

## Introduction: Framing nature and culture

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The articles gathered in this special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* discuss a variety of discourses, theoretical models, artistic activities, principles of design, etc. which in one way or another expose and manifest, but also guide, our perception of nature and human-environment relations. Most of the articles in this issue have grown out of presentations made at the conference Framing Nature: Signs, Stories, and Ecologies of Meaning, which took place in Tartu from 29 April 2014 to 3 May 2014.<sup>3</sup> Humans create multiple environments by using various frames of interpretation. In addition, specific means of expression and modes of signification give nature a particular shape and character. However, framing nature is not a one-way process – i.e. the semiotic frames are not simply of nature, but they are part of nature as they have an effect on the ecological processes themselves. Such a modified environment in turn becomes an object of further models, interpretations and significations. Hence, nature frames culture just like culture frames nature in a variety of ways, some of which are examined in the articles of the current issue.

In the first article of the issue, “Urban discourse – city space, city language, city planning: Eco-semiotic approaches to the discourse analysis of urban renewal”, Ernest W. B. Hess-Lüttich reviews a broad set of approaches to the discourse of urban development. He finds that, for planning a sustainable urban environment, successful communication between different stakeholders should take place, the stakeholders’ various backgrounds, interests and even perceptions of reality must be observed and taken into account, and a coherence of different discourses involved

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<sup>3</sup> This large meeting on environmental humanities, hosted by the Department of Semiotics of the University of Tartu, included the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment (EASLCE) Biennial Conference, and the Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies (NIES) IX Conference, altogether with more than 240 participants and 115 presentations (Tüür 2015a, 2015b; Rattasepp 2014). It also included a Jakob von Uexküll Lecture given by Wendy Wheeler (Wheeler 2014).

should emerge. He observes Berlin Tempelhof airport as a case at the intersection of this communication, while views on what it means to develop the airport area in a sustainable way have not converged so far.

In his article “Textualities of the city – from the legibility of urban space towards social and natural others in planning”, Tiit Remm interprets the city and landscape using the concept of text. He discusses the ways in which cities are both the result and the providers of textualizations of the semiotic space. Conceptualizations of the urban environment are made manifest in what he calls ‘texting’. By studying urban planning on the example of Tartu, Estonia, we can see how nature is conceptualized during different steps of that process through acknowledging certain aspects of the environment, such as particular species and green areas in the city, and discarding other aspects. Although understood as necessary part of our everyday lives, nature is also marginalized at times, and framed for developing future urban environment.

In their paper “Hedge mazes and landscape gardens as cultural boundary objects” Katarzyna Kaczmarczyk and Montana Salvoni present the 17th- and 18th-century English hedge mazes and landscape gardens as particular ways of organizing and perceiving the environment. Whereas the landscape gardens tend to hide their boundaries and the hedge mazes highlight them for the perceiver, both constitute borderline objects between nature and culture, rendering such a border itself as an unsolvable puzzle.

The image of the maze holds a central place also in Matthew Clements’ article “The circle and the maze: Two images of ecosemiotics”. However, in this particular case the maze serves the function of a mental tool, a particular way of organizing the semiotic reality characteristic of the thinking of Charles Sanders Peirce. The maze is juxtaposed with another visual organizer of thought – the functional circle, which was a key element in Jakob von Uexküll’s umwelt theory. As models, both images shape the world, while at the same time enclosing it in restrictive conceptual bounds. Clements indicates how both authors possess additional conceptual tools, which help to relieve such restrictions.

Yogi Hale Hendlin’s paper “Multiplicity and *Welt*” takes a new look at the classic Uexküllian models of the functional cycle and umwelt. While highlighting the heterogeneity and multiplicity of sign processes, the author demonstrates how they converge in the formation of umwelten of humans as well as other species. A Deleuzian supplementation helps to uncover such formative undercurrents of semiotic reality.

