



The International Association for Semiotic Studies
L'Association internationale de Sémiotique
Asociación internacional de semiótica
Internationale Vereinigung für Semiotik



NEW
BULGARIAN
UNIVERSITY



Southeast European Center
for Semiotic Studies

NEW SEMIOTICS

Between Tradition and Innovation

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12th WORLD CONGRESS OF SEMIOTICS

Sofia 2014 New Bulgarian University

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	15
AN INTERVIEW WITH UMBERTO ECO (1932-2016).....	19
ENTREVISTA A UMBERTO ECO (1932-2016).....	24
HONORARY GUEST SPEAKERS	
LANGUAGE-GAMES AS A FOCAL NOTION IN LANGUAGE THEORY	
Jaakko Hintikka.....	33
HIDDEN SIGNS. THE LITERARY FACE OF THE NON-LITERARY TEXTS	
Solomon Marcus.....	41
THEORETICAL SEMIOTICS	
BIOSEMIOTIC ETHICS	
A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE PET WORLD	
Panagiotis Xouplidis.....	56
CULTURAL SEMIOTICS	
SEMIOTIK DER KULTUR ALS ÜBERSETZUNG VON SCHRIFTZEICHEN BEI YOKO TAWADA	
Aglaia Blioumi.....	67
LE ROLE DES NORMES DANS LE CADRE D'UNE SEMIOTIQUE DE LA CULTURE	
Anna Maria Lorusso.....	74
EL MOTIVO DEL AGUA Y LA DIMENSIÓN MÍTICA EN EL FILM DOCUMENTAL SIGO SIENDO KACHKANIRAQMI (JAVIER CORCUERA 2013)	
Celia Rubina Vargas.....	81
ABDUCTION AS THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND BIOLOGY	
Drude von der Fehr.....	91
WAITING FOR HISTORY. ON THE EVE OF EXPLOSION	
Laura Gherlone.....	97
POPULAR MUSIC AND SIGNS OF TIMES. ROMANCES DEDICATED TO BUCHAREST	
Mariana Neț.....	104
CULTURAL SEMIOTICS AS <i>FLUXORUM SCIENTIA</i>	
Massimo Leone.....	112
SEMIOTICS OF CULTURAL HERITAGES: THE DIALECTICAL PROCESS OF ASSIMILATION AND REJECTION OF OTHERNESS IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE AL-ANDALUS CIVILIZATION	
Ricardo Nogueira de Castro Monteiro	118
CULTURE OF DIGITAL NOMADS: ONTOLOGICAL, ANTHROPOLOGICAL, AND SEMIOTIC ASPECTS	
Irina Kuzheleva-Sagan, Snezhana Nosova.....	131
LA NEGATIVITE COMME FONCTION CULTURELLE DANS LE DISCOURS LITTERAIRE	
Somayeh Kariminejad Estahbanati.....	141

ETHNOSEMIOTICS: APPROACH TO TRADITION AND CULTURESEMIOTIC APPROACH IN DETERMINING FUNCTION
AND SEMANTICS OF RITUAL GESTURE

Dzheni Madzharov.....149

MODELS, SIGNS, VALUES AND DIALOGUE

THE ARGUMENTATIVE CONSTRUCTION IN QUEIROSIAN FICTION

Cecília Contani Baraldo, Esther Gomes de Oliveira.....156

MONEY TALKS: A SEMIOTIC EXPLORATION OF MONEY AS COMMUNICATION

Christopher M. Bingham.....165

TRANSPERSONAL POETIC COMMUNICATION

Emilia Parpală.....173

THE ARCHETYPAL LANGUAGE OF EUROPE. THE LANGUAGE OF THE GETAE
AND ETRUSCANS

George Cadar.....183

PROGRAMS, MESSAGES AND COMMODITIES IN ROSSI-LANDI'S
MATERIALISTIC SEMIOTICS

Giorgio Borrelli.....188

NARCO-TRAFFIC IN THE LIGHT OF CULTURAL SEMIOTICS AND
COMPLEXITY THEORY

Julieta Haidar, Eduardo Chávez Herrera.....197

PEIRCE'S PRE-1867 SEMIOTIC AND THE ORIGINS OF HIS THEORY
OF INTERPRETANT

Michal Karla.....209

ALGUNAS TENDENCIAS DE LA SEMIÓTICA EN CHILE A
PARTIR DEL AÑO 1990

Elizabeth Parra Ortiz, Jaime Otazo Hermosilla.....216

DEED, OTHERNESS AND LOVE IN BAKHTIN AND PEIRCE

Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio.....227

SOCIAL DESIGN AND ETHICS IN PEIRCE'S PHILOSOPHY

Raquel Ponte, Daniele Ellwanger, Lucy Niemeyer.....237

HEGEL'S SEMIOTIC FUTURE: BEYOND THE END OF ART

William D. Melaney.....242

THE IMAGES OF THE TIME / LES IMAGES DU TEMPS

TRADITION, INNOVATION AND TIME

Antonio Roberto Chiachiri Filho, Rodrigo Antunes Morais.....251

ALBUM COVERS: DISCOVERING BRAZILIAN LIFE UNDER MILITARY DICTATORSHIP

Eduardo A. Dieb.....255

PERCEPTION AND COGNITION INSIDE TECHNOLOGICAL SPHERES

Felipe Gabriel Ervaz Garcia, Rodrigo Antunes Morais.....265

INSTANT COMMUNICATION: A BRIEF HISTORY ABOUT TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION

Liliane Pellegrini.....273

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS ON FRANCESCA WOODMAN'S ARTWORK

