

## What is the main challenge for contemporary semiotics?

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Once again, something important is going on in semiotics.

Within the framework of preparing the final talk “Semiotics taking form: Through the eyes of leading semioticians” at the 12th World Congress of Semiotics in Sofia in September 2014, we asked several leading semioticians<sup>3</sup> to give brief answers to the question: “What is the main challenge for contemporary semiotics?” We received 35+3 responses which are published below.

Some years ago, Peer Bundgaard and Frederik Stjernfelt posed a similar question to 28 semioticians<sup>4</sup> formulated as “What are the most important open problems in this field and what are the prospects of progress?” The responses were published in a book (Bundgaard, Stjernfelt 2009). Indeed, a regular (re)formulation of the main tasks and unsolved problems can be seen as a form of self-description of semiotic inquiry, which is important for the identity and development of the field. Understanding what is going on in semiotics, a broad field with much variety in it, would help us to provide a better focus for our research today.

For instance, it seems that the scholars working in the field of (what we would at present call) semiotics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries produced much more than the semiotically oriented researchers could actually make use of during the period of rapid growth and institutionalization of semiotics in the 1960s–1970s. The aim of many studies conducted in the 1960s–1970s, often described as structuralist, supposed a formalization of the conceptual apparatus used by semioticians. For

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<sup>3</sup> Our list of interviewees included all those who have been invited by the organizers of the Sofia Congress to present a lecture in the *Semiotics and its Masters series*, plus a few more. Altogether, 20 countries are represented.

<sup>4</sup> Some interviewees coincided with the current list: M. Danesi, J. Deely, J. Hoffmeyer, K. Kull, G. Sonesson, F. Stjernfelt, E. Tarasti.

instance, Juri Lotman (1972) mentions: “The ability of various mathematical disciplines to serve as a metalanguage also in the description of the phenomena of art is evident”<sup>5</sup>

However, this ambitious programme remained unaccomplished, at the same time contributing to the appearance of a number of crucial (and seemingly independent) trends during the decades which followed this “failure”. These trends include, in particular:

- (a) poststructuralist criticism of the attempts to formalize semiotics;
- (b) rapid development of Peircean semiotics;
- (c) impetuous growth of biosemiotics and placing the lower semiotic threshold at the origin of life;
- (d) development of several applied fields of semiotics (like commercial semiotics);
- (e) attempts to develop experimental semiotics.

As a result, the conceptual systems of various branches and approaches within the framework of contemporary semiotics differ considerably. Even if, since the 1970s, semiotics as a discipline has noticeably extended its (both visible and invisible) limits, its potentially general models and conceptual system(s) are seemingly still being formed.

Below we present the responses of all interviewees as formulated by them in the autumn of 2014. The order of the answers attempts to provide a loose general narrative. Good starting points to approach these could be provided in the form of quotations from the summary of a recent article by M. Nadin, and from interviews with V. V. Ivanov and B. A. Uspenskij.

**Mihai Nadin** (Romania, Germany, USA)

The day when scholars and students of semiotics become the hottest commodity in the labor market and are traded like neurosurgeons, high-performance programmers, footballs players, movie stars, or animators, we will all know that semiotics finally made it. Currently, semiotics is of marginal interest, at most, in academia. Nobody hires semioticians. I am convinced that this can change. But for this change to come about, everyone involved in semiotics will have to think in a different way, to redefine their goals. Semioticians need the patience and dedication necessary for working on foundational aspects, starting with defining the specific domain knowledge and the appropriate methodology. And they need to define a research agenda for semiotics above and beyond the speculative. (Nadin 2012: 28)

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<sup>5</sup> Lotman (2008[1972]: 6): “Способность различных математических дисциплин выступать в качестве метаязыков также и при описании явлений искусства очевидна”.

**Vyacheslav Ivanov** (USA, Russia)

At present, science has many difficulties mainly because of the unsteady nature of its financing by society (and such financing is necessary). [...] The system of grants and large bureaucratic organisations supervising sciences by means of half-educated or corrupt functionaries [is resulting] everywhere in [the] decline of experimental science, of education and of the valuation of discoveries. In the very near future, I foresee a crucial necessity to find a way out of the crisis science is going through; any further delay will threaten the existence of humanity as a biological species because biological and geological factors can intervene. I expect [...] very important discoveries at the intersection between semiotics and disciplines studying the human nervous system. Methods of both modern mathematics and natural sciences are likely to spread to semiotic studies. [... Also,] the potential of neurosemiotics seems crucial to me. I attach a lot of importance to discoveries concerning mirror neurons of various primates and human beings. We can consider the question about a physiological substratum ensuring the participation of every person in a community, inside which information of various kinds circulates. (Velmezova, Kull 2011: 310–311)

