

How to develop semiotics: Paul Cobley

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“To be means to communicate.” *Subject Matters* – a journal founded by Paul Cobley – makes this statement in its first issue.³ The beauty of an expression lies in the multiplicity of meanings that match it. Communication is the core of semiotics. Indeed, to be means to communicate. And communication – in so many senses of this word – characterizes Paul Cobley very well.

For several years Paul worked as Reader in Communications at London Metropolitan University, and later served as Professor of Semiotics and Communications at the same University. Since 2013, he is Professor in Language and Media at Middlesex University, London.

Paul entered semiotics via a comic – the book *Semiotics for Beginners* (1997) that instantly made him known on the world semiotic scene and beyond. This comic book has been republished several times and translated into a dozen languages. In the years that followed he has published three monographs: *The American Thriller* (2000), *Narrative* (2001), and *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics* (2016), plus a couple of hundred of articles. In addition, he has become one of the most productive editors of semiotics volumes, having worked on more than 25 edited collections and special issues of journals. Among these is the seminal work *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics* (2010) that marks an important step for the whole discipline of semiotics.⁴ In 2014, Paul Cobley was elected as the

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³ Cobley, Paul 2004. ‘To be means to communicate.’ *Subject Matters* 1(1): 29–46. Cobley refers here to Deely, John 2003. The quasi-error of the external world. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 10(1): 25–46

⁴ A list of Cobley’s publications can be found in the Appendix.

sixth President of the International Association of Semiotic Studies, after Émile Benveniste (1969–1972), Cesare Segre (1972–1984), Jerzy Pelc (1984–1994), Roland Posner (1994–2004), and Eero Tarasti (2004–2014).

To mark his sixtieth birthday, we formulated some questions and asked Paul to respond. The text was completed in early March 2023.



Paul Cobley, Copenhagen, 30 November 2018. (Photo by K. Kull.)

Was the *Subject Matters* your brainchild? It is a valuable bibliographic rarity.

Yes – I had funds to run this from 2003 to 2009. It had a stellar editorial board and produced some excellent work. I think there were five volumes, two issues per year. As is so often the case, though, things that are rather good still disappear.

Except semiotics. Why were you initially drawn to semiotics, how did you arrive at semiotics? And before that – where did you hear about semiotics first time?

I've answered this question a few times in the past, both formally and informally, citing experiences at university. Writing this now, though, I think I would go further back, still, to when I was at secondary school. At that time in the UK, there had been an admirable attempt to eliminate selective schooling. Although that attempt proved unsuccessful for a number of reasons, it also involved some curriculum development in schools. One initiative that remains in my memory is a class called 'Integrated Studies' that the teachers at my comprehensive school staged for pupils in their first two years at secondary school. In those sessions – which lasted the entire afternoon rather than just for the duration of a lesson – all pupils from the year were mixed in order to engage in activities which were not connected to one particular discipline. I remember a number of those sessions vividly – a trip

to the coast in which pupils considered the ecology of a particular seaside town and visited a seafood processing plant; an afternoon the following week when pupils were asked to be the jury in legal proceedings to determine whether a local tycoon should be allowed to open a new “fish factory” which would bring jobs locally but would do damage to the local environment; etc. Being asked to contemplate these general social issues, but also mixing a requirement of some knowledge of science and of communication, probably had some effect on me. It broke disciplines out of boxes, as far as I could see, and made students think about the signification and significance of the decisions humans make in their environments. I don’t think that the teachers responsible for this were aware of semiotics or at all semiotically orientated. However, they were committed, they’d invented these activities as a group and, although dealing with some of the most lowly and deprived offspring in UK society, were determined to develop their pupils’ opinions from a generalist perspective rather than simply coercing them to pass exams in traditional subjects.

That is probably the root of my “generalist” outlook which underpins my interest in semiotics, although I was not aware of semiotics until I went to study at university. I had left school with just one exam passed and was part of the last generation that went straight into working in a factory – the kind of place where I never wanted to work. So, when I decided to go back to education, I was convinced that I was going to do it properly this time and to do it for as long as I possibly could. I was elated to get to university and enjoyed every second of it. However, I did not quite realize what an excellent choice the University of Sussex was. Established less than 20 years previously, it fostered an approach to education that, again, encouraged generalism in the best possible way. The range of choice and combination in the degree programmes was not necessarily what struck me; I took that for granted. What struck me above all was the fact that there was one building which was full of lecture theatres of differing sizes and these lecture theatres operated from early in the morning to late in the evening, with presentations on every conceivable topic, often – but not always – serving different courses, and *open to any student*. You could, literally, attend any lecture you wanted. In the first few weeks, I tried to attend everything, round the clock, but soon realized I could not sustain the attempt. Although I chose a very diverse programme for my studies, my main focus was American history and a visiting tutor from the US had invited his friend, the British novelist Malcolm Bradbury, to give a lecture during my first year. That was where I first heard the term ‘poststructuralism’. My tutor said, afterwards, “Jeez. I’ve hardly got onto structuralism, yet”. Despite that, I had already set an English collection of Roland Barthes’ essays, *Image-Music-Text*,⁵ to

⁵ Barthes, Roland 1977. *Image Music Text*. (Heath, Stephen, trans.) London: Fontana Press.

read in the first few weeks of my university studies and that was heading in the direction of poststructuralism.

In my second year I remember meeting a woman who said that she'd attended a lecture by Jacqueline Rose, a popular and impressive member of staff, and the talk was about some things called 'signifier' and 'signified' – "I can't quite explain it," she said. "You'll have to attend those lectures for yourself." So I did – and, from what I can remember, what was presented we would now see as a very conventional "structuralist" account of semiotics. All these years later, the much-translated version of semiotics that was gaining fashionability in the late 1970s and early 1980s looks partial and muddled. Terence Hawkes' confused book *Structuralism and Semiotics*,⁶ written as though it was the coherent key to all mythologies, gives a flavour of this period. For me, I was confused, but very much interested. In my final year, I studied on another huge but student-centred course at Sussex called 'The Modern European Mind'. Students were required to set each class's readings from week to week and I asked for us to study *The Name of the Rose* which had just been translated into English.⁷ "OK", said my tutor. "Eco's translator, David Osmond-Smith, is just along the corridor and if I read this I'll be able to hold up my head at cocktail parties".

You have been active in semiotics for a rather long time. What was your evolution in semiotics? How would you describe it?