Flávia Mantovani Alves, Roberto Chiachiri.....280

VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL AESTHETICS OF THE HUMAN BODY–WITH REFERENCE TO THE FASHION DESIGNS OF JEAN-PAUL GAULTIER Miki Okubo.....	291
TRANSMEDIATION AND SCHIZOPHRENIA:A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PROPOSAL Rodrigo Antunes Morais, Antonio Roberto Chiachiri Filho.....	300
TIME: THEME AND CONTENT IN A VIDEO ART WORK Edson Pfitzenreuter, Roberto Chiachiri	306
THE MYTH IN TRIUMPH OF THE WILL (TRIUMPH DES WILLENS) – AN ANALYSIS OF THE SYMBOLISM USED IN THE AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVE OF LENI RIEFENSTAHL Sílvio Henrique V. Barbosa.....	316
FROM ELVES TO SELFIES Simonetta Persichetti.....	327
THE LAW AS A SOCIOCULTURAL DISCURSIVE PRACTICE Aparecida Zuin, Bruno Valverde ChahairaTiago Batista Ramos.....	332
<i>SEMIOTIC PARADOXES: ANTINOMIES AND IRONIES IN TRANSMODERN WORLD</i>	
SEMIOTIC CHOICE AND TERMINISTIC SCREENS AS SEEN IN CROP CIRCLES Jonathan Griffin.....	342
<i>VISUAL SEMIOTICS</i>	
GENDERING THE NATION: FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS ON CYPRUS POSTAGE STAMPS Sonia Andreou, Stephanie Stylianou, Evripides Zantides.....	347
INTERPRETANTS AND THIRDNESS IN THE WORLD OF THE QUANTA Baranna Baker.....	359
SIGNS OF SPACE IN ARTISTIC, SCIENTIFIC AND CHILDREN’S DRAWINGS: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES Eirini Papadaki.....	366
INTERPRETING PICTURES: A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL SEMIOTIC MODEL FOR VISUAL IMAGERY Howard Riley.....	379
POLISEMIOTICITY OF VISUAL POETRY BY VIKTOR ZHENCHENKO Iryna Zhodani.....	388
TAKING A STEP OUTSIDE THE PHOTO AND FRAME: HOW SHOULD DRAWINGS BE ANALYSED IN THE CONTEXT OF GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION? Markus Hilander.....	396
WHAT IS A LETTER? Robin Fuller.....	404
TOWARDS A QUANTITATIVE VISUAL SEMIOTICS? Yannis Skarpelos.....	413
STRIKE A POSE: THE SEMIOTICS OF ELECTORAL IMAGES IN CYPRUS AFTER STATE INDEPENDENCE IN 1960 UNTIL 2013 Evripides Zantides, Anna Zapiti.....	424

COGNITIVE SEMIOTICS

NEUROSEMIOSIS – AN EXPLANAT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Karl Gfesser.....434

EXISTENTIAL SEMIOTICSCOMPOSING GESTURE-TOPICS: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO VILLA-LOBOS'
AFRICAN FOLK DANCES

Cleisson Melo.....446

TOWARDS A UNIFIED CONCEPTION OF THE LINGUISTIC SELF WITHIN
THE FRAMEWORK OF SEMIOTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Elżbieta Magdalena Wąsik.....456

SIGNS AND EXISTENCE: THE EXISTENTIAL SEMIOTICS OF
EERO TARASTI BETWEEN EXISTENTIALISM, SEMIOTICS AND
PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Roberto Mastroianni.....465

A SOLIPSISTIC PARADIGM OF NEW SEMIOTICS IN THE LIGHT
OF EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS

Zdzisław Wąsik.....471

**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OR UNIVERSAL CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS?
AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL RIFT**

FOR A SOCIOSEMIOTICS: CENTRIFUGAL AND CENTRIPETAL FORCES

Anti Randviir.....481

REVELIO! A (SOCIO-)SEMIOTIC READING OF THE HARRY POTTER SAGA

Gloria Withalm.....487

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND IDEOLOGY IN ANIMATION FILMS

Maria Katsaridou.....498

NOT NATURAL: AN ARGUMENT FOR THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF CINEMATIC SEMIOSIS

Rea Walldén.....506

SEMIOTIC SPACE AND BOUNDARIES – BETWEEN SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTIONS AND SEMIOTIC UNIVERSALS

Tiit Remm.....517

APPLIED SEMIOTICS**AN OUTLINE FOR A THEORY OF POLITICAL SEMIOTICS**FROM ALBERTY'S WINDOW TO TODAY'S INTERFACE. A SEMIOTIC
READING OF THE SEEING METAPHOR IN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Sorin Nicolae Drăgan.....530

THE UPRISING OF SOCIAL VALUES AS A STAKE OF THE 2012 GREEK
ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN. FOLLOWERS OF SYRIZA ARE DESIGNING
THE NEW POSTERS FOR THEIR PARTY CAMPAIGN

Lazaros Papoutzis, Anastasia Christodoulou, Ifigeneia Vamvakidou, Argyris Kyridis.....539

GRAMSCI'S PRISION NOTEBOOKS: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO CULTURE?