**Boris Uspenskij** (Russia, Italy)

Unfortunately, theoretical semiotics isn't moving forward. In my opinion, the situation is very bad, because there is no progress in semiotics. It seems to me that in semiotics, basic concepts have not been defined; there is no unity of methods. The words 'semiotics' and 'sign' seem so clear that people can use them considering that everything seems obvious. But indeed people who speak about semiotics use different meta-languages, which leads to the absence of real communication between them. [KK & EV: Nevertheless, would it still be possible to distinguish some directions of modern semiotics which seem promising to your view?] First of all, linguistic semiotics: I mean, general linguistics, problems of general linguistics which are examined from a semiotic point of view. Then, I would say, the semiotics of culture. And also biosemiotics seems promising to me, even though I don't know much about those matters. Finally, semiotics of economics seems interesting.<sup>6</sup>

**John Deely** (USA)

I published a small book, *Semiotics Seen Synchronically: The View from 2010* (Deely 2010), dedicated to "the semioticians of the 22nd century". The reason for the strange dedication is precisely the main challenge that semiotics has to overcome: the same sort of resistance to recognizing a perspective that underlies and transcends scientific specializations that modern science had to overcome in making the need

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<sup>6</sup> Our interview of B. A. Uspenskij took place on August 25, 2011, at the Tartu Summer School of Semiotics at Palmse (Estonia).

for experimentation and specialization be recognized by the university world of the 17th and 18th centuries. Semiotics will succeed, but it will take at least the rest of this century for the academic community generally to come to recognize how semiotics is the only inherently interdisciplinary perspective there is, and hence the only antidote for the specializations modern science requires within (and outside of) academe as they have come to threaten any unity for intellectual culture as a whole.

**Alexandros Lagopoulos** (Greece)

The semiotic explosion of the 1960s and 1970s, revolving around French structuralism and semiotics, had wide repercussions on the whole sphere of anthropology, humanities and the arts. This impressive diffusion was not without negative effects for semiotics. Frequently, while semiotics revitalized the multiplicity of the fields with which it came into contact, it was absorbed by their traditional habits. Semiotic terminology became part of their everyday vocabulary, but in a rather imprecise manner, thus losing its systematic character. The width of classic semiotic theory, in combination with its tendency to neglect applied aspects of the field, has been an obstacle to its institutionalization in the academy and has so far limited semiotic teaching to isolated courses and a few postgraduate programmes.

This width concerns not only the object of semiotics, but also semiotic theories themselves, since we have, besides the French approach: first, the Central and Eastern European approach, represented by Russian formalism, the Prague linguistic circle and the Tartu-Moscow School; second, the transformation of French structuralism and semiotics into poststructuralism and then, in the U. S., into postmodernism; third, the late diffusion of Peircean semiotics and its by-product, zoosemiotics and biosemiotics; fourth, more recently, cognitive semiotics. Thus, the domain of semiotics today is an evolving, dividing and conflicting kaleidoscopic domain, creating a confusing nebula.

I believe that this brief historical introduction offers a framework for an inquiry into the main challenges for contemporary semiotics. The paradigms founding today's different approaches to semiotics are, at times, overlapping, close, different or conflicting. There seems to be no question of unifying our field. What, thus, remains as an urgent task is the need for a metatheoretical work: (a) within each approach, defining, penetrating into and rethinking the main epistemological presuppositions of its constitution, clarifying its theoretical perspectives and limitations and examining the theoretical and practical interest of its research objects, and then (b) between approaches, in order to define with precision connections and divergences. For example:

(i) Semiotics, poststructuralism and postmodernism constitute standard parts of anthologies in cultural studies, together, for example, with the British school of cultural studies. However, this school is clearly sociologically oriented, while

semiotics insists on remaining enclosed within its relevance, avoiding the issue of its articulation with the sociological processes, something that limits its scope and possibilities. Poststructuralism and postmodernism, not to mention sociolinguistics, are turned towards objects of contemporary interest, such as power, identity, gender, local communities and mass media, while semiotics remains attached to more traditional objects and is extremely poor in the applied field.

(ii) The Peircean approach has not dealt with certain fundamental epistemological issues. The most important one is the confusion between philosophy and science. However, as currently practiced, Peircean philosophy is directly applied to different scientific fields. This has no epistemological sense. The lack of intermediary levels explains the markedly limited number of concepts used in Peircean analyses.