I would probably describe it as "muddled" in the early stages. And the middle stages. Probably the latter stages, too. I've tried to offer a flavour of what semiotics was like in the UK at this time and for me, as well as many others, you also had to try to get a grip on both Marxism and psychoanalysis, too, not to mention feminism and poststructuralism. I had quite a way to go if I was to catch up with the likes of Jacqueline Rose (which I never would). When I started working in the academy in the late 1980s, teaching undergraduate classes at various London universities while also doing a PhD and a full-time job elsewhere, I was basically teaching a version of semiotics that looked more like Hawkes' book than contemporary semiotics does. My PhD supervisor enlisted me to teach seminars on a first-year Communications class and, before it started, he asked me if I could find an up-to-date summary of semiotics that we might use for the class. Typically, I treated the task not just as 15 minutes on Google – which didn't exist at that time – or a couple of days in the newly-computerized library, but as a PhD. I started to

⁶ Hawkes, Terence 1977. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen. [Reprinted 1983; reprinted by Routledge, London 1991, 1992, 1997, 2003; 2nd ed. 2003, reprinted 2005.]

⁷ Eco, Umberto 1983. *The Name of the Rose*. (Weaver, William, trans.) London: Secker and Warburg. [San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.]

read everything with ‘semiotics’ in the title that I could get my hands on and there were some strange books out there. Quite a lot of people had decided that they knew about semiotics and would write a volume for those people who didn’t know (because the subject was “so difficult”). Often the books contained an obligatory but specious critique to show that although the author was writing about semiotics they were still predominantly Marxists or psychoanalytic, or some other such. It would often be the only book/article they ever wrote. Certainly, these were not people who ever went to semiotics conferences or mixed with other semioticians. Eventually, the Communications class ended up using some books by John Fiske whose grasp of semiotics, as part of a mix with other stuff, was refracted through Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Eco’s journalism and a diluted version of de Certeau.

Yet I also came across other publications on semiotics. The works of Sebeok were, obviously, a major influence. I remember buying Lucid’s collection, *Soviet Semiotics*,⁸ and quite a few other Prague and Slavic Studies texts. While writing my PhD, I had read a lot of the translations of works from the Prague School, of which there were many, but I was especially interested in the work of Vodička, as well as Mukařovský and I even read Bogatyrev’s book on clothing and costume. I went to the Women’s Library to look up work by Lady Welby and it was there that I encountered the name Susan Petrilli. I began to teach a course on ‘Communication theory’ and my interests in semiotics were reflected in a “reader” volume I published for Routledge in 1996⁹ – a mix of poststructuralism, reader theory and some genuine semiotics (Saussure, Peirce, Benveniste, Jakobson) but, overall, very semiotic in tone.

The real eye-opener was travelling to Berkeley in 1994 for the IASS Congress. I must confess, as a relatively young man unleashed in the Bay Area for a week during the Summer, I did not spend quite as much time listening to conference papers as I might have done. However, I met people there who still loom large in my life, including those who are not with us any longer – Tom Sebeok, Umberto Eco – and those who are with us – Brooke Williams, Fernando Andacht, Richard Lanigan – as well as seeing papers by Sebeok, Lakoff and others. The one thing that overwhelmed me, though, was the predominance of Peirce – and not just in papers by US scholars. Peirce was a massive phenomenon and, almost exactly like finding a new musical artist/genre or a new novelist, a universe opened up invitingly. After seeing a presentation by Joseph Brent in which he shed tears, the first thing I read when I got home was his biography of Peirce.¹⁰ For the next few years, I tried to go through the *Collected Papers* but I have to admit that I was stumped more often

⁸ Lucid, Daniel P. (ed. and trans.) 1977. *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁹ Cobley, Paul (ed.) 1996. *The Communication Theory Reader*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Brent, Joseph 1993. *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

than I was enlightened. It didn't stop me becoming a Peircean, though, especially with the help of some commentaries (e.g. Merrell).

I can't say that it was the Paris School or the "minor tradition" or glottocentrism that I was leaving behind, even though the jumbled version of semiotics that was taught to undergraduates in the UK was very much a concoction with Parisian ingredients. That was true to a certain extent of Anglo-Australian "social semiotics", too, which I started to understand a little when I first met Gunther Kress in the mid-1990s on his return from Australia. Rather, I was feeling at odds with the poststructuralist mix that had somehow become dominant in Anglophone theory circles and almost seemed to have stopped at 1995, with a block put on any theorizing thereafter. Indeed, I do think that the kind of informal poststructuralism that we taught undergraduates during that period has come home to roost; it's become the "common sense" (in Gramscian terms) of contemporary civil society. Yet I was already feeling like that in the 1990s and I wasn't the only one. I remember Frederik Stjernfelt in 2007 responding to a question about why he got into biosemiotics and the answer he gave was precisely the one that I would offer if I was as articulate in English as he is. He said that he had become tired with the continual poststructuralist lament that any attempt to actually make an observation on signification amounted to a grand narrative or a binary opposition or an undecidable.

In the late 1990s, I had become friends with Tom Sebeok and was reading his work plus a lot of popular science books on biology and animal communication. I came to biosemiotics through Sebeok's wider vision of what constituted semiotics, the broader questions it asked beyond how literature works like a system or how an advertising photograph might utilize codes, for example. For me, biosemiotics was a thoroughgoing examination of how human signification is rooted in many biological phenomena – and biosemiotics remains that for me now. Cultural studies and poststructuralism had told us to have nothing to do with science, with its imperialism, phallocentrism and positivism, while any reference to biology, in particular, was "dangerous" and risked social Darwinism. But biology didn't have to be this way and biosemiotics demonstrated that it isn't (although it can sometimes be so in its institutional form). And, aside from that, sometimes the nettle had to be grasped and it had to be accepted that there are things in the world that *are* biological even if in a more nuanced way than determinists would have it.

Basically, that's been my position in semiotics in the later years. It's not so much that I would say I'm a biosemiotician and think everyone else should do biosemiotics. It's more a matter of taking the broader perspective on semiosis and considering the possibility that human endeavour and human artefacts are a result of the human constitution which is, itself, a constitution rooted in the natural world.

You have written many works on semiotics. What do you consider your most important contributions to semiotics?

I'm pretty sure that all of my stuff has been semiotic in one way or another. About twenty or so years ago, I wrote a book on American popular narrative of the 1970s and I still consider that to be thoroughly semiotic, even if not all the vocabulary was. I'm lucky enough to have had the experience of people meeting me at conferences and elsewhere and saying "I read your [whichever it was]" to initiate conversation. Usually, it's been a book (I don't think anyone ever said "I read your article") and it's usually been a book I've edited. So, I'd have to say that the edited volumes I've done are probably most important, but also because they've brought people together, you hear other voices rather than mine and they've been useful for readers who might have needed some information about the topic.

Probably my 2016 book, *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics* is quite close to what I would have said if I'd had the chance a decade or so before it was published. But there are a lot of compromises in that volume, as well as a bit of bad temper which might put people off. I wanted to shout a bit of a wake-up call and settle accounts with my erstwhile poststructuralist colleagues and I realize that sounds like a missionary impulse, easy to reject and easy to write off as grandstanding. I'm not great at doing the latter without it being egregious.

So, my most important contributions to semiotics have been those that other people have made for me. Bringing those people together has been rewarding. From a very early stage in my career in the academy, I've been walking round with an edited book in my head, thinking "She'll be great for that contribution; he'll be great for that one" and so on. I still do that now, although I'm too pressed to act upon it.