Pietro Restaneo.....546

SEMIOTICS APPLIED TO MARKETING COMMUNICATIONADVERTISING TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES APPROPRIATED TO CONSTRUCT
THE GLOBAL BRAND MR. CLEAN

Carl W. Jones.....554

SEMIOTICS AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: THE CASE OF FOOD TRENDS

Giacomo Festi.....570

INTERACTIONS AND BEAUTY ADVERTISING

Jean Henaff.....578

LA PRESENCE DU SILENCE. LE SILENCE COMME OBJET DE VALEUR
DANS LES ESPACES DE PRODUCTION, DE CONSOMMATION

Zeinab Goudarzi585

MUSICAL SEMIOTICS

NEW MUSICAL SEMIOTICS? INNOVATION THROUGH TRADITION

Gabriele Marino.....594

ARTICULATION AS MUSICAL DIMENSION OF TEXT. THE RELATION
BETWEEN WORD AND MUSIC IN SALVATORE SCIARRINO'S WORK

Julia Ponzio.....601

ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S *MUSICAL OFFERING*: THE LAW OF QUOTATION

Julia Shpinitzkaya.....608

FRANZ LISZT – A DILEMMA OF STYLISTIC INTERFERENCES

Mihaela-Georgiana Balan.....617

MUSIC AS A METAPHOR OF LIFE

Sandro Santos da Rosa.....629

SEMIOTICS OF CULTURAL HERITAGESTHE LITHUANIAN SINGING REVOLUTION AS CULTURAL HERITAGE AND
SOURCE OF SOFT POWER

Dario Martinelli.....637

ETUDE SEMIO-CULTURELLE DE LA DANSE QACHQA'I PRATIQUEE EN IRAN

Arsalan Golfam, Ferdows Aghagolzadeh, Hamid Reza Shairi, Reza Rezaei.....647

LE TAPIS PERSAN : FIGURE, MATIERE, PRATIQUE DISPOSES A FAIRE SENS

Hamid Reza Shairi, Université Tarbiat Modares, Iran.....657

SEMIÓTICA DE LA MARCA / SEMIOTICS OF BRANDLES MARQUES DE CONSOMMATION ET LES FORMES DE VIE SEMIOTIQUES
QUELLES FONCTIONS, QUELLES RELATIONS, QUELLES DEFINITIONS ?

Alain Perusset.....668

LA MARCA COMO SIGNO

Antonio Caro.....679

SEMIÓTICA DE LA IRRADIACIÓN

Fernando R. Contreras, Pedro A. Hellín Ortuño.....684

BRANDOLOGY – NEW GENERATION OF MARKET(ING) KNOWLEDGE

Dimitar Trendafilov, PhD.....690

POSICIONAMIENTO VISUAL EN EL CONTEXTO DE UNA ECONOMÍA
GLOBAL- LOCAL: EL CASO DE LOS BANCOS EN CHILE

Erika Cortés Bazaes.....698

ROLE NARRATIF DU JINGLE DANS LE RECIT AUTOUR DE LA MARQUE Mona Ansari.....	707
SHIFTING FROM CHANNELS AND CODES TO MODES: A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF BRAND COMMUNICATION VIA MULTIMODALITY Oana Culache.....	717
SEMIOTICS OF BRAND OF PROCTER & GAMBLE PRODUCTS IN A BRAZILIAN MOVIE Pablo Moreno Fernandes Viana.....	726
SEMIOTICS OF COLOR	
COLOUR AS INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION IN EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION: A SOCIOSEMIOTIC APPROACH Evangelos Kourdis.....	736
SEMIOTICS OF COLOUR Mony Almalech	747
THE SEMIOTIC ABSTRACTION Russell Daylight.....	758
SEMIOTICS OF RELIGION	
PERFORMATIVES IN RELIGION AND SCIENCE Borislav Gueorguiev.....	767
TRANSPERSONAL POETIC COMMUNICATION Emilia Parpală.....	774
DEUX NOUVEAUX MODELES DE L'ANALYSE FIGURATIVE ET DE L'ANALYSE ENONCIATIVE APPLIQUES DANS LA PARABOLE DU BON SAMARITAIN George Vasilakis.....	784
DE LA POLYPHONIE RÛMIENNE A LA TRANSCENDANCE MYSTIQUE DU SAMÂ, CAS D'ETUDE : LE PERROQUET ET LE COMMERÇANT Marzieh Athari Nikazm.....	799
THE SEMIOTICS OF RELIGIOUS AMAZEMENT Marzieh Athari Nikazm.....	808
BIBLICAL DONKEY Mony Almalech.....	816
RELIGIÓN Y POLÍTICA. EL DISCURSO DE LA IGLESIA (ARGENTINA 2001–2003) Norma Fatala.....	828
FLESH, METAL, AND VERSE: CULTURES OF VIOLENCE IN BRAHMANICAL SIGN SYSTEMS AND MEANING Prasheel Anand Banpur.....	837
HOW RELIGIOUS ARE THE MODERN ANGLO-AMERICAN PROVERBS: A LINGUOCULTURAL STUDY Roumyana Petrova.....	847
PEDAGOGY AND ENUNCIATION IN RELIGIOUS INTRINSICALLY CODED ACTS. THE CASE OF THE PASSOVER SEDER Ugo Volli.....	856

SEMIOTICS OF FOOD

A SENSE OF FORCE AND POWER IN BANQUETING ICONOGRAPHY
FROM HARD ROCK AND HEAVY METAL LP AND CD COVERS

Adriano Alves Fiore, Miguel Luiz Contani.....864

FEASTING WITH THE OUTLANDER

Francesco Mangiapane.....878

TOWARD A SEMIOTICS OF FOOD QUALITY: PERSPECTIVES AND
INTERPRETATIVE CHALLENGES

Giacomo Festi.....888

LE PARADOXE DU VIN SELON LES VOYAGEURS OCCIDENTAUX

Mohamed Bernoussi.....897

“CON-FUSION CUISINES”: MELTING FOODS AND HYBRID IDENTITIES

Simona Stano.....904

COCINA MIGRANTE: HISTORIAS SOBRE LA IDENTIDAD GASTRONÓMICA
(MIGRANT CUISINE: STORIES ABOUT GASTRONOMIC IDENTITY)

Zuly Usme.....914

CINEMA AND SEMIOTICS

UNE SÉMIOTIQUE DES ARTS DU SPECTACLE EST-ELLE POSSIBLE ?