(iii) The second major epistemological issue encountered by Peircean semiotics is the claim of global semiotics to unify biosemiotics and anthroposemiotics. To achieve this goal, three preconditions are necessary: the establishment of a coherent cultural theory, the establishment of a coherent theory of biosemiotics, and their unification through common principles, presumably guided by biosemiotics. However, there is as yet nothing like a Peircean general cultural theory; biosemiotics seems to be in an early stage of exploration, and thus the claim of unification remains at best a bold ambition.

Saussurean theory, contrary to the Peircean one, is not philosophical, but belongs to the scientific domain and thus could give the impression that it can be directly transferred from linguistics to the other semiotic systems. However, its applications to the latter did not follow from a direct extrapolation from structural linguistics, even if initially this is what occurred. It took many years of intensive work, mainly in the francophone world but also elsewhere, by a very great number of scholars and for many decades to establish *specific* principles for each of the great variety of semiotic systems.

(iv) Cognitive semiotics is in search of universals, but first it should realize the audacity of this task. Lévi-Strauss was looking for unconscious universal *structures* (not concepts) of the mind ultimately anchored in nature. Jakobson and Greimas formulated universal concepts, explicitly stating that they are metalinguistic and are not to be found in the object of study. But cognitive semiotics has the ambition to find specific universal *concepts* in the brain, not even the mind. Theoretical work is needed to distinguish between universal concepts and universal *mechanisms*, because the latter may offer a generally acceptable object of research. Theoretical work is also needed in order to avoid a new unwanted fragmentation of semiotics, to indicate the connections, if any, and clarify the divergences between cognitive semiotics and biosemiotics.

With scientific work of this kind our field will hopefully reach better self-knowledge, establish firmer principles of research within each separate approach, facilitate communication between them because convergences and divergences will become clearer, and modernize its research objects. Then it should be possible to transform the present nebula into a heterogeneous, but at least structured field.

**Anne Hénault** (France)

The main challenge for the contemporary “*sémiotique*” is in its ability to pursue a coherent and powerful articulation and a correct description of its immanent forms.

**Jaakko Hintikka** (USA, Finland)

Contemporary semiotics faces the same challenges as all theory of language and communication. The challenge is to gain an overview, not to say intellectual mastery, of the different facets of the phenomena of language and meaning. This involves overcoming the pernicious division of language studies into syntax, semantics and pragmatics and the integration of the results of cognitive neuroscience with semantics and semiotics.

**Peeter Torop** (Estonia)

For the early Tartu School, semiotics was the tool for creating a new methodology of the humanities, a new method of scientific thinking. The results foreseen for this development were stronger disciplinary identities, well delimited research objects and a more systematic usage of terminology. These questions are still topical: (1) Semiotics needs a more systematic self-description as a science, a metadiscipline or a collection of disciplines (conceptualization of a methodologically legitimate structure: theoretical semiotics and applied semiotics, or theoretical semiotics, disciplinary fields of semiotics such as cultural semiotics, biosemiotics, sociosemiotics, etc., and subdisciplines in semiotics). (2) Self-description and self-identity of semiotics should be based on the conceptualized boundaries of research objects. (3) Self-identity of semiotics is most important for strengthening its academic status and in order to introduce stronger qualitative principles of evaluation. (4) In an academic context, international comparative analysis of semiotics syllabuses is required for the creation of a more systematic image of semiotics as a sphere of knowledge. (5) Developing new projects for comparative analysis of different schools (for example Lotmanian, Greimasian, Eco's and Barthes' semiotics) for a deeper methodological synthesis and better understanding of complementarity between the schools. (6) Contemporary semiotics of culture needs more elaborate analysis comparing it with other disciplines of cultural research (cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, etc.) in the context of a larger whole – culture research. (7) The future of semiotics

(also) lies in responding to questions about disciplinarity, inter- and transdisciplinarity of semiotics, specificity of semiotic methods, methodological and practical value of semiotics. This future will depend on the productivity of the dialogue occurring within semiotics as well as between semiotics and other fields. Both the internal and external dialogues in turn depend on the ability of methodology translation (making concept fields relate to one another) and the development of understanding methodology.

