



Hortus Semioticus

Conceptualising, Modelling,
and Imagining the Future

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CONTENTS | SISUKORD

EDITOR'S FOREWORD	3
Toimetajate eessõna	4
THE BANG IN <i>MEMORIA</i> as the degenerate and genuine index in the dynamics of trauma	
Ziyi Ye.....	7
HAUNTING FUTURES: Spectral value in retro semiocommodities	
Rahul Murdeshwar	17
THE PAST, THE FUTURE AND THE URGENT of climate change	
Naira Baghdasaryan.....	43
AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTI RANDVIIR on Semiotics and the Future	
Interviewed by Eleni Alexandri.....	55
AN INTERVIEW WITH RAINE REVERE	
Interviewed by Eleni Alexandri.....	70
AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE RITZER on prosumption, McDonaldization, enchantment, and globalization	
Interviewed by Andrew Mark Creighton	76

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Katarina Damčević

Thinking about the future is as old as mankind, as is the question of the various links between the past, present, and future(s). This ubiquitous question is certainly not new to semiotics, and it motivates us to consider the multifaceted nature of the discipline, along with the various ways of modelling the future. The current issue of *Hortus Semioticus* engages in these topics all the while marking the Tartu Summer School of Semiotics "Coming Soon", which took place from 24-27 August 2023, and welcomed a variety of scholars and practitioners who provided their insights on the semiotic mediation of future(s).

The current issue features three original articles, all of which explore various intersections of semiotics and future(s), including the dynamics of trauma (Ye), semiocommodities and abandoned futures (Murdeshwar), and temporal references that concern human-nature relations (Baghdasaryan). In addition to the articles, we have included three interviews with scholars who provide their own observations regarding the modelling of the future, as well as the future of semiotics, namely George Ritzer, Raine Revere, and Anti Randviir.

The first article by **Ziyi Ye** is titled "The bang in *Memoria* as the degenerate and genuine index in the dynamics of trauma". The author explores the representation and dynamics of trauma in the film *Memoria*, while stepping into scholarly dialogue with Peirce and Lacan. By focusing specifically on the role of subjective interpretation in the retroactive construction and reshaping of trauma, the author presents insights into potential ways for integrating and overcoming the unrepresentable nature of trauma.

Rahul Murdeshwar's article, "Haunting Futures: Spectral value in retro semiocommodities", outlines a speculative model for locating spectral semiotic values within retro-pop cultural consumer products. In doing so, the author develops his thoughts based on the contributions by Derrida, Fisher, and Baudrillard.

The third article in this issue, titled "The temporal coordinates behind environmental messages: the Past, the Future and the Urgent of human-nature relations", by **Naira Baghdasaryan**, analyzes selected David Attenborough's speeches by focusing on the temporal references of the delivered messages, as well as the metaphors that accompany them. The overarching question of the author's work revolves around determining what the detected temporal references tell us about human-nature relations.

In the first of the three interviews published in the current issue, **Eleni Alexandri** steps into dialogue with senior researcher in semiotics, as well as lecturer and programme director at the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, **Anti Randviir**. In the interview, Randviir considers questions such as the object of study in semiotics, the responsibility of researchers, specifically those engaged in the discipline of semiotics, and comments on how he sees the evolution of semiotics in the near future.

The second interview was held by Eleni Alexandri with the American software engineer, therapist, and independent researcher **Raine Revere**. The interview highlights topics such as the potential of applying semiotics in different sectors and examines its position in the rapidly evolving technological environment, as well as in the future more generally.

The third interview was conducted by **Andrew Mark Creighton** with prominent American sociologist **George Ritzer**. In the interview, they discuss topics ranging from the dynamics of McDonaldisation and rationalization, globalization, nonhuman technologies, to Ritzer's personal and historical context revolving the development of his scholarly insights.

The articles and interviews presented in the current issue are based on an interdisciplinary approach and provide fruitful insights into the intricacies of semiotics and/of the future(s). It is therefore with hope and enthusiasm that the presented contributions will further pave the way for new modes of exploring and contemplating this complex and intriguing topic.