André Helbo.....923

COMICS IN MOTION: THE INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION OF COMICS INTO FILM

Federico Zecca.....929

A QUELLE DISTANCE SOMMES-NOUS DE LA SEMIOLOGIE DU CINEMA ?

François Jost.....941

THE ROLE OF SOUND IN FILMIC EXPERIENCE: A COGNITIVE SEMIOTICS APPROACH

Juan Alberto Conde.....946

MUSIC IN FILM SEMIOSPHERE: RECONSIDERING KUBRICK’S 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

May Kokkidou, Christina Tsigka, Ifigeneia Vamvakidou.....958

INNOVATION IN DEFIANCE OF HOLLYWOOD’S “INVISIBLE STYLE”:
JEAN-LUC GODARD’S *À BOUT DE SOUFLE* (*BREATHLESS*, 1960)

Nikos P. Terzis.....967

ÉNONCIATION AUDIOVISUELLE : FAUT-IL RENIER CHRISTIAN METZ?

Sylvie Péreineau.....979

DESIGN SEMIOTICS AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

TOWARD A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF TOYS

Mattia Thibault.....989

DESIGN SEMIOTICS AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

Melihat Küçükarslan Emiroğlu.....999

THE CONCEPT OF SCENARIOS SUPPORTED BY SEMIOTIC CAPABILITY
TO DESIGN A BICYCLE BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Liliana Soares, Ermanno Aparo, Manuel Ribeiro.....1005

RESEARCH METHODS FOR EDUCATIONAL SEMIOTICS SYMPOSIUM

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS’
ADVERTISEMENTS: A VISUAL SEMIOTICS-BASED MIXED METHOD RESEARCH APPROACH

George Damaskinidis, Anastasia Christodoulou.....1013

YOUNG CHILDREN ACCESSING MULTIMODAL TEXTS: A CASE STUDY Polyxeni Manoli, Maria Papadopoulou.....	1022
SEMIOTICS OF WEB SURFING AND ITS USERS / SEMIÓTICA DE LA NAVEGACIÓN POR INTERNET Y SUS USUARIOS / SÉMIOTIQUE DE LA NAVIGATION PAR INTERNET ET LEURS USAGERS	
ESTRUCTURACIÓN COGNITIVA Y NAVEGACIÓN POR INTERNET EN LOS ADULTOS DE SANTIAGO DE CHILE Evelyn Campos Acosta.....	1032
SEMIÓTICA DE LA NUEVA CULTURA DIGITAL Y EL USO DE LAS TAXONOMÍAS EN EDUCACIÓN María Loreto Lamas Barrientos.....	1044
TEORÍA SEMIÓTICA: LÓGICA/CONTRADICCIÓN, CUERPO Y EDADES DE VIDA Rafael del Villar Muñoz.....	1051
SOCIOSEMIOTICS	
SOCIOSEMIOTICS AND MEDIATIZED PUBLIC SPHERE	
EL RELATO ÍNTIMO EN EL MUNDO COMÚN: DEL SINSENTIDO AL SENTIDO EN LOS DISCURSOS AUTOBIOGRÁFICOS DE MUJERES MALTRATADAS Diana Fernández Romero.....	1066
SEMIOTICS OF THE CITY	
NATIONALIZING KAZAN': TATAR STATE NATIONALISM AND ARCHITECTURE Fabio De Leonardis.....	1076
LES LIMITES DE LA VILLE : ENTRER EN AVION Gianfranco Marrone.....	1085
PRETENDING DEMOCRACY. DELEGATION OF AGENCY IN URBAN PLANNING Gunnar Sandin.....	1094
CONNOTATIONS OF EQUATED SIGNS IN MODERN URBAN SPACES Sergio Marilson Kulak, Miguel Luiz Contani, Dirce Vasconcellos Lopes, Maria José Guerra de Figueiredo Garcia.....	1103
RETHINKING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL NETWORKS, URBAN TERRITORIES AND EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICES. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE SPREADING OF HASHTAGS IN URBAN STORYTELLING Paolo Peverini.....	1113
SMART CITY BETWEEN MYTHOLOGY, POWER CONTROL AND PARTICIPATION Patrizia Violi.....	1125
POSTCARDS AS REPRESENTATION OF THE CITY: A VIVID PICTORIAL JOURNEY Pedro Henrique Cremonez Rosa, Dirce Vasconcellos Lopes.....	1132
TOWARDS A SEMIOTICS OF SACRED GEOMETRY: ON THE ARCHETYPAL "ARCHITECTURE OF LIGHT" Aritia D. Poenaru, Traian D. Stanculescu.....	1140
TYPES OF SETS OF ARCHITECTURAL GRAPHICS AND TEXTS IN BULGARIAN PUBLIC SPACE – XX CENTURY Stela Borisova Tasheva	1151

SEMIOTICS IN THE INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTEXT

FROM TRANSLATION TO SEMIO-TRANSLATION: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND METAMORPHOSES

THE POWER OF SILENCE IN INTERLINGUISTIC AND INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION Caroline Mangerel.....	1162
FROM TRANSLATION TO SEMIOTRANSLATION Dinda L. Gorlée.....	1171
SEMANTIC CONNOTATION IN THE LINGUO-SEMIOTIC RESEARCH INTO TERMINOLOGICAL LOANWORDS Olga Lesicka.....	1180
RAISING AND HOLDING ONE'S HEAD HIGH: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF STYLISTIC, PRAGMATIC AND LEXICAL VARIABILITY OF THE IDIOM IN RUSSIAN, SERBIAN, ENGLISH, AND GERMAN Pavel Dronov.....	1189
INTERPRETATION AND ICONICITY IN THE TRANSLATION PROCESS Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio.....	1201