### **Ivan Mladenov** (Bulgaria)

Semiotics today has to withstand the wide-spreading habit of making “ad-hoc” hypotheses about anything in the world. This would be my summarized answer. It is based on my international experience of teaching semiotics (Peirce) around the world. Everywhere there is an initial suspicion among students whether they really need to delve into the depths of such a “dinosaur” philosopher. Fortunately enough, this opinion changes completely thereafter. It seems to me that there is a misconception that the problems in knowledge today can be solved within the frames of non-conceptual thinking. It is wrong because this new way of thinking, sometimes called “expertise” suggests theses contradicting each other. However, it is precisely semiotics which can provide at least some basis of structuring even to excessive thoughts. So, in my opinion, semiotics must resist the ignoring of theoretical knowledge in general and secondly, semiotics must strengthen its classic roots – Peirce, Lotman, Sebeok, etc. I think it is time to recapitulate the heritage of semiotics by ordering and classifying its sources in new editions, perhaps, done in a more attractive way, like, for example, the newest Peirce edition *Charles S. Peirce in His Own Words*.<sup>7</sup> This was a felicitous way of presenting classic semiotic thought.

### **Massimo Leone** (Italy)

A traditional English rhyme that details what a bride should wear at her wedding for good luck would fit contemporary semiotics very well: *Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, ... and a silver sixpence in her shoe.*

*Something old:* recovering old confidence by exploring and reviving the glorious past of semiotics, from ancient philosophy onwards, both in the West and in the East.

*Something new:* finding new answers: focusing on the social demand of knowledge, proving the originality and utility of its approach, gaining global recognition for its innovative solutions; finding new questions: exploring new levels of abstraction, bridging disciplines, challenging scientific clichés.

*Something borrowed:* finding new friends, cooperating with other disciplines and techniques; cooperating with the institutions and the citizenry; promoting its activities.

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<sup>7</sup> Thellefsen, Sørensen 2014.

*Something blue*: finding a new unity: cultivating and valuing difference within semiotics while recognizing and emphasizing a common perspective; finding new courage: worrying less about what the world thinks of semiotics; worrying more about what semiotics thinks of the world.

... *And a silver sixpence in her shoe*: finding new sources of funding would not hurt...

### **Youzheng Li** (China)

In contemporary academia, we can observe that,

- (1) commercialized utilitarian academic systems hold “success” rather than “truth” to be the genuine final aim of a scholar’s practice;
- (2) nihilist ontological rhetoric is used to weaken the interdisciplinary human-scientific tendency of semiotics;
- (3) in a global academic context Western scholarship is far from being familiar with non-Western traditional thinking and contemporary non-Western scholarship about its own traditional studies is far from being familiar with contemporary Western human-scientific theories;
- (4) commercialized cultural and academic circumstances lead to a general vulgarization of content, direction, practising style of semiotic activities with the result that the term “semiotics” could be frequently misused as a “pop-cultural brand” to search for increasing any kind of propaganda, advertising effect and factional influence through manipulating internet media in academic-educational marketing.

### **Myrdene Anderson** (USA)

Silos. To be genuine to itself, semiotics must remain ecumenical – even deepen and extend that embrace of open inquiry.

All science and scholarship (should there be any distinction) rests on natural curiosity that engages cognition and cosmology alike, emerging from and returning to semiosis.

### **Gianfranco Marrone** (Italy)

Semiotics is often applied as a methodology in fields quite different from one another, from literature to design, from cinema to music, each of them having its specificity and thus challenges. The problems of a semiotician who investigates cinema may be quite different from those of somebody who works on advertising, leading other people to think these are two fields of investigation. Well, I think this is one of the main challenges for semiotics: making people (both ordinary and academics) understand what we do. It seems very important to me to make it clear for everyone



that a semiotician who analyses a movie or a medieval cathedral is neither part of cinema studies nor an architect, he is simply doing semiotics. The specificity of doing semiotics is to move from movies to architecture, from design to food, each time indicating what different texts may have in common regarding their functioning. If a semiotician does not jump from a field to another he or she is not interpreting the role well, he is not doing semiotics. What happens concretely, however, is that those who move from a field to another are seen as people who claim to be experts in everything. No, they are not, they are just doing their job, a job that should be done side by side with cinema historians, architects, advertisers etc.

This is both an internal and an external problem. It is internal because often semioticians who work on movies think about themselves mostly as cinema experts; it is external because those who are not semioticians do not recognize semiotics as a specific field of study but as some kind of tendency within lots of different fields. Unless we won't be able to make people recognize the specificity of our field of studies we will always be considered simply as "passionate about meaning production processes" and not as people who are doing a specific job.

To make interdisciplinarity work people need somebody able to translate from a field into another and semiotics has developed the theoretical and methodological tools to achieve such a goal.

The question now is: how do we do this? How can we give semiotics the status of a discipline making it recognizable? This can only be done acting from the bottom, educating students, making the concepts of our discipline accessible to a wide public. If we cannot explain to our neighbour what semiotics is, we cannot expect to see our field recognized in the academia.