Whose works have influenced your semiotic views the most? Can you mention some of these works?

There are many. The works of Tom Sebeok, Susan Petrilli, Kalevi Kull, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Søren Brier, Frederik Stjernfelt, Gunther Kress, Marcel Danesi, Roy Harris, Terry Deacon, Brooke Williams and John Deely. These are all people with whom I've been privileged to have been friends. There are others whom I never met: Roland Barthes, Juri Lotman, Umberto Eco, Émile Benveniste. There are obviously others in the semiotic community that I cite less frequently but are friends who have influenced me through discussion: Don Favareau, Dario Martinelli, Kristian Bankov, Jamin Pelkey, Hongbing Yu, Fernando Andacht, Timo Maran, Gary Shank, David Machin, Eero Tarasti, Alin Olteanu, Anti Randviir, Neyla Pardo, Alexandros Lagopoulous, Peeter Torop, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Kaie Koppel (Kotov), Kobus Marais, José Enrique Finol, Yiheng Zhao. It feels invidious to leave out the many others who have informed me over the years.

If we're talking about specific works in the field, I'd have to say all of Sebeok's post-1962 writings. More specific still, I'd say the 1991 collection of his essays entitled *A Sign is Just a Sign*.¹¹ And if I had to pick out one essay from that volume it would be Sebeok's 1988 contribution "In what sense is language a 'primary modelling system'?" Some of the archaeology it references is now dated, but once you have absorbed the argument there is no going back to a glottocentric semiotics. I should perhaps mention his encyclopedia article also reprinted in that volume, "Communication", from which there is, equally, no going back to an anthropocentric version of what communication is. Sara Cannizzaro, now a formidable academic researcher, was an undergraduate who declared herself to be shy and struggling with her studies when I first met her twenty years ago. Nevertheless, we managed to discuss the first paragraph of this essay, with no breaks, for two hours in the first class of mine to which she came.

Another major influence has been all of John Deely's works but, if pressed to pick out one, I'd point to his 1994 book *The Human Use of Signs; or Elements of Anthroposemiosis*.¹² It's a book laid out in individual theses but is a singularly coherent (if difficult) outline of the ontology of the sign (and the object and the thing). I'd probably say that it's been more important to me than the ontologies presented by both Peirce and Saussure, let alone Halliday, Greimas and others. The discussions that John had with Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio were always illuminating, including the book he co-authored with them.¹³ The Petrilli/Ponzio book *Semiotics Unbounded*¹⁴ is a fairly complete statement of their position on a number of semiotic issues but, before that, I was very much influenced by the 1998 special issue of *Semiotische Berichte* dedicated to their work.¹⁵

The 2001 *Semiotica* special issue on Jakob von Uexküll¹⁶ was an eye-opener and I have cited it in full, repeatedly over the years, as well as referring to particular essays. It was this collection which really made me think about how far-reaching and thoroughgoing the concept of *Umwelt* is. Other people now find that to be the case and there has been an explosion of work on *Umwelt* from many corners since.

¹¹ Sebeok, Thomas A. 1991. *A Sign is Just a Sign*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹² Deely, John 1994. *The Human Use of Signs or: Elements of Anthroposemiosis*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

¹³ Deely, John N.; Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto 2005. *The Semiotic Animal*. New York: Legas.

¹⁴ Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto 2005. *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

¹⁵ Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto 1998. Signs of research on signs. *Semiotische Berichte* 22(3/4): 5–173.

¹⁶ *Semiotica* 134(1/4), 2001: *Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics* (edited by Kalevi Kull).

The essays of Søren Brier, eventually collected and rounded off in his book, *Cybersemiotics: Why Information is Not Enough!*.¹⁷ Those essays and quite a few presentations made me more familiar with some of the questions that second-order cybernetics entails and they were absolutely central to biosemiotics. Frequent discussions with Sara Cannizzaro about related topics kept that pot on the boil.

Reading Jesper Hoffmeyer's books was crucial to understanding what biosemiotics entailed. *Signs and Meanings in the Universe*¹⁸ was recommended to me by Tom Sebeok and then *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs*,¹⁹ recommended to me by John Deely whilst it was in manuscript, tipped me over to the point where I could genuinely state my belief, in Whiteheadian fashion, that everything I and possibly a few others could write would merely be just a set of footnotes to Hoffmeyer.

Deacon's volume *The Symbolic Species*²⁰ was something that Tom Sebeok referred to as a "huge book". I think he meant that phrase in terms of ideas rather than number of pages; but of greater magnitude still, perhaps, was *Incomplete Nature*.²¹ I couldn't have written my 2016 book if *Incomplete Nature* hadn't answered – or at least attempted to answer – so many questions I had.

Likewise, there are sometimes articles which influence you to be able to articulate matters where you broadly agree on the issues but you do not quite know how to express them. Eco's article "Unlimited semiosis and drift"²² simultaneously allowed me to settle some questions for myself on textuality and reading, while also enabling me to say what it was that separated a Peircean understanding of semiosis from a deconstructive or poststructuralist idea of signification. Another article of this kind was Kalevi Kull's "To know what life knows" in *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*.²³ The distinction between *phi* and *sigma* sciences was borrowed; but what was original about the article was that it shifted a number of questions

¹⁷ Brier, Søren 2008. *Cybersemiotics: Why Information is Not Enough!* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

¹⁸ Hoffmeyer, Jesper 1996. *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

¹⁹ Hoffmeyer, Jesper 2008. *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs*. Scranton: Scranton University Press.

²⁰ Deacon, Terrence 1997. *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain*. New York: Norton.

²¹ Deacon, Terrence 2012. *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*. New York: W. W. Norton.

²² Eco, Umberto 1990. Unlimited semiosis and drift: Pragmaticism and pragmatism. In: Eco, Umberto, *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 23–43.

²³ Kull, Kalevi 2009. Biosemiotics: To know, what life knows. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 16(3/4): 81–88.

towards the nature of knowing: on the part of the sentient form under discussion and on the part of the sapient observer.

One of the best books in semiotics of the last decade has been Frederik Stjernfelt's *Natural Propositions*.²⁴ There is quotable wisdom on every page and material to argue with even if you're not influenced by it. Because of this, plus its cheap price, I exhort every semiotician to buy a copy.

A volume that is worth revisiting – which I have failed to do until now – and was very helpful in my early getting to grips with the sheer breadth of semiotics, is Krampen *et al.*'s *Classics of Semiotics*.²⁵ In dealing with “classics” or individual scholars it could be seen as too much of a hagiography; it is also very Germanic, in terms of its contributors, although I thought that was a good thing. Overwhelmingly, though, it is both lucid and prescient because the agenda it set is still the one, in my opinion, that we are negotiating in semiotics today. Probably most of my understanding of semiotics comes from this volume and that explains why I have so seldom revisited it: I'm repressing the knowledge of where my understanding comes from. That is, in addition to the above, I've been influenced by hundreds of the *very good* “secondary” texts that exist and whose names I've forgotten but which have helpfully guided me through Peirce, von Uexküll, the Prague Linguistic Circle, second-order cybernetics, ethology, non-verbal communication and philosophy of science.

