

Nature in our memory¹

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Humans seem to have been set apart from other animals by their ability for mental time travel, into the past as well as into the future. In case this is so – have we tried to appreciate the true wealth that this ability gives us? Are we able to perceive these opportunities and the full responsibility that it brings along?

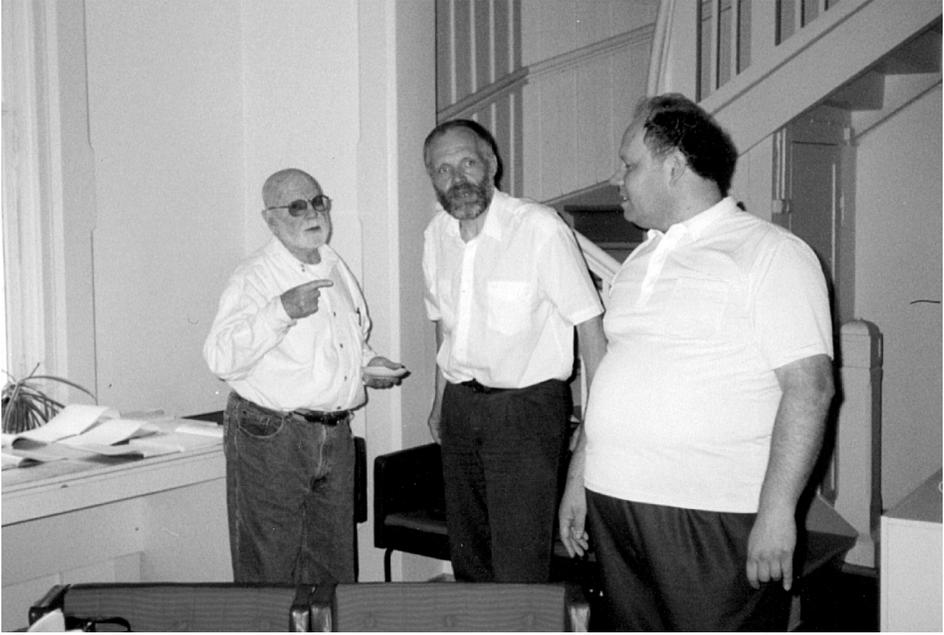
“If we kept all our wonderful abilities except for the sense of time, we would still remain uniquely different from all other animals, but we would hardly be humans in the sense we understand it now,”² believes Endel Tulving (2002). Tulving writes that the unique human sense of time – chronesthesia – is related to the development of specific brain regions (prefrontal cortex and frontal lobes). By chronesthesia Tulving understands “a form of cognition that allows human beings to think about subjective time and enables travel through subjective time”. Furthermore, he concludes that “for the development and continuance of civilisation and culture it is indispensable for a human being to be aware of her own and her offspring’s continued existence in time that includes not only the past and the present but also future” (Tulving 2002).

Each moment of communication with our surroundings involves recognition of signs, establishment of their interrelations, attribution of meaning – in other words, there occurs semiosis. Chronesthesia can be seen as a type of semiosis in which personal memories are arranged on a subjective timeline. It is only on the basis of remembering the personal that trust can appear or disappear. Wisdom as well as stupidity, sincerity as well as deceit are all recorded in the mind. On the basis of experience all of us shape our own landscape of memory, space of values, attitudes and (pre)conceptions.

Personal time travels intertwine memories and acquired knowledge. Among these there are general signs of culture that “[...] actualize behavioural, ideological, temporal and spatial codes in the mind of the receiver” (Torop 1999). Kalevi Kull and Mihhail Lotman (1995) have suggested: “A sign requires to be recognized. What an interpreter does not recognize is not a sign for her. This, seemingly a rather self-evident and primitive statement brings along rather important implications, such as semiosis being inseparably connected to memory.”

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² All quotations from Estonian are translated by Elin Sütiste and Timo Maran.