#### **Farouk Y. Seif** (USA)

Semiotics remains not widely accepted as a perfect tool for navigating through reality and as a transdisciplinary framework for social change. Sharing the predicament whether residing in humanities or science, semiotics seems to face the same challenge design confronts. Augmenting contemporary semiotics with design thinking has the potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice, science and humanities, and has the capacity to transcend pedagogical methods of conveying factual information into andragogical ways of engaging adult learners in imaginative interpretations.

#### **Dinda L. Gorlée** (Netherlands)

This IASS world congress has the slogan "from tradition to innovation".

What springs to my mind and heart is that the younger semioticians will follow the process of information reception in Peirce's semiosis. Starting with guesses (possible and spontaneous information) to the deeper status of background opinions

(old information) by rounding it out in judgments (new information) for “future” generations. Knowledge is naïve competence with limited incompetence and must echo choices and decisions in the light of complete information in “old” knowledge. The goal is to acquire new and special knowledge from old information.

When Saint Augustine spoke about emotion, knowledge and wisdom, was he perhaps overrating his own knowledge?

**Umberto Eco** (Italy)

I have always defined semiotics as a logic of culture and I still stick to this definition. However, cultural processes change and I think that today semiotics should take into account new phenomena such as the Web as a maximal encyclopedia (with all the problems concerning how to filter information – which means defining the notion of interpretation again) and new kinds of communicative intercourse such as social networks and so on. Communication with virtual partners implies a reformulation of pragmatics.

**Marcel Danesi** (Canada)

The challenge is to get semiotics accepted as any other scientific discipline (linguistics, psychology, and so on). To do so, I really believe that we must follow the Tartu School example – ignore any specific theory of the sign as superior and simply take a look at culture and nature as semiotic phenomena, no matter what theoretical framework is needed. Indeed, Tartu has taught us that semiotics is more a “*forma mentis*” than a set of principles and as such puts every scientist in a frame of mind to search for interpretive mechanisms in representation and expression.

**Jesper Hoffmeyer** (Denmark)

Seen from my esoteric point of view the major tasks are,

- (1) to get rid of nominalistic debris (they are actually not debris but main chunks of theory for all the Saussureans);
- (2) to take the consequences of semiosis as natural and human culture and sociality as framed by the life-historical individuation of human beings.

**Eero Tarasti** (Finland)

- (1) Most important is that semioticians develop their discipline in theoretical aspects, i.e. constantly create new theories and methods of analysis as well as new concepts and discourses ... from the basis of classics of semiotics.
- (2) Second important is to find fields and areas of application of semiotic theories; semiotics should be able to answer to the challenge of our time and big problems mankind is facing, such as war and peace, clashes of civilizations, preservation of

cultural heritages, ecological problems, psychotherapeutical issues, impact of media and new technology etc. But sermons do not help, semioticians must elaborate sharp analyses of these situations, and make models whereby solutions can be possibly found. That would be its major contribution, perhaps a utopian ideal.

**Winfried Nöth** (Brazil, Germany)

I have partly answered your question in an earlier interview with Marek Tamm in 2008<sup>8</sup>, where I was asked to answer, from a semiotic perspective, the question of “the greatest challenges, the most promising perspectives, as well as the most serious problems a scholar in humanities faces in our time”. My answer was, among other things, that the currently most important challenge to the humanist doctrine of the autonomy and freedom of the human mind was the perspective of a posthuman world in which humans may no longer be the masters but the slaves of those intelligent machines which they once devised as their instruments of rational thought and labour. I am still convinced that semiotics can and must face the challenges posed by development of semiotic machines.

**Paul Cobley** (United Kingdom)

The main challenge for contemporary semiotics is to establish itself as a presence in empirical research across the humanities and social sciences (including cognitive science) – and possibly in the natural sciences – not just in the work of semioticians, and to be instrumental in elucidating how the impact of research is semiotic in nature.

**Göran Sonesson** (Sweden)

Semiotics has the ambition to unite all the sciences of man, in the broad sense in which this also includes disciplines having to do with the place of human beings in nature. Its main competitor in this respect is nowadays cognitive science, which covers much the same domain, but which often takes a very reductive approach to meaning. To become more relevant in the contemporary world, semiotics has to go much further than today in the direction of becoming a truly empirical science, in a sense that includes, but is not limited to, experimental studies. To develop semiotics in this sense is to me the main challenge today. It is what we have increasingly been calling cognitive semiotics.

