar Puura directs our attention to the possibility of misusing our semiotic skills: according to him, semicide is "a situation in which signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else's malevolence or carelessness, thereby stealing a part of the former's identity".

Semicide has the potential to become a useful theoretical concept for describing relationships between cultures as well as between culture and nature, and for distinguishing specific practices applied in these relationships. In its essence, we can describe any such relationship as an encounter between one's own semiotic sphere and another semiotic sphere (to follow the terminology of Juri Lotman 2005), and we can categorize these relationships on the basis of attitude (whether one's own semiotic sphere is aggressive or neutral towards or supportive of the other), level of activity (whether it is passive or active towards the other), and intentionality (whether the relationship is cognized and intentional or not). Semicide can take place in a situation in which one's own semiotic sphere is actively aggressive towards the other semiotic sphere and brings along the destruction of the latter's "signs and stories". The question of intentionality is more ambivalent and by focusing predominantly on the victims of semicide, Puura's definition is broad enough to include both destruction because of someone's "malevolence" that is intentional and directed, and destruction because of someone's "negligence" that is unintentional, undirected and often accidental. I believe, however, that the

manipulations] at the seminar "Ökosemiotika suveseminar" [Summer Seminar in Eco-semiotics], July 31 – August 2, 2009.

³ Semiotic affordances could be understood as "those environmental elements that have a tendency to act as objects of signs. Such elements could be physical areas, for instance, hybrid zones between biological communities, animal trails in the landscape, water currents, but also temporal events, such as seasonal rains, forest fires, and the melting of the snow" (Maran, forthcoming). See also Gibson 1986: 127.

distinction between intentional and unintentional semicide may be relevant for the future discussion of the concept: first, because intentional semicide requires planning and awareness of the other's semioticity, being thus foremost a capacity of the human species⁴; and second, because it is in regard to intentional semicide that we can speak of specific practices used in semicide. Unintentional semicide is often part of our relations with other species: for instance, semicide can appear as the damaging effects of human traffic noise on the vocal communication of wild birds (Forman, Alexander 1998). Unintentional semicide can be avoided by increasing our knowledge.

In analysing actual occurrences of semicide, we can distinguish between cases in which the destruction of semiotic processes is a by-product of the destruction of the material environment and objects, and cases in which the semiotic and communicative processes themselves are the primary target. Material destruction can be part of semicide against biological species and indigenous cultures, in which case the other semiotic sphere relies mostly on natural (i.e. iconic, indexical) sign relations that use semiotic affordances of landscapes and material objects. Also symbolic manifestations of culture such as statues, religious buildings, heraldic symbols, natural monuments etc. are vulnerable to material destruction. In cases when semicide is targeted directly at semiotic or communicative processes, it can be more specifically aimed at any one component of the process. Here we can follow classic descriptions of communication, such as Roman Jakobson's or Thomas A. Sebeok's communication models, and ask what components of communication semicide can affect: thus, senders and receivers can be persecuted or executed, the channel of communication can be prohibited, and the communication code damaged. Ivar Puura's essay provides examples of all of these cases. We can further describe specific strategies of semicide, for instance masking (replacing information and messages with those of dominant culture) and ideological overcoding (Eco 1984: 22–23).

Puura most correctly stresses that nowadays the phenomenon of semicide is very widespread both in human culture and society as well as in relations between culture and nature. Unfortunately, semiotics appears to have overlooked this dark side of semiotic relations, as is evident from the lack of a conceptual framework and studies dedicated to this topic. As we now have a word to denote this phenomenon, there is hope that Ivar Puura's legacy in semiotics will be better perceived and also elaborated. This is a question of the ethical responsibility of semiotics. While chronesthesia and other unique semiotic capabilities have enabled humans to reach the position from which we are able to intentionally carry out semicide,

⁴ Apparently there are destructive strategies that target the means of communications also in other species, for instance in parasites of ants and slave-making ants (Lenoir et al. 2001).

the same capabilities also make us aware that every human being as well as every animal gravitates towards the “reliable world of dearly loved landscapes and smells, familiar signs and relationships”. Since the ability to remember our past and to project our being into the future makes us so eager to preserve our existence over time, semiotics can teach us that we can thrive only in our relations with what is other and different. It is indeed a profound semiotic insight that to have a future, any semiotic sphere needs a realm (objects, partners of dialogue, context) that remains (partially) outside it and that it does not fully perceive, understand or control. We are our memories, but what we predominantly remember, are others – other human beings, animals, places, books. One of these others is you, Ivar. Fostering the richness of the world appears to be an essential principle of semiotic ethics.

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