SOBRE LA CORPOSFERA: NUEVOS AVANCES EN LAS CARTOGRAFÍAS DEL CUERPO / ON THE CORPOSPHERE: ADVANCES ON THE CARTOGRAPHIES OF THE BODY

DANCE INTERPRETATIVE SIGNS Ana Cristina Medellín Gómez.....	1212
THE BODY AND ITS LIMITS WITH ESCENOSFERA Benito Cañada Rangel.....	1221
APROXIMACIÓN SEMIÓTICA A LA VISION DEL CUERPO FEMENINO EN LA NOVELA COLOMBIANA MANUELA Laura Cristina Bonilla N., Jhon Janer Vega R.....	1228
MAROON SUBVERSIVE AESTHETIC: BASTING OF METAPHORICAL AFFECTIVE MEMORY Marisol Cárdenas Oñate.....	1238

MUSIC, THEATER AND PERFORMANCE IN A GLOBALISED WORLD: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

THEATRICAL PERFORMATIVITY AND STAGE SIGNIFICATION – THE PERFORMANCE AS A THEATRICAL TEXT Ivaylo Alexandroff, Ph.D.....	1249
PLAY AS THE LIMINAL PERFORMATIVE MODALITY OF EXISTENCE. THE ORIGIN OF 'FLIGHTS OF FANCY' ACCORDING TO HENRI LABORIT Simon Levesque.....	1258

SEMIOTICS AND NARRATIVE

NEW AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING: LI NA'S <i>MY LIFE</i> Anita Kasabova	1268
TRANSMEDIA AND SEMIOTICS, A STRUCTURAL MODEL FOR TRANSMEDIA DYNAMICS Oscar Bastiaens, Hans Bouwknecht.....	1279
ADAPTATION OF VIDEO GAMES INTO FILMS: THE ADVENTURES OF THE NARRATIVE Maria Katsaridou.....	1290

ANALYSE DU DISCOURS DE LA PIECE <i>PALABRAS VERTICALES</i> (<i>DES MOTS VERTICAUX</i>) DE RAFAEL LOPEZ MALO	
María del Socorro Merlín de Pérez Rincón.....	1296
AUTOFICTION OR WRITING ABOUT ONE’S SELF: AESTHETIC ELEMENTS IN NEW LITERATURE – CONSIDERED THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF HERVÉ GUBERT’S WORKS	
Miki Okubo.....	1303
LOGOTYPE AND NARRATIVE	
Rumyana Stefanova.....	1313
IS IT A STORY – OR JUST ARTWORK? GRAPHIC IMAGE AS A NARRATIVE	
Silja Nikula.....	1324
DANCE NARRATOLOGY (SIGHT, SOUND, MOTION AND EMOTION)	
Smilen Antonov Savov.....	1332
SEMIOTIZING HISTORY	
Taras Boyko.....	1340
SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNS IN POLITICAL DIALOGUE	
Veronica Azarova.....	1346
<i>NEW FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE, OF SOCIAL RELATIONS, AND OF ECONOMIC VALUE IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET</i>	
TOWARD SYSTEMATIZATION OF BASIC SEMIOTIC DISCIPLINES	
Ivan Kasabov.....	1351
CONSUMER RITUALS IN FACEBOOK	
Kristian Bankov.....	1361
MATHEMATICAL SEMIOTICS: A CHALLENGING MEETING PLACE	
Paolo Rocchi,	1368
THE IMPACT OF STUDENTS’ CREATIVITY ON BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF A BRAND IN SOCIAL MEDIA	
Yagodina Manova.....	1375
<i>PENSER SÉMIOTIQUEMENT LE PRÉSENT À L’ÉPOQUE DE L’EXPLOSION</i>	
SEMIOTIC ENGINEERING	
Assen I. Dimitrov.....	1385
<i>THE SENSE OF ACTION: DIALOGUES BETWEEN SEMIOTICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY</i>	
DOSTOYEVSKY IN CAPE TOWN	
Giovanni Spissu.....	1392
CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE AND THE SEMIOTIC PARADIGM: NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM ANCIENT SPACES	
Matteo Baraldo.....	1398
HABIT, NORM, RITUAL IN THE LIGHT OF CHARLES PEIRCE’S PRAGMATISM	
Reni Yankova.....	1405
NOW HE TALKS, NOW HE ACTS. VOICE, ACTION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN TWO CASES OF ASYLUM CLAIMING IN ITALY	
Tommaso Sbriccoli, Stefano Jacoviello.....	1415

CULTURAL SEMIOTICS AS *FLUXORUM SCIENTIA*

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Abstract

The article is a caveat vis-à-vis the typological excesses of cultural semiotics. Structuralism naturally inclines toward the formulation of grids where cultural artifacts are recognized as tokens of types. Nevertheless, the article argues, such methodological attitude is not ideologically neutral. Pushed to the extreme, it risks overlapping with a politics of rigid articulation of humanity that 20th-century totalitarianisms tragically embraced. The antidote would be to pursue a paradoxical effort of cultivating cultural semiotics as “fluxorum scientia”, as science of fluid, iridescent phenomena.