**Denis Bertrand** (France)

Considering the complexity of the contemporary ways of languages and meaning communication, it is also a challenge to give a clear and simple response. But I could say (1) that the main challenge for contemporary semiotics is to elaborate theoretical

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<sup>8</sup> Nöth, Tarasti, Tamm 2008.

tools based upon positive critics of the epistemological background of semiotics and able to articulate general positions with close analysis of concrete discourses in order to contribute to a better understanding of contemporary world through the numerical revolution, keeping in sight the question of values. This challenge implies (2) a tight connection between semiotics and other disciplines in the field of human, social and natural sciences, in order to develop, control and explicit complementarities – the specific semiotic contribution being the focus on language activity itself. And finally, (3) the challenge is to assure the transmission of semiotic knowledge and skills to new generations of researchers, through institutional activity (new doctors for instance), based upon creative and convincing works.

**Solomon Marcus** (Romania)

For me, as a mathematician and a computer scientist, the main challenge for contemporary semiotics is to bridge science and the humanities and to prove in this way that semiotics can essentially contribute to the realization of the unity of human knowledge and creativity. Unfortunately, we are far from this unification and the recent developments are not occurring in this direction.

**Jacques Fontanille** (France)

One of the main challenges for semiotics today is its interactions with other areas of scientific research. Eero Tarasti has often highlighted the difficulties faced by semiotics to be recognized as a discipline among the others. But now the scientific fields have any clear borders only in academic institutions. In contrast, in international research programmes, a discipline is only recognized as a discipline if it is able to participate in the treatment of collective scientific problems with an original contribution that would complement those of other disciplines, and, if possible, a contribution which appears necessary to solve the common problem.

Today, to be recognized as a discipline and to exist in international research programmes, semiotics needs to be able to collaborate with other scientific fields, including technological sciences, and be able to offer creative and relevant solutions to answer key questions that men and societies raise. To exist as a discipline, and to provide high-level career opportunities to PhDs in semiotics, semiotics can no longer afford to deal with issues concerning only semioticians. It must also, at the same time, understand and deal with the problems that our contemporaries are facing across the globe. And these problems are these of the future of our societies and our cultures.

**François Jost** (France)

First, semiotics must return to the mission Barthes originally assigned to it: examining how both signs and their related ideology work. Two dangers threaten semiotics: (a)

becoming autonomous, only turning to specialists and not taking the context into account; (b) valuation of the object: semiotics is too often limited to literature, art, and looks scornfully at everyday objects. Hence the delay in the semiotics of media. I also advocate a symptomatology (semeiology) that is not only interested in the life of signs, but also in symptoms. Faced with cultural studies that ignore content and documents as such, semioticians must show how certain manifestations of the media allow understanding, even anticipating certain social movements in depth.

The audiovisual and the media are clearly changing, semiotics must analyse changes brought by digital technology. In order to do this, it must also reclaim the communication issue as its own, which means moving away from ontology and using a pragmatic approach.

**José Luis Fernández** (Argentina)

The main challenge for semiotics studying mediatizations is the development of new web-based mediatizations. This requires, on the one hand, changing the rhythms of research work and publication of results and, on the other hand, establishes new relationships with sophisticated ethnographic and statistical methodologies.

**José Enrique Finol** (Venezuela)

One of the most appealing challenges that today's semiotics has to pay attention to is the definition and conceptualization of its limits and boundaries, and, consequently, the relationships with other disciplines. In order to solve this challenge, semiotics should ask itself where its own levels of interpretation are, and where the levels of interpretation of other disciplines are. In many so-called semiotic analyses, the descriptions, analysis, and interpretations are no different from those made by other disciplines like philosophy, sociology, anthropology and so on and so forth. Solving this kind of epistemological problems would help to find a relevant place for semiotics among other well established disciplines.

**Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio** (Italy)

Today's globalized communication-production is the main challenge for contemporary semiotics. Because, (1) semiosis and life converge (Sebeok); (2) semiotics is interested in semiosis=life; (3) today's globalized communication-production endangers life=semiosis.

This phase of social production is characterized by the industrial revolution of automation, globalization of communication and universalization of the market. Such universalization is not only a quantitative fact of expansion, but above all a qualitative transformation represented by the fact that anything can be translated into goods and by the continuous production of new goods-things. At present, communication is no

longer just an intermediate phase in the reproduction cycle (production, exchange, consumption). Far more radically, communication now represents the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes themselves. Not only does the exchange phase involve communication, but *production* and consumption too are communication. So the whole reproductive cycle is communication. This phase in the social system of production can be characterized as the “*communication-production*” phase.