Who has influenced your intellectual development besides semioticians?

Lots of teachers over the years and lots of colleagues. My parents were quite good, according to their abilities, too. My dad read a lot of popular fiction; I don't think my mum ever saw a Shakespeare play, but she had picked up few quotations here and there. That can make the difference within a relatively culturally impoverished household; it was only after I started to get interested in Shakespeare – and, so, too late to withdraw – that I realized that she had not partaken of the interest to that extent herself. But I guess the readers of this interview cannot go back to these people and see if they'll work for their own purposes because the traces of their influence are not solid enough and have not endured for the purposes of reuse. So, I guess you're asking about bodies of intellectual work outside semiotics which has guided my approach to semiotics. Again, there are many. As Umberto Eco used to say when he was repeatedly asked what book was the greatest single influence on

²⁴ Stjernfelt, Frederik 2014. *Natural Propositions: The Actuality of Peirce's Doctrine of Dicisigns*. Boston: Docent Press.

²⁵ Krampen, Martin; Oehler, Klaus; Posner, Roland; Sebeok, Thomas A.; Uexküll, Thure von (eds.) 1987. *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press.

him, “I’d have to be an idiot if I was influenced only by one book”. However, I’ll try to narrow down to some proper names.

Althusser – when I became an undergraduate, Althusser had been committed to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. So, while there was still some interest in his work and the ideology essay was still set on course reading lists, there was a dismissive attitude towards him. But in the early years of my PhD, I sat down and read very closely, over a number of months, the English translations of Althusser. I found the discussions of anti-humanism more convincing than the discussions of ideology and the theorization of overdetermination and uneven development more convincing than Althusser’s writings on culture. Nevertheless, I developed into a card-carrying Althusserian and, effectively, I have remained unrepentantly so up to the present. It’s probably for this reason that I found Alain Badiou’s writing so compelling after fifteen or so years of ‘postmodernism’ and ‘poststructuralism’ in the academy and hardly even a mention of ideology anymore. At the same time that I was giving close attention to Althusser, I was also reading Gramsci who, in turn, was a major influence on *Marxism Today*²⁶ in the 1980s. Concomitantly, I read much more by Stuart Hall who was a giant in the UK academy, a major theoretician for *Marxism Today*, one of the greatest speakers and general communicators you could ever witness, a supreme humourist and, happily, on my PhD supervision team. His discussions of semiotics were a little bit flaky and a hostage to his attempt to reach larger audiences, but he was a major influence regardless.

Odd though it may sound, I was also caught up in psychoanalysis in London when there was immense interest in it globally and within the UK. I was always dubious about it as a therapy, but as a theory of culture it’s quite illuminating. So, from the early 1980s, I was influenced by Freud’s writings. In fact, in terms of richness of writing, Sebeok’s articles are closest to the output of Freud (although Tom wouldn’t have thanked me for the comparison). It’s difficult to think of any other academic writers beside the two of them who can structure their arguments quite as well.

Perhaps linking Freud and semiotics in a proto-semiotic moment are the two books and small number of essays by Voloshinov. In the early 1990s, I found them extremely persuasive and, against the tide, was convinced that the author of the Voloshinov books was not Bakhtin. I saw the idea of the word as a bridge, the critiques of Saussure and Freud, as well as the discourse in life/art argument in lots of work in semiotics from that period – sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not. I felt certain that Halliday must have been well versed in those works and I saw it in Anglo-Australian social semiotics.

²⁶ A magazine issued in London from 1957 to 1991.

I was interested in non-verbal communication after Sebeok and that led me to, especially, the research of Adam Kendon, David McNeill and Bill Stokoe. I met a Sebeok favourite, Serge Santi, around 2000, but I think all his writing is in French and therefore difficult for me to read. More recently, I've been inspired by Sarah Bro Trasmundi's work on reading, as well as that of her colleague, Stephen Cowley. The latter, of course, has been involved with biosemiotics²⁷ but it was when I saw him and Sarah working in their own environment with other like-minded researchers that I was pulled round to a distributed perspective. At first, I thought they were being doctrinaire; but, on seeing their work and becoming more acquainted with their project, I very quickly started to admire their relentless insistence on the scalarity of activities in embodied cognition. I think it's very much of a piece with the perspective that some parts of semiotics are trying to achieve. It's certainly had considerable impact on the work of me and my close colleague – and influence – at my institution, Johan Siebers.

What would you say about the present state of semiotics? What worries you, and what makes you happy in it?

What worries me about semiotics is usually what worries me about the state of the contemporary academy. In particular, I am concerned about young semioticians getting jobs. Slightly smaller as a worry is the prospect of having to forsake semiotics to get a job. This is a very difficult issue which requires wholesale changes that we may not witness in the global academy. The IASS has introduced some small measures in respect of 'early career researchers'; hopefully, that will raise consciousness a little. But it's only a start. We cannot assume that we can reproduce semioticians and semiotics by semiotics just being an interesting pursuit. I think established scholars need to play a part in creating opportunities.

Another worry with semiotics that I register concerns sectarianism. This is sometimes arranged along national lines, but more often arranged along theoretical lines. Sometimes there are personal/historical reasons for lack of dialogue; sometimes it's a matter of closed minds. In the global scheme of things, it's not as worrying a problem as that of the job situation, although it is possible that it might impinge on that situation. Sometimes, there may be the start of a solution: for example, the major Greimassian works in contemporary semiotics appear in French or Italian, therefore sidelining many semioticians who don't speak those languages. The IASS has tried to address this situation by funding translation into English of Greimassian texts.

²⁷ E.g. Velmezova, Ekaterina; Kull, Kalevi; Cowley, Stephen (eds.) 2015. *Biosemiotic Perspectives on Language and Linguistics*. (Biosemiotics 13.) Cham: Springer.

What is heartening about this sectarianism is that, in many instances, the opposing intellectual parties are on good terms, friends who shake hands and slap each others' backs in the corridors of conferences. At the same time, though, that dialogue could be extended to encourage greater understanding.

Another worry concerns two related issues in semiotics: rigour and critique. From its inception, semiotics was practiced rigorously as a very challenging theory and method for exposing the systematic workings of cultural artefacts. True, there were those like Barthes and Eco who practised what seems like a 'semiotics-lite' in their journalistic works. However, if you look at much of their work in this sphere, it was certainly not unsophisticated. The dominant trend in semiotics has been heavy theory – rightly so, when it addresses heavy problems in order to say something serious. Connected with this is the imperative of critique. Semiotics, in its early incarnation, was almost 100% concerned with critique – that is, showing that semiotic systems often rule in tyrannous fashion, effacing their very workings in order to render them “natural”. When semiotics stops doing this, I think it is in trouble. When it becomes a highly elaborate tool to demonstrate how well corporations are working or, worse, a means of informing corporations how to do their work with even more murderous efficiency, I start to worry. There is probably room for this kind of work; but it needs to be carried out and financed in-house by the corporations themselves. As a journal editor, I see – and reject – dozens of articles per week that are of this uncritical semiotic bearing. It's a symptom in semiotics of the unholy march of the academy toward business.