An urge of attribution pervades semiotics. Peirce has imagined the sign as a triadic structure, Saussure as a dyadic one, but no semiotics could rest on a monistic ontology. Every model of sign is permeated by the idea of a cleft, and by the narrative of a quest to bridge it. In Saussure, the sign is unity of signifier and signified, but this unity concerns the phenomenology of signification more than the ontology of meaning. “Sign” could be defined as the name of everything that humans do in order to bridge the perceptible and the imperceptible, the known and the unknown, the uncanny and the familiar. Interpreting signs is tantamount to transforming a chaotic, puzzling reality into language that speaks and is understood. From this point of view,

signification is pervasive, and the scope of semiotics as vast as that of humanity, for living is, for humans, appropriating the unknown. Theories about the genesis of the human semiotic ability often relate it to the needs of hunting, and deciphering the unfamiliar traces left by preys or predators. Increasingly sophisticated languages have been created since the prehistory of humanity, yet it can be argued that the semiotic instinct still is about hunting and being hunted, about turning an unfamiliar environment into a matrix of decipherable elements.

One of the fundamental questions of semiotics, since its inception as semeiotics in the medical field, concerns whether the reading of reality can be guided by technique; whether the terrifying but thrilling experience of turning the unknown into the familiar must be invented at every step through instinct and intuition, or whether, on the opposite, such process of appropriation can be formalized, perfected, taught, and learned. Perfecting interpretation is indeed crucial in all walks of human life, and attribution one of its key processes. Medical diagnosis needs to bridge the gap between some awkward and painful manifestations of the body and the identification of a disease that provokes those symptoms and must be cured to eliminate them. Jurisprudence seeks to attribute a certain human act to a category of behaviors, and relate this to a code or law that rules its existence in society. The reader of a poem or the viewer of a painting must refer the apparently unique arrangement of words and pigments to a genre, a style, a historical and cultural context, and to the poetics of an artist in a certain phase of its evolution. Also everyday life cannot be lead without a modicum of connoisseurship, whose mastery is among the most desirable social skills. Referring fellow human beings to a precise social, cultural, and psychological characterization; ascribing their words and acts to specific categories of intentions; detecting honesty and lie: all these abilities partake in the semiotic hunting that marks the role of humans in both nature and culture.

Being unable of reading the signs of reality, and reality as a sign, means being unable to predict what reality still is not, but might be in the future. That is the case not only for the future of social reality, but also for the future of texts. On the one hand, Wall Street brokers require semiotic ability in order to forecast the course of stock exchange titles. The fact that this ability is not completely formalized as technique does not mean that it stems entirely from mysterious intuition. On the other hand, literary critiques speculating on the interpretation of a novel also debate about the future. In the structural credo, for instance, they argue that the semantic fabric of the novel will elicit a certain range of responses by its potential future readers.

Since antiquity, semiotic theories and techniques have been thought as a remedy to the uncertainty of the future. From this point of view, the place of the semiotic instinct in the evolution of the human species is that of an adaptive quality: those who better relate the current phenomenology of reality to its future developments will be able to react to them in a quicker and more appropriate way. History is replete with anecdotes of humans who failed because, as Americans say, did not see it coming. "See it coming" requires, on the contrary, semiotic skills: see a financial crisis coming, or the end of a relationship, or a new tendency in consumption.

Semiotics as a discipline has therefore faced a double task: on the one side, describing the human consubstantial tendency to decipher the unknown; on the other side, suggesting techniques in order to perfect such innate interpretive drive.

What were the main suggestions of semiotics thus far?

In the frame of Saussure's semiotics, attribution of an unknown signifier to a known signified requires familiarity with the law. It is the law that associates a red flag to a signal of danger, the lexeme "dog" to a zoological species, burning incense with a propitiatory liturgy. The titanic efforts of Saussure's followers, from Hjelmslev's glossematics to Greimas's generative semiotics, have aimed at grasping the essential law beyond every form of signification. Also those signification processes that seemed patterned by unwritten laws or idiosyncrasy, such as social phenomena or artworks, have been investigated in search of a rule of attribution: given an ap-

parently random configuration of plastic elements, or social behaviors, the application of the semiotic method ascribe them to a law, turn them into the token of a type, interpret them. In this framework, what does not mean simply has no meaning, the unfamiliar is doomed to remain such, and ignorance of the signified beyond a signifier is only temporary, destined to vanish as soon as the suitable code will be detected, known, and applied. That explains why the structural mindset never focuses on how laws are instituted, evolve, or decay: what occupies the core of the semiological project stemming from Saussure's definition of sign is the law caught at the peak of its development, the human ability to bridge the unfamiliar and the familiar as it is crystallized in a code, in a system, in the *langue*. That is also why the structural attribution has an exclusively deductive allure: given a rule, a token must be attributed to a type with no exception, and all the cleverness of the semiologist consists in coming up with the most comprehensive formulation of this rule.

That does not mean, though, that the structuralist attribution does not produce any new knowledge. On the contrary, structural semioticians serve the purpose of identifying what explicit code links a token with a type, but also that of eliciting an implicit code from tokens that seem unrelated to any type. On the one hand, the structural semiotician determines that an ostrich egg in a canvas by Piero della Francesca must be related to the meaning of that egg in the coeval heraldic code. On the other hand, the structural semiotician elicits the rule according to which Mondrian's abstract paintings have been created and prompt aesthetic answers.