Communication-production means persevering in being, insisting on being, persisting, *conatus essendi*. But *conatus essendi* of today’s communication-production contrasts with *conatus essendi* of communication-life. Persistence of communication-reproduction is *persistence of the same social form*. Communication-production with its continual adjustments and metamorphoses functional to reproduction of this same type of society contrasts with *social reproduction* and with reproduction of life on the planet.

Reproduction of the same production cycle destroys: (a) machines which it replaces with new machines because of competitive needs; (b) jobs, to make space for automation with a consequent increase in unemployment; products on the market, stimulating consumerism; (c) existing products, realizing similar new products which immediately make the former obsolete; (d) goods and markets, which cannot resist the competitiveness of global communication-production. Global communication-production is destructive not only with regard to social reproduction, human life, but life over the entire planet.

Semiotics understood as the capacity to reflect upon signs is connected with responsibility: the human being is the only semiotic animal existing, the only animal capable of accounting for signs and for sign behaviour, of accounting for self. Therefore, the human being is subject *to* and subject *of* responsibility. To the extent that the semiotician practices metasemiotics, s/he is doubly responsible: the semiotician must account for self and for others, and as a global semiotician for life over the entire planet.

### **Gunther Kress** (United Kingdom)

I assume that theories are in some significant sense shaped by the social world in which they are produced – that is, that they are (even if always “skewed” in some way) recognizably images (of a kind of common sense) of what that society is. The frame in which I have done my thinking and research and theorizing over the last twenty years or so has been shaped by a question of this kind:

*First:* what does a semiotics look like which can aptly account for “the social” as it is presently constituted in the “Western world”? That theory would exist within a larger one which aimed to account for semiosis in all human societies – at a general

level. In that, I am not thinking of ‘universals’ in an older sense. That theory would have to be the outcome of a collective effort.

A *second* question would then be about comparison and contrast with existing theories, theories that have come to us, shaped in a different, another “social”. That might entail asking: what remains, shared and common, what changes, and why?

A *third* question would be about “application” or “relevance”: I would wish to be able to make that theory “count”, “be telling”, be useable and useful in *my* world, able to use it to engage with issues and problems in my world. In my world, it could produce, as one example, an apt, equitable, theory of learning.

**Rocco Mangieri** (Venezuela)

One of the main challenges is the ability and skill to take up space in the socio-political and ecological field. We have two major issues and problems in 21st century: war and survival on our planet. We may search for the necessary engagement with contemporary sociology and history. Beyond the text as a uniform and regular unit, semioticians should not ignore the historical and sociological perspectives. The idea of the text as being closed and regular (the structuralism of first generation) is not enough for this target. This is one of its most important and necessary challenges but, at the same time, a very important meeting place for interdisciplinary contact.

**Ugo Volli** (Italy)

Until now, semiotics is not considered in many environments as a legitimate and useful social science. The main challenge now is overcoming this diffidence and establishing semiotics as an important methodology for understanding the evolution of our societies.

**Isabella Pezzini** (Italy)

It is important and vital for our discipline to continue to keep in mind even today – at the time of radical change of scenarios of communication and its means – the fundamental circuit between internal consistency, descriptive efficiency and a “grip” on the world.

**Neyla Graciela Pardo Abril** (Colombia)

The main challenge of semiotics is to contribute to the reflection on multimedia and multimodal discourses that occupy a central place in contemporary media (with their many sign systems).

**Patrizia Violi** (Italy)

I believe that the most important challenge of contemporary semiotics is to be able to say something meaningful on today’s complicated and highly complex world,

its transformations, its problems, the way technology affects our ways of living and communication, the new forms of power, control and ideology – recuperating, so to say, the original “engaged” attitude of the semiotic enterprise of the Sixties and Seventies, with the seminal works of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Semiotics, I believe, could thus be a very important tool to deconstruct discourses and help us understand their meanings and the implicit forms of their messages.

Then, of course, we could ask ourselves which kind of semiotic approach might be the most appropriate one, and, also, whether or not there is only “one” semiotics. Already in the 1970s, Eco was posing the very same question: is semiotics a well-defined discipline or is it rather a field of many different approaches? 40 years later this question is still open. I do not believe that it is possible to unify in a single framework the many existing quite different approaches and theoretical options that make our discipline a vibrant and alive domain of research today. It would be desirable, however, to expand the level of internal debate and look at comparisons between our respective different assumptions and methodologies, and maybe ask ourselves what are the most bottom line theoretical bases and undisputable beliefs we all share as semioticians, if any.