In the case of biosemiotics, the accusation might be lodged that it, too, is uncritical because it seldom directly addresses concrete political issues that exist at specific moments. However, my reply to this would be to ask semioticians to look closely at the biosemiotic enterprise to see how it is political in its very conception. It takes semiotic critique in its fullest possible implications – the “semioclastm” which Barthes called for in 1970 – to the very heart of nature. It is not a critique *of* nature; rather it countenances critique on the *grounds* of nature. Its targets include the global communication-production disposition to the Earth (see Ponzio and Petrilli), the denial of species consanguinity (see Martinelli, Maran), human exceptionalism (see every biosemiotician) and the relation of humans with their environment (ditto).

What makes me happy about semiotics is that, in spite of my frustrations with sectarianism, it is a real, global community. I have temporarily been in other academic communities and while there was an immense amount of *schadenfreude*, there was no joy – just backbiting and holier-than-thou profile polishing. From a very early stage, I've felt at home in semiotics.

Most recently, I've been delighted to see the rise of younger scholars in our community. Outstanding scholars like Alin Olteanu or Hongbing Yu have seemed to suddenly appear and just as suddenly become leaders and made me feel they were always with us. Most recently, I was very struck by the low average age of those presenting at the 15th Congress of the IASS in Thessaloniki.

I note that I have said less about the optimistic side of semiotics and more about what worries me. In truth, though – and you need to look at it – the optimistic side is much, much larger because it involves multiplication and reproduction.

Speaking about semiotic research, what do you see as yet unsolved problems in semiotics?

There are numerous issues for semiotics to work through in its interesting and promising future. But I'll pick out a double-headed one, here, which I think is emblematic. It is the problem that goes by the name of 'representation'. The major tradition of semiotics – marked by the work of Peirce, or even with Poinot before him and, arguably, back to Hippocrates – features a thoroughly non-Cartesian conception of the sign. Signs cannot exist without embodiment, even while it might seem that some of what goes into making a sign is disembodied. That would appear to be a pretty uncontroversial proposition and true of semiotics. However, there may have been pockets of argumentation in the history of semiotics when the mythically singular sign was temporarily assumed to have been susceptible of disembodiment and therefore open to analysis and conclusions to be made of it on that basis. At various periods in our history, semiotics has been the emotional and intellectual punchbag of other fields and approaches. Often, the aforementioned pockets of argumentation have been taken as constituting the essence of semiotics by those who are either ignorant or wilfully overlook the many opportunities to set themselves right about what semiotics is. In the last few decades, the most concerted examples of this have come from those involved in examining questions of cognition and its evolution. To some extent, it's understandable that they should wish to repress semiotics, in the same way as people may wish to deny what really motivates them. After all, as Tom Sebeok said on more than one occasion, cognitive science is simply 'semiotics + money'. Yet, many of those seeking to punish semiotics for crimes that it never really committed have other targets, principally the computational view of mind. Often calling themselves 'radical', they attribute to semiotics the contention that every feature of the world or environment is matched by a corresponding disembodied 'representation' somewhere in the brain. As a little exercise for readers of this interview, I would ask them to try to identify any semiotician that has even unwittingly and momentarily fallen into this view, let alone ever espoused it. I'm pretty confident that the exercise will not be completed.

But the reason that this issue is important is because its onward trajectory in the arts and the humanities (which are not characterized by linguistic and purely cerebral boundaries) as well as the sciences (where non-representational models are constantly in use) threatens to cynically sideline semiotics at precisely the moment when it will be pivotal in anticipating the future of humankind.

The other strand of ‘representation’, therefore, is obvious. We have to work smarter to represent ourselves globally. Possibly time will be needed for this. We have suffered from the moment in our history when semiotics was suddenly fashionable (roughly, from the early 1970s to the early 1980s). Even then, though, as has been seen, we were sometimes poorly or *misrepresented*. I gave the example of Hawkes’ book, earlier, but there are actually people, mainly outside semiotics, who are still writing books like that. Being in fashion is a curse because it is always followed by plummeting right out of fashion, ignominiously. We need to find a way of remaining out of fashion but still representing our perspective in a way that makes it incapable of misrepresentation.

That was about unsolved problems in semiotics as a whole. But of yourself – is there any semiotic problem you are working on, attempting to solve it or clarify?

Yes, I’ve been doing some work with colleagues on the practice of ‘close reading’. For some, semiotics is a particular variant of close reading – or *vice versa*. Those relations are revealed in greater relief when you open up the history of the practice, particularly in the last century since Richards’ *Practical Criticism*.²⁸ There has been an explosion of writing on the practice, predominantly from a literary point of view, and there continues to be much discussion. This latter, of course, focuses on written texts; yet there have been other approaches not named ‘close reading’ which have not been confined to the ‘literary’; additionally, the idea of ‘reading’ was translated very early on in twentieth-century semiotics, by Barthes and others, so that it could be used to describe the acts of interpretation of non-verbal phenomena. Even there, though, reading is largely conceived as a cerebral activity, taking place irrespective of bodies. So what is the role of the body and its environment in acts of reading? Me and Johan Siebers have taken influence from colleagues at the University of Southern Denmark to conceive reading, including close reading, as scalar activity distributed through the body and across the immediate environment. In addition, we are considering the drivers of scalar activity in the impulse to close reading, particularly in relation to greater knowledge and even ‘truth’. For addressing this, we’re drawing on John Deely’s realism.

²⁸ Richards, Ivor Armstrong 1929. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.

It should be said that we find close reading synonymous with semiotics but, more importantly, it is a practice – both formal and informal – which is absolutely integral to the higher learning whose home is the university. Unfortunately, our day-to-day work as senior managers in such an institution is so multifarious and extensive that we have not made as rapid progress with this project as we may have liked. Nevertheless, it is a project which is probably attendant on, characteristic of and partaking of insights in, the long career we have enjoyed in the academy.

As the President of the International Association of Semiotic Studies, what are the main points of attention from the point of view of such position? What good can be done via the IASS?

I'm nine years into the role and I must confess that I'm still not sure what it is that can actually be achieved in it. I've been lucky in having a Secretary General who is *sympatico*, was already a friend and with whom I converge on every decision. In addition, he was always interested in the SG job: not just because he was keen to follow in the footsteps of his teacher Umberto Eco, but because, as a research centre director, he understands the importance of the administration of scholarly activity. In 2014, we inherited an association that was largely just the umbrella for an international congress and no more. In a way, it can be argued that the Congress of the IASS was the most important function: certainly, it was the activity that fostered the most participation, bringing people together.