Lotman's model of cultural interpretation is in line with Saussure's strategy of attribution. Each element in the semiosphere, be it an isolated sign, a text, or a whole language, signifies insofar as it stems from an underlying matrix determining its value in social exchange. Elements in the semiosphere that are not related to any modeling system are chaotic, perturbations coming from outside the semiosphere, or appear as such simply because no semiotician yet has found any suitable way to situate them in relation to the cultural text, in relation with the general pattern of the semiosphere. In Lotman's model too, the aim of the semiotician is twofold: on the one hand, mastering the cultural and sub-cultural codes that explicitly shape communication in society. On the other hand, inductively more than deductively, establishing how different, apparently random signs are indeed a byproduct of some general dynamics of the semiosphere. For instance, the cultural semiotician will be able to differentiate among different kinds of tattoos, and determine which are to be ascribed to the subculture of detainees in a certain country, which are imported from an ethnic, pre-industrial visual culture, and which are a combination of both. At the same time, the cultural semiotician will seek to put forward more encompassing hypotheses about the spreading of tattoos in present-day societies, by claiming, for example, that the fashionable permanence of tattoos, piercing, and scarification is a reaction to the sense of precariousness that anguishes youth in contemporary western countries.

An important question to be raised about Lotman's model and about cultural semiotics in general is the question of creativity and innovation. As it was argued earlier, Saussure's semiology is not primarily concerned with creativity because it is not primarily concerned with time. Semiology provides a structural photograph of the laws that, at a given moment in the evolution of language, underpin the relation between tokens and types. How these laws are created and how they evolve in history concern semiology only retrospectively, for instance when the structural laws of 17-century poetics must be retrieved in order to explain the creation of Shakespeare's sonnets. However, as regards their interpretation, what matters is not to somehow reconstruct the aesthetic reception of Shakespeare's contemporaries, but to understand through which codes *the analyst's contemporaries* read the sonnets. From this point of view, Saussure's semiology is always contemporary. Historical semiotics is possible, but has been rarely chosen as a field of investigation, for the epistemology of semiology is more apt at describing the *langue* of a sign system as static deposit of forms than at speculating on how it might have changed through history.

A giant leap is taken, though, when the structuralist epistemology is applied not to a specific system of signs, like in Saussure, or to a text, like in Greimas's structuralist semantics, but to culture as a whole, considered as system of signs. It is reasonable, indeed, to crystalize the evolution of scripts for the blind – one of the examples given by Saussure in explaining the scope of semiology as he first defined it – into synchronic still frames, since such evolution can be ascribed to a context, for instance, the changing place of sensory impairment in modern societies. The same goes for Greimas's analysis of Bernanos's works in *Structural Semantics*: here too, there was no need to place the French novelist's texts in the flux of time, like historicist criticism would do, for in this case too such evolution would be relegated in the context. In Lotman's semiotics, though, and more generally in cultural semiotics, there is no context. What is the context of a culture, indeed, if not another culture, that is, something that is external and relatively unrelated to it?

As a consequence, in cultural semiotics there is no creativity that is not somehow combinatorial, stemming from the rearrangement of existent types according to different rules rather than from the unfathomable creation of new types. Lotman's semiotics accounts for innovation also through contamination between or among semiospheres. However, like abduction in Peirce, contamination in Lotman is magically referred to more than explained. The issues of how precisely inter-cultural contamination would work, and of how it would generate change in the semiosphere, are left unaccounted for. That ultimately derives from the circumscribed character of the structuralist epistemology. In order to work as an explanatory model, a cultural structure must be closed, its topology determined by precise frontiers. Also Saussure's *langue* is a closed system, as it is closed the system of Greimas's text. However, considering a whole culture as a closed system brings about a vision of society that implies disquieting secondary effects.

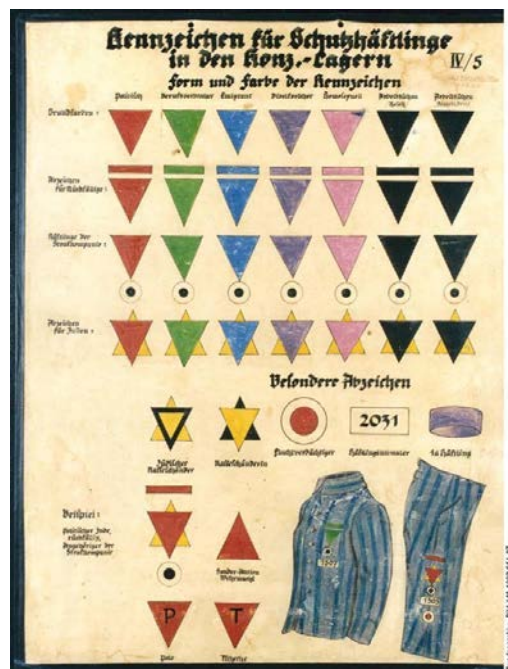
In other words, the urge for attribution that is at the core of Saussure's semiology and Greimas's structural semiotics envisages culture in a questionable way when reproduced at the level of Lotman's cultural semiotics. Cultural semiotics asks at a theoretical level the same question that strangers ask each other when they meet for the first time: where are you from? The social psychology of this question is complicated, but it undoubtedly manifests a drive for attribution, and therefore control. The alien individual is seen as a puzzling novelty, a source of unknown, and therefore as a potential danger. The question "where are you from?" seeks to elicit an answer that will allow interlocutors to 'case' each other, turning individuals into tokens of national and socio-cultural types. Of course there is no need for the question to be uttered explicitly, since it is asked implicitly at every new encounter, and about all the signs that compose a person's social presence. Where is this accent from? Where is this use of words from, and these clothes, and these gestures? Getting to know someone means progressively classifying as tokens of as many types all the signs that compose the person's voluntary or involuntary signification. Stereotypes, both positive and negative, are among the types that individuals use to 'interpret' each other.