### **Mihhail Lotman** (Estonia)

As compared to the Peircean and Saussurean time, semiotics has evolved a great deal, but it has evolved, first of all, extensively. In a way, Charles Morris’s vision, according to which semiotics would become an organon of science, at least that of humanities, has been realized. Semiotics is, first of all, a method (cf. Umberto Eco), which is used to describe and sometimes even solve the problems of different fields. Such direction is promising and in a way inexhaustible, since there are constantly new phenomena in societies and cultures, which need to be deciphered and explained. One of such challenges, for instance, is connected with hypertexts and more widely, with the semantic hyperspace. Classic formal language theory is engaged in the analysis of monodimensional texts (strings), two- or three-dimensional texts (e.g., paintings or sculptures) already create nearly unsurpassable difficulties, but when we are speaking about semiotic hyperspace, we are dealing with  $n$ -dimensional texts.

Nevertheless, in my opinion a bigger challenge is not related to the extensive, but intensive development of semiotics. In the sphere of the foundations of semiotics we have not evolved much farther, in comparison with Peirce and Saussure. Semiotics is not just a method of describing and solving problems, but it is a problem itself. Usually we approach it from our habitual angle, which can be biological, linguistic, sociological, philosophical... I think that we urgently need a semiotic approach to semiotics: metasemiotics is a sign system as well.



**Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou** (Greece)

The most difficult challenge for semiotics right now is to *move forward*. We seem to be continually starting from zero.

Partly, this is due to the conflicting theoretical approaches within the field. But I don't believe that we will be able to create some unified semiotic super-theory simply by arguing about the merits of our different theories. What we can do is use the different theories that we have to do some applied empirical analysis.

I don't mean the sort of simplified semiotics that has, for instance, come out of marketing. I mean taking one of the developed theories and applying it, consistently, to produce actual analysis of actual semiotic phenomena – and then using the insights from this applied analysis to review and revise and build on the theory. There is far too little actual dialectical feedback between theory and practice in semiotics.

Of course, my position implies that I consider semiotics to be a scientific theory of meaning and not a branch of philosophy.

**Frederik Stjernfelt** (Denmark)

The main challenge for contemporary semiotics is to articulate a unifying framework integrating semiotics, cognition and biology on the premises that the three are coextensive and interrelated. The semiotic character of such a framework implies that it should account for the validity of cognition and reasoning from their beginnings in the simplest organisms. Thus such a framework cannot be reduced to psychology, also because psychology is relevant only to higher animals.

Institutionally, the challenge is to rally not only humanities scholars, but also social scientists, biologists and logicians, to contribute to such an endeavour.

## Concluding remarks

The answers to our question are very different as to their detail, concrete or abstract nature, or substance as such. In this sense, it is certainly hardly possible to distinguish *only one particular aspect* of challenges that contemporary semiotics has to take up – there are many. Nevertheless, some opinions overlap from one answer to another. They concern the necessity, for semiotics,

- (1) to (re)define its goals, its language and methodology, at the same time reconsidering its own past and providing an appropriate self-description;
- (2) to (re)think its relations with other disciplines (in particular, in connection with its own status and image within the academic community);
- (3) to correspond more adequately to the demands of the contemporary world, especially favouring producing new knowledge and theoretical tools;

- (4) to develop more actively in the applied and experimental fields, therefore becoming more useful (in a humanistic sense, among others) and pragmatically oriented, and reconsidering “traditional” relations between theory and practice;
- (5) to resolve particular institutional and financial problems;
- (6) to reflect on educational and pedagogic questions both on a purely theoretical level and in the sense of teaching semiotics to the new generation(s) of future semioticians.

However, since not all centres and schools of contemporary semiotics are represented in the list above, this self-description is certainly incomplete. As for a brief conclusion, or rather instead of it, here are some thoughts of our own.

Indeed, contemporary semiotics is still in its youth and has to be developed into an academic discipline. Besides the institutional development and the introduction of semiotics programmes in many more universities, this includes a more explicit formulation of the semiotics toolbox and methodology. However, this also requires scrupulous work on some fundamental theoretical problems.

Semiotic theory should incorporate the modelling of learning and building processes. It will be fascinating to describe in detail how (and to what extent) different mechanisms of learning are connected to the production of different types of signs, and as a result, different behaviours, communication systems and morphologies. Also, we should describe how the situations of incompatibility and confusion between the existing sign relations produce new sign relations, habits and logic. This includes an extensive area of prelinguistic logic as studied by biosemiotics. In addition to theoretical inquiry, experimental analysis of meaning making can be introduced into all branches of semiotics. The understanding we can get from such studies will undoubtedly favour a more efficient, interesting and fascinating semiotics.<sup>9</sup>

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