However, after the Sofia Congress in 2014 which had, effectively, digitized our endeavours and brought the Association into the twentieth-century world of social media, we wanted to use new forms of communication to the best advantage of the global semiotics community. We would also need to raise money for this, which we set about doing. Some of our early ambitions are laid out in the article we wrote for *Semiotica*.²⁹ We also wanted to foster greater collaboration among international colleagues who were happy to meet each other in the convivial surroundings of the Congress, but who might not collaborate once the closing ceremony was complete. We wanted to bridge continents (we were younger, then, and more ambitious), as Europeans eager to learn about the good practice in sustaining semiotics in Latin America and China, in particular. We wanted to discourage any tendency toward sectarianism and encourage, in Sebeok's phrase, "ecumenicalism in semiotics". We wanted to enhance transparency in Association procedures and facilitate communication. Above all, we wanted to try to provide advantages for early career researchers – a real challenge, this.

²⁹ Cobley, Paul; Bankov, Kristian 2016. Vistas for organized global semiotics. *Semiotica* 211: 9–18.

New people will replace us in 2024 and we hope that they will have new ideas which will enable our ambitions to be carried out more effectively or, if necessary (which is likely as time passes), to replace our ambitions with new initiatives that will benefit the community. The good that can be done via the IASS is not unlimited; also, there are challenges, as I've noted, which sometimes impede our ambitions in certain areas. In respect of those who attempt to serve the IASS, we should remember that they also probably have a very full workload at home. Working for a scholarly association is vocational, like much academic work, but needs to be balanced against urgent duties entailed in paid employment and putting bread on the table. However, I'd say that both me and Kristian Bankov feel strongly that anyone elected to IASS posts is called upon to be committed and work as hard as possible for the Association's members and the international semiotic community. IASS posts are not to be considered as prizes.

You do research, teaching, administration, editing others' work in journals and book series; you read, write, review, organize semiotic events, speak at conferences ... And respond to letters ("to be *means* to communicate", as you have confirmed). What is the proportion of these activities?

That's a very good question – one that applies to all academics, at whatever stage of their career. If you do a fair bit of research and publishing, it's often assumed that you don't carry out a great deal of other activities that are part of the academic's lot. That's not necessarily true, though. From the time I first started working in universities, I have done an immense amount of teaching, for example, as a matter of routine. As I mentioned earlier, I had a full-time job outside of academia whilst also teaching part-time at a number of universities and studying for a PhD. My entry into a full-time academic job took place because of the massification of higher education in the UK. Effectively, I was brought in because I had a record of teaching (there is a temptation to say 'processing') large amounts of students. Soon after that, with my inability to say 'no', I took on the exam board role for my subject area – not a cosy little job by which a few students were progressed once a year during the lunch hour, but a massive "scheme board" run by a national body that awarded masses of students twice a year and required constant reporting throughout the year. I mention this not to say "Look at me: haven't I been busy?" No. Even though I use that busyness as an excuse to myself when I worry about my lack of success in so many areas, I also wanted to address your question which I construe as "What does it mean to be an academic?"

The answer is, obviously, many things. We're constantly juggling these imperatives – and having to impose ourselves in order to carry out tasks. It is a real struggle to do research. Even responding to these interview questions means that

my emails are piling up and people are going unanswered for the moment. If I had to add citations to my responses to your questions, the emails would pile up further. Some of the many things that academics are asked to do inevitably end up being executed to a level that is less than 100% of one's ability. You cannot do everything perfectly. To use a tennis analogy, you are often forced to rely on your second serve. If you are engaged in a research project, some of your teaching-related administration may be slightly delayed. If you are writing an article, you might have to re-schedule a mentoring session to a week later. And so on.

Some universities give their academics a sabbatical every three years. I've never had a sabbatical at all in my entire career. I have never worked at that kind of university. However, I do understand how important it is to be freed up to focus on a task, particularly one associated with research, for decent stretches of time which allow continuity of thought and effort. For the last twenty years or so, central to my work has been helping other academics to carry out their research. A couple of years ago, I was released from what was almost a maximum load of teaching in order to carry out research administration more fully. I certainly don't dislike teaching and I still retain all my PhD supervision; but being despatched from the classroom has been a massive liberation in the sense that it has allowed me to focus on tasks which previously did not get my undivided attention. There are still some duties that I am incapable of doing well (rather than choosing to do them less than perfectly). That's probably true of many academics. From the start, though, I always thought that it was my job to engage with undergraduate teaching, postgraduate supervision, teaching administration, administration of research, coaching/mentoring, research, publishing, networking with publishers, editing books, co-editing books, editing and co-editing journals, presenting conference papers, giving research seminars at other universities, collaborative work with colleagues locally/nationally/internationally, contributions to international scholarly societies, refereeing, mentoring colleagues outside of one's own university, writing references for students and colleagues, leading within one's own university, forging strategy – and a few other things, too, including replying to every email, starting with students'. I always assumed this was true of the majority of academics. It's the vocation – not to be brilliant at everything; but definitely not to be overspecialized or brilliant at just one thing. I'm certain there are many colleagues who can tell you when I've been deficient in one or more of the foregoing.

You have paid remarkably much attention to biosemiotics. Why? What has directed your interest towards this field? And when did it start?

I think that I answered much of this question earlier, but I can say something about how I became involved in the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies

after not attending the very first Gatherings. Although I had known Kalevi Kull for some years, I had not been involved with any of the ‘institutional’ questions of biosemiotics. Somehow, I had been in contact with Jesper Hoffmeyer for a while; possibly it was through Tom. Certainly, I was sufficiently in contact with Jesper to be able to discuss with him his excellent Sebeok obituary in early 2002.³⁰ And it was either that year (or possibly my 2004 visit) when I was in Bari as a guest of Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, that I discussed with Jeff Bernard and Gloria Withalm the possibility of the ISBS becoming affiliated to the IASS. I discussed it again with Jesper in 2005 when he came to London with Kalevi Kull and Søren Brier (as well as Frederik Stjernfelt, separately) for a small event on biosemiotics that I organised.³¹

That relationship was cemented in the Summer of 2004 at the IASS Congress in Lyon where I also shook hands for the first time with my great friend, Don Favareau, whose similar roots and interests meant that we clicked at first sight. What had always impressed me about the people involved in biosemiotics is that they faithfully grouped and re-grouped for every IASS Congress rather than just restricting themselves to their own meetings. In 2007, I arranged the biosemiotics session in Helsinki; in La Coruna, 2009, Terry Deacon was there with us; in 2012, at a relatively small event in Nanjing, biosemiotics was quite central; there were also memorable sessions, as well as ‘Masters’ lectures by biosemioticians, in Sofia (2014), Kaunas (2017), Buenos Aires (2019) and most recently, a very lively session in Thessaloniki (2022), in which I was pleased to see that the average age of biosemioticians had been significantly lowered and two of my biosemiotics PhD students were involved. But, further into the past, even if I open my programme for the very 1994 Congress in Berkeley which I have dramatized, for the purposes of this interview (but it’s true), as a personal epiphany, I see a session featuring Kalevi and Jesper that I failed to attend (probably because I was sightseeing).³²

My first Gathering (in biosemiotics) was in Prague,³³ I was happy to be elected as Secretary in 2012 and then very pleased to hold the Gatherings at Middlesex University in 2014. That was a very impromptu affair, arranged (badly, by me) at short notice and I was constantly being called away on urgent university business during the sessions that week. However, the potential stress of all that was offset by the (resultant?) relaxed nature of the sessions. I think that’s been my favourite

³⁰ Hoffmeyer, Jesper 2002. Obituary: Thomas A. Sebeok. *Sign Systems Studies* 30(1): 383–386.