Thomas A. Sebeok (from left), Kalevi Kull and Ivar Puura at the seminar “Uexküll and the Living Environment” at the Estonian Naturalists’ Society, Tartu, June 8, 1999 (Photo: T. Maran).

Jaan Kaplinski (1996) has written: “In a simple case, the free part of mind is filled with a simple reflection of the surroundings. But our mind is hardly ever a mere mirror: filaments of memory connect each of our perceptions to something past. There is no such thing as a pure present. Memories bring into it the past, wishes and expectations the future; imagination and thinking combine all this into new pictures and thoughts.”

A notion of temporal relations accompanies us everywhere. The pillars of our world picture – ideas about the emergence and development of phenomena, about causality and repeatability of experiments – all entail temporal relationships. Written and unwritten rules of communal life, morality, ethics, (behavioural) norms, laws and responsibility for our past – all these are based on our own and others’ personal (life)stories unfolding in time.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (2001), who studied the “savage mind” of indigenous people, described tribes who responded to the researchers’ wish to learn their language with spreading out a pile of plants. The names of the hundreds of plants make up a considerable part of a tribe’s common vocabulary and signscape. Some understanding of the depth of such “savage thinking” can develop in a person whose knowledge of nature approaches that of indigenous peoples.

As a contrast to the world in which there still exist shreds of the “savage mind”, Jean Baudrillard describes a world of simulacra, in which groves and meadows are replaced by artificial environments, such as Disneyland or McDonald’s. While in earlier times natural landscapes were transferred onto maps, at the present time programmes to change nature are devised in the paper reality of landscape planning. A modelled artificial environment as a simulacrum starts to prevail over the primeval and the natural, both in the physical world as well as in the human mind.

The diversity of nature is overwhelming. Every living creature, being part of a greater whole, carries in itself memories of billions of years of evolution and embodies its own long and largely still unknown story of origin. By wholesale replacement of primeval nature with artificial environments, it is not only nature in the biological sense that is lost. At the hands of humans, millions of stories with billions of relations and variations perish. The rich signscape of nature is replaced by something much poorer. It is not an exaggeration to call this process semiocide.

I understand semiocide to be 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. In everyday life this often takes place in the form of material or mental violence among children as well as grownups: things that are significant and have become dear to somebody are threatened to be or are actually destroyed. In the cultural sphere, semiocide can be looting of tombs or destruction of heritage objects. Classic nature protection looks out for individual natural objects also in the sense of their physical as well as semiotic existence.

When semiocide is targeted at some nation or group of people, it can manifest itself as ideological pressure or as sacrilege that often goes together with physical violence or occupation. A form of semiocide – linguacide, i.e. suppression of national languages – is something we remember from our own recent past and can see everywhere in the world today. Semiocide has also been the destruction of totems of indigenous people and the banishing of people from their home signscape – from the native land of their forefathers, taking away from them everything which all together means home.

What is homesickness if not a wish to return to our reliable world of dearly loved landscapes and smells, familiar signs and relationships? What keeps families in their homes until the last moment when burning lava or rising water is already threateningly near? Why do families refuse to accept financially tempting offers to move away when their homes get in the way of new mines or roads?

If we took time to get to know ourselves better, we would discover nature in ourselves. Deep in our memory our sensations are related to the signs of nature that we see, smell and hear even when we have not yet become aware of this. Nature that is intimately familiar to us embodies the signscape that carries

traditions going back through centuries, helps culture to persist and helps human beings to stay human.

How can we find this nature in ourselves? We can always listen to nature's music that lightens our mind. Some people experience an elevated mood, others perceive the nuances of the melody, yet others are able to write the music down as a score, and finally there are some who are able to create music. The richness of melodies and signs hidden in nature is not elitist, it cannot be fenced in or marketed. Nature just is. When need be, it comforts the traveller of the (memory) landscape. And sometimes nature gives us a jolly wink and is willing to tell its stories, unfolding multilayered meanings and offering joy of discovery to last one's entire lifetime.

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