As cultural semiotics approaches a text, an object, or a cultural phenomenon whatsoever, it also tends to 'case' it as manifestation of a rule, as expression of a socially deposited *langue*. The stereotypes that cultural semioticians make use of are much more articulated than those which common people, let alone racist people, resort to. Yet, there is something in common between cultural semiotics and racism, as there is between racism and bureaucracy.

Albeit very different in many respects, these three social practices aim at creating an inventory of reality that categorizes and interprets it without residues. Bureaucracy in western universities, for instance, is churning out more and more complicated forms in order to make sure that each aspect in the life of a student or a professor is attributed to the appropriate class, turned into the token of a type. There is nothing that irritates more bureaucracy, indeed, than the unclassifiable case, whose potential novelty cannot be neutralized by reference to a specific form, set of parameters, range of criteria, etc. etc. This classificatory frenzy, which seems to ape that of natural sciences like zoology or botany, covers increasingly large areas of university life. Students' learning,

professors' teaching, the use of infrastructures, financial data, every aspect or behavior cannot be left unaccounted for but must be classified and, possibly, numerically treated. Accounting for university life is more and more tantamount to counting university life. Recounting the meaning of the academia does not require a historian anymore but an accountant.

The desire of controlling other people through turning them into tokens of predetermined types finds the most aggressive expression in racism, especially in the institutional shape it took in 20th-century totalitarian regimes. The parallel between bureaucrats and fascists might seem exaggerated, yet there is something in the epistemology of the former than dangerously resemble the epistemology of the latter. All considered, the common epistemological denominator comes down to substantial anti-humanism. Fascisms, like bureaucracies, do not understand individuals and their behaviors independently from the explanatory grid that was predetermined so as to attribute them to a class of individuals and behaviors. The kind of meta-language that fascisms adopt in order to articulate and interpret people racially is therefore intrinsically bureaucratic, and disquietingly resembles the forms of modern bureaucracy. What follows is, for instance, the visual meta-language through which Nazi concentration camps would articulate prisoners according to their race and the 'crime' they had committed.



Claiming that racism is always bureaucratic does not imply that bureaucracy is always racist. On the contrary, bureaucracy in modern societies is meant to protect individuals from the idiosyncratic abuse of power. Yet, the semiotic parallel between organized racism and bureaucracy should make us wary of collectivities where the impulse to categorize, classify, and interpret individuals attains increasingly pervasive degrees of sophistication. A society that is unable to accommodate exceptions is a dangerous society, perhaps even more dangerous than a society that is unable to come up with rules.

The parallel between organized racism and bureaucracy should warn cultural semioticians too. Medieval scholastic philosophy used to repeat, interpreting Aristotle, "*Scientia est de universalibus, existentia est singularium*", "science concerns the universals, existence refers to singular (objects)" or, with another formula: "*Nulla est fluxorum scientia*", "there is no science of fluxes". In order to produce falsifiable hypotheses about culture, indeed, semiotics must elaborate general models where cultural phenomena are interpreted as manifestation of an underpinning semiotic rule. Cultural phenomena must be stripped of their idiosyncratic particularities

and cased into a category. Cultural semiotics can of course increasingly refine the articulation of its categorical thinking, but its operations keep resting on a theoretical movement of attribution.

Yet, it would probably be reductive to think that cultural semiotics should not be concerned by the existence of singularities, as scholastic epistemology urged sciences to do. On the one hand, the risk that bureaucracy runs when forgetful of the dignity of exceptions, treating them as anomalies, recurs in cultural semiotics too. When cultural semioticians deal with texts, they usually ask them the same question that strangers ask each other when meeting for the first time: “where are you from?” Where are you from, folktale? Where are you from, epic? Where are you from, painting? Where are you from, behavior? What cultural semiotics hopes for as an answer is an indication of where, in the spatial and temporal semiosphere, the object of investigation should be placed and categorized, so revealing its intrinsic meaning in relation to a precise patterning model.

One could argue, though, that asking the question “where are you from” is not the end of the gnoseological process, but the timid beginning of it. Stereotypes and bureaucratic parameters offer a grid to interpret reality, but stopping at them means divesting humanity of its deepest character, means stripping scholarship of its inner beauty. What do we know of a scholar, when we know that he is Italian? Something, but not much. And what do we know of a paper, when we know that it has been quoted twenty times? Something, but not much.

On the opposite, there is a stage in knowledge between two people, at which the question “where are you from?” does not arise anymore. It is the stage of love, or true friendship. At this stage, stereotypes must dissolve and leave space to irony, and the irreplaceable uniqueness of the subject. A subject who, as Lévinas would suggest, is not known anymore as a façade, in its cold splendor, but as visage. Of the architecture of a façade one could argue that follows and embodies a certain style. But saying thus of a visage would bring us back to the dubious investigations of Lombroso, to the Fascist anthropology of the face.

Demanding cultural semiotics to study texts as the visage of a beloved one is perhaps excessively tainted with romantic connotations. Yet, keeping in mind the political danger of turning semiotics into a bureaucracy of cultures is imperative, not only in moral terms – since it reminds us of what humanities are about, and their substantial difference with sciences – but also in theoretical terms. As the forms of university bureaucracy will never be able to tell why a student falls in love with semiotics, or why a professor devotes most of his life to study this discipline, in the same way a cultural semiotics oblivious of its humanistic constraints will be never able to explain how, despite the despotic pressure of the language, the constraining grid of types, and the thwarting cage of modeling systems, signs and their laws are not solid structures but fluid elements, which *do change* through history. A science of fluxes is needed to understand them fully.