³¹ See also: Kull, Kalevi 2023. Paul Cobley’s impact on biosemiotics: Thomas Sebeok’s next century. *Chinese Semiotic Studies* 19(1): 15–23 (page 19).

³² That session indeed took place, Jesper Hoffmeyer was there, but Kalevi could not make that travel (his in-person IASS congresses started from Dresden 1999).

³³ 2009.

Gatherings, certainly in terms of the frankness of discussions that we conducted and I say this in light of the fact that there have been many excellent Gatherings that I have experienced.

You have visited Tartu several times, in particular in connection with presenting papers at the University. Is there anything from Juri Lotman and/or from the old Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School that you’ve found particularly interesting or important? Have you met some of the members in person – Boris Uspensky, probably? In general, what is your relation to or your attitude towards the Tartu–Moscow School, Juri Lotman and others? Were they important for you?

I have mentioned my early engagement with the collection of writings somewhat erroneously brought together as examples of “Soviet semiotics”. However, I think I must have been aware of Lotman well before reading that volume because of the high profile of his articles for *New Literary History* as well as the “Slavic studies” texts³⁴ that I was reading in English translation collections. Clearly, Sebeok’s essay “In what sense is language a ‘primary modelling system?’” was in dialogue with Lotman. Also, Lotman’s book, *Universe of the Mind* came out in English in 1990,³⁵ but I remember that by the time of the *Semiotica* issue devoted to Lotman soon after his death in 1993, I had still not read that volume. By the time I was preparing *Semiotics for Beginners*, I had read that volume and remember a discussion with Richard Appignanesi, as he was desk editing my scribbles, about Lotman’s remarkable accomplishment as a futurologist. At that moment, the concept of cyberspace was very much in vogue, just before the internet and the world-wide web started to come into general use. We were intrigued by the way that Lotman’s late 1950s discussion of cybernetics heralded a reconceiving of space that would not come to fruition until forty years later.

I must confess, though, that I have never really been able to implement Lotman’s perspectives in my own work, despite being sympathetic and enjoying many of his insights. I think that one reason for this is that, paradoxically, in light of his interest in systems, Lotman’s own writing is quite allusive, literary and not highly organized. He’s a bit like McLuhan in that respect. People love Lotman precisely for these attributes and I know people who are even avowedly obsessed with his work. I understand that. However, after seeing Stuart Hall broadcasting for the Open University and after seeing him present at conferences, I always aspired to his systematic, step-by-step lucidity. I never achieved those heights, but I always have

³⁴ Cf. Kull, Kalevi 2011. Juri Lotman in English: Bibliography. *Sign Systems Studies* 39(2/4): 343–356.

³⁵ Lotman, Yu. M. 1990. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. (Shukman, Ann, trans.) London: I. B. Tauris.

them in mind. The result was probably less in the realm of producing such lucidity myself but more a matter of not being able to assimilate the work of those who were more allusive. I think Lotman's writing – and, possibly, his thought in general – carried with it a layer of elusiveness. It was not obfuscation, but more a matter of being deliberately unreachable and fully definable. Sara Cannizzaro brought to my attention the possibility that Lotman wrote consciously in this way during the Soviet period in order to escape censorship and censure, introducing discussions that would be heavily coded as far as the cognoscenti were concerned. I remember reading the work on the Decembrists and getting precisely this impression.

Although Lotman understandably loomed large for a long time, I've never felt that Tartu was ineluctably connected with that particular proper name. When I first went to Tartu – and on subsequent visits – I thought of it as the mothership. John Deely later referred to it as staging the first semiotics course “on planet Earth”. Everyone knew it had the first semiotics journal. It was the home of semiotics; but not just that: it was also the home of modelling. I remember being taken on a coach with my fellow participants during one of the Summer Schools and we arrived at our final destination: a meadow. I honestly wondered what was going on and what we were supposed to be looking for. The Estonians, by contrast, were overwhelmed by the diversity of organisms and foliage there. I only saw weeds. The incident completely amplified the importance of human modelling and made cemented my views on humanity's (sometimes unacknowledged) mission to enhance its own *umwelt*. It is probably no coincidence that when attending a later Summer School I met the Dutch scholar, Barend van Heusden. In the space of a few lunchtime conversations during the week, he completely enthused and enlightened me regarding how to organize the higher learning in arts and humanities with explicit reference to the action of modelling.

Before my very first visit to Tartu, I knew the achievements of its past luminaries, but I was concerned with the work of my contemporaries: Peeter Torop, Kalevi Kull, Anti Randviir (who I first met in 1999), remarkable people who I bumped into in the corridor (e.g. Ivar Puura,³⁶ whom we lost too early) and, later, people like Timo Maran, Riin Magnus, Tiit Remm and a host of international postgraduate students who are too numerous to mention. I did know Boris Uspensky, who had decamped to Rome years before. I had had breakfast with him every day for a week when I was at a conference in Switzerland in 2001. Luckily, before meeting him I knew his work reasonably well and had a few questions to ask. Despite his apparently austere demeanour, he was an extremely humorous individual and keen to speak about the wider world beyond his academic

³⁶ An Estonian paleontologist and geologist, 1961–2012.

achievements. I finally managed to pin him down a little when I was with him at Malpensa airport in Milan and got him to talk about his links with his colleagues from the *Soviet Semiotics* book. The last time I saw him was at the Summer School in Palmse in 2011. I'll remember the sharpness of his wit, something he shares with two other Tartu associates, Mihhail Lotman and Anti Randviir.

Another specifically “Tartu question”: about whom did you learn first – Jakob von Uexküll or Juri Lotman? Do you remember in what particular context, when and where it happened?