Rebecca C. Potter takes a stroll in the footsteps of the American ecologist Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* and Jakob von Uexküll’s umwelt theory in her paper titled “The biosemiotics of Aldo Leopold”. The compatibility of these approaches has been suggested before, as Uexküll theorizes how organisms perceive

and understand objects in their umwelten, and Leopold focuses on meaning-making in the interconnected relations within the biotic community. Rebecca Potter recognizes a further alignment in the works of these two thinkers, as in *A Sand County Almanac* the narrative depictions of the natural world account for an attempt to describe how organisms subjectively make meaning of their environments in complete accordance to Uexküll's biosemiotics.

Wojciech Kalaga's article "Against the frame" unfolds the paradoxical nature of textual frames. A text needs a frame in order to preserve and present its identity, yet it can be understood only when borders are dissolved and reached beyond. Hence the osmotic character of the frame comes to the fore – upholding the entity on the one hand, yet making it "alive" via all the crossing and diffusion.

Pierre-Louis Patoine and Jonathan Hope follow the ideas developed by Martin Heidegger in "Literature as a defining trait of the human umwelt: From and beyond Heidegger". Although Heidegger's views on humans among other living beings, or "stones" and "animals", and his interpretation of Hölderlin's works as particularly foundational for rebuilding the unique identity of a nation also appear to reflect his anthropocentrism and Western-centred nationalism, they do offer a solid ground for understanding literature and literary texts in a truly broad and timeless sense – as producers of the world, a collective umwelt that we inhabit as humans –, providing it a shared locality and a natural uniqueness in its environmental space and historic time.

Ott Heinapuu's article "Agrarian rituals giving way to Romantic motifs: Sacred natural sites in Estonia" focuses on sacred natural sites as semi-natural communities, which are preserved through human interpretation just as much as through human activity. Past centuries have overwritten and reframed the sites with dominant schemes of interpretation, stemming from literary culture. The article demonstrates how frames which often shadow the original meanings can still contribute to the preservation of the original objects.

Hing Tsang takes a new look at Johan van der Keuken's award-winning documentary films *Flat Jungle* (1978) and *Face Value* (1991). *Flat Jungle* is an observation of interrelations between natural habitats and human activity on the Wadden Sea, an intertidal area spanning the North Sea coast of the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. *Face Value* consists of empathic close-ups of faces of people of different appearances, ages, backgrounds, etc. Hing Tsang argues that van der Keuken's films intrinsically hold an ecosemiotic point of view, overcoming the sharp distinction of the cultural and the natural, as in *Flat Jungle* the initially neutral landscape is humanized, and in *Face Value* the anthropocentric appearance is dissolved in the naturalization of the faces observed.

Zoos serve as another kind of mediatory environment where human conceptions of nature are put on display. In their article “Semiotic dimensions of human attitudes towards other animals: A case of zoological gardens” Nelly Mäekivi and Timo Maran discuss the cultural and biosemiotic frames that determine the choice and presentation of animals in zoos. The authors indicate which semiotic strategies can be employed by the zoos to shift the perception of the visitors while making use of the animals’ own biological characteristics for certain human rationale.

Ariel Gómez Ponce takes a closer look at metaphors of predation used to characterize human behaviour on examples from Argentinean culture, based on the cougar and the jaguar. On the one hand, animal metaphors seem to place humans in their natural environments alongside with the significant species they are in contact with. In that, predatory species continue to be sources for recurring motifs in representing certain cultural behaviours. On the other hand, the predatory metaphors reflect the culture’s attitudes towards and perceptions of the species involved, as persons characterized by those metaphors tend to be set outside the culture through the use of these metaphors.

The volume ends with an overview of the 10th Tartu Semiotics Summer School by Ekaterina Velmezova, a book review by Remo Gramigna, and two biographic papers: Myrdene Anderson’s autobiographic confession, revealing a personal and intellectual exploration based on a deep de- and reframing of one’s own mind in the context of the history of semiotics, and Kalevi Kull’s survey of the work and ideas of the theoretical biologist Alexandr Levich, including the introduction of the concept of ecological code.

## References

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