That one is easy: Lotman first. When I was an undergraduate and a postgraduate, the world of what was then called ‘theory’ was very much integrated. It seemed that way to me, in any case. Of course, it was acknowledged that there were different schools, but there seemed to be a much greater eclecticism in the approach to knowledge in the academy forty years ago. This was before the humongous proliferation of journals and increasingly strenuous encouragement of academic niches, in a sphere which already had a tendency to tribalism. Also, I was viewing international scholarship from the distortingly parochial enclave of an island in the North Sea. Lotman seemed to be known as one of the “Soviet theorists”, broadly categorized. I’ve mentioned the *NLH* articles; but Lotman, I seem to remember, was loosely grouped with the likes of Luria or Vygotsky and, later, Bakhtin. One thing to remember is that my generation grew up when there was only a faint sense of Estonia as one of the erstwhile ‘Baltic States’. To all intents and purposes, anyone in Estonia, even if they’d originally come from Moscow and didn’t want to go back, was still in the Soviet Union.

As for Jakob von Uexküll, I would have come across him in 1988 when I was searching for semiotics texts that could be used on undergraduate courses and I found *Classics of Semiotics* (published the year before and extremely helpful personally, but I found it useless for the kind of course I was tasked with teaching). Both Thure von Uexküll’s³⁷ and Eugen Baer’s³⁸ essays featured explications of Jakob’s work. I think it was later that I read the small appendix on “Neglected figures” in Sebeok’s *The Sign and Its Masters* (1979). Von Uexküll doesn’t seem neglected any longer; certainly not from where I’m standing.

³⁷ Uexküll, Thure von 1987. The sign theory of Jakob von Uexküll. In: Krampen, Martin; Oehler, Klaus; Posner, Roland; Sebeok, Thomas A.; Uexküll, Thure von (eds.), *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press, 147–179.

³⁸ Baer, Eugen 1987. Thomas A. Sebeok’s doctrine of signs. In: Krampen, Martin; Oehler, Klaus; Posner, Roland; Sebeok, Thomas A.; Uexküll, Thure von (eds.) 1987. *Classics of Semiotics*. New York: Plenum Press, 181–210.

What is your idea of the future of semiotics? Where does it develop? What are the important directions and problems along the way?

My idea of the future is one where all semioticians have comfortable, well-remunerated jobs, with time to think and time to demonstrate to students, colleagues and all those who consult them from the world outside of academia, how issues in the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences can most profitably be addressed by understanding their signifiatory basis in species-specific semiosis and how such an understanding may help humanity to expand the human *umwelt*, thus benefitting its own cognition but also thus enabling full care for the planet.

Now, let me take off my virtual reality headset. Ah – that’s better. Now, at least I think I can see “real” reality a bit better.

Yes, that idea is one way of formulating the ultimate goals. I’d hope that something like this project was in the imaginations of all academics. For the short term, though, there are some imperatives that should be a little easier to address. I think semiotics needs to be self-defining if it is to have any message and goal at all. This is why I’ve made reference to others’ attempts to define us and to say what we are. Often, those are self-interested bids to consign us to the dustbin. The trouble is: those speculative assaults don’t just come from outside semiotics. Only this morning, I started to read a book which purported to be an ‘Introduction to semiotics’. That sounds fine, except that the book was about Greimas’ semiotics alone. It was quite useful in this respect; I’m always interested to read about that strand of our heritage and practice. But the title is either indicative of ignorance or of wilful sectarianism. Our self-definition needs to arise from ecumenicalism, not localism, narrowness and exclusivity.

In consonance with this last observation, I would see semiotics developing in all its possible manifestations, including those which are focused on purely human-generated texts, as well as those which consider human endeavour and existence within the context of semiosis in the universe. This wouldn’t be a license to simply reproduce existing semiotic analyses. Such replicability might have some purchase where new phenomena arise or are discovered and we can productively apply semiotic analysis to understand and adjust them if necessary. However, we will die if we continue to mindlessly repeat the same approaches without results; and I see those results in terms of changes which will be beneficial to human cognition and the environment. This will involve, quite frequently, a critique of the iniquities of existing sign systems. Moreover, it will *not* involve analysis to improve the communication strategies of corporate entities whose purposes involve exploitation of peoples and despoliation of the earth. This is the problem that I see along the way: that semiotics might be tempted to rest from its work of trying to define what makes us human through our signification and how that is related to

all other life, as well as a few non-living things, too. Sometimes that “rest” might take the form of stagnant, routinized forms of analysis which descend to mere description. However, I am sufficiently reassured that human curiosity will endure and that there will be intellectuals who harbour benign wishes to further cognition. Of course, to be efficacious, these will require a firm and progressive institutional framework ... but that’s another story.

And: your favourite joke?

One of Tom’s.

Appendix. Publications by Paul Cobby

The list is not complete. Web articles, journalism, papers in conference proceedings, several translations and encyclopedia articles, etc. are not included.

Monographs

- Cobby, Paul 2000. *The American Thriller: Generic Innovation and Social Change in the 1970s*. London: Palgrave.
- Cobby, Paul 2001. *Narrative*. (New Critical Idiom series.) London: Routledge.
- Cobby, Paul 2014. *Narrative*. 2nd ed. (New Critical Idiom series.) London: Routledge.
- Cobby, Paul 2016. *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics*. (Biosemiotics 15.) Berlin: Springer.
- Cobby, Paul; Jansz, Litza 1997. *Semiotics for Beginners*. Cambridge: Icon Books. [Other editions: – 2004. *Introducing Semiotics*. Royston: Icon Books. – 2005. *Introducing Semiotics*. New York: Totem Books. – 2007. *Introducing Semiotics*. Cambridge: Icon Books. – 2010. *Introducing Semiotics: A Graphic Guide*. Cambridge: Icon Books.] [Translated into Finnish (1998), Japanese (2000), Spanish (2001), Estonian (2002), Indonesian (2002), Korean (2002), Romanian (2004), Arabic (2005), Croatian (2006), Chinese (2009), etc.]

Articles

- Briggs, Adam; Cobby, Paul 1996. Designing HIV awareness strategies: An ethnographic approach. In: Palmer, Jerry; Dodson, Mo (eds.), *Design and Aesthetics: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 176–189.
- Briggs, Adam; Cobby, Paul 1999. “I like my shit sagged”: Youth, black musics and fashion. *Youth Studies* 2(3): 337–352.
- Cannizzaro, Sara; Cobby, Paul 2015. Biosemiotics, politics and Th. A. Sebeok’s move from linguistics to semiotics. In: Velmezova, Ekaterina; Kull, Kalevi; Cowley, Stephen J. (eds.), *Biosemiotic Perspectives on Language and Linguistics*. (Biosemiotics 13.) Cham: Springer, 207–222.
- Cobby, Paul 1994. Throwing out the baby: Populism and active audience theory. *Media, Culture and Society* 16: 677–687.
- Cobby, Paul 1996. Self-analysis: Some problems in psychoanalytic approaches to popular culture. *Free Associations* 38: 297–309.

- Cobley, Paul 1997. The specific regime of verisimilitude in the thriller. In: Rauch, Irmengard; Carr, Gerald F. (eds.), *Semiotics around the World: Synthesis in Diversity. Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Berkeley 1994*. Volume 1. (Approaches to Semiotics 126.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 389–392.
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