This issue was edited by Katarina Damčević, Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri, and Hongjin Song, with the assistance of Katre Pärn and Nelly Mäekivi. The Hortus editorial board consists of Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri, Katre Pärn, Nelly Mäekivi, Hongjin Song, Siiri Tarrikas, Thorolf Johannes Van Walsum, Andrea Barone Renolfi, and Karl Joosep Pihel. Special thanks go to Ott Puumeister, J. Michael Ryan, J. Augustus Bacigalupi IV, Tyler James Bennett, Pauline Suzanne Delahaye, Erik Georg William Kõvamees, Silver Rattasepp, Mariia Cherezova, Eugenio Israel Chavez Barreto, Daniel Viveros Santillana, Thomas Bardakis, and all the reviewers.

Toimetajate eessõna

Tulevikule mõtlemine on sama vana kui inimkond, nagu ka küsimus mineviku, oleviku ja tuleviku/e omavahelistest suhetest. See üldlevinud küsimus ei ole uus ka semiootikale, suunates arvestama selle valdkonna mitmekesisuse ning erinevatele tuleviku modelleerimise viisidega. Käesolev *Hortus Semioticuse* number tegelebki nende teemadega, samas markeerides 24.–27. augustini 2023. a. toimunud Tartu

semiootika suvekooli “Coming Soon”, et koos erinevate suundade uurijate ja praktikutega heita pilk tuleviku/e semiootilisele vahendamisele.

Käesolev number sisaldab kolme algupärast artiklit, mis uurivad erinevaid kokkupuutepunkte tuleviku/e semiootikaga, nende seas trauma dünaamika (Ye), semiokaubad ja hüljatud tulevikud (Murdeshwar) ning ajalised viited inimeste ja looduse suhetes (Baghdasaryan). Artiklitele lisaks oleme numbrisse koondanud intervjuud erinevate valdkondade uurijatega – George Ritzeriga, Raine Revere’iga, and Anti Randviiruga –, kes pakuvad oma tähelepanekuid tuleviku modelleerimisest ja ka semiootika tulevikust.

Numbri avab **Ziyi Ye** artikkel “Pauk *Memorias* kui mandunud ja tõeline indeks trauma dünaamikas”. Autor uurib Peirce’i ja Lacaniga dialoogis trauma representeerimist ja dünaamikat filmis *Memoria*. Keskendudes täpsemalt trauma subjektiivsele tõlgendamisele selle retroaktiivses konstrueerimises ja ümberkujundamises, uurib autor võimalikke viise, kuidas lõimida ja ületada trauma mitterepresenteeritav olemus.

Rahul Murdeshwar’i artikkel “Kummitavad tulevikud: retro-semiokaupade spektraalne väärtus” visandab mudeli spektraalsete semiootiliste väärtuste tuvastamiseks retropopilikes tarbekaupades. Selleks toetub autor Derrida, Fisheri ja Baudrillardi käsitlustele.

Kolmas artikkel selles numbris on **Naira Baghdasaryan**’i “Keskkonnasõnumite ajalised koordinaadid: minevik, tulevik ning pakiline inimese ja looduse suhetes”, milles ta analüüsib David Attenborough kõnesid, keskendudes edastatavate sõnumite ajalistele viidetele ning neid saatvatele metafooridele. Autori põhiküsimus puudutab seda, mida ütlevad tuvastatud ajalised viited inimese ja looduse suhete kohta.

Esimeses kolmest käesolevas numbris avaldatud intervjuudest astub **Andrew Mark Creighton** dialoogi ameerika sotsioloogi **George Ritzeriga**, arutledes erinevatel teemadel, alates mcdonaldiseerumise ja ratsionaliseerumise dünaamikast, globaliseerumisest, mitteinimlikest tehnoloogiatest kuni Ritzeri enda teadusmõtte arengut mõjutanud isikliku ja ajaloolise kontekstini.

Teise intervjuu tegi **Eleni Alexandri** ameerika tarkvaraarendaja, terapeuti ja sõltumatu uurija **Raine Revere**’iga. Intervjuu keskseteks teemadeks olid semiootika rakendamise võimalused erinevates valdkondades, selle positsioon kiiresti arenevas tehnoloogilises keskkonnas ning samuti tulevik üldisemas võtmes.

Kolmanda intervjuu tegi Eleni Alexandri Tartu Ülikooli semiootika osakonna õppejõu ja programmijuhi **Anti Randviiruga**, käsitledes teemasid nagu semiootika uurimisobjekt, uurijate ja eelkõige semiootikute vastutus ning semiootika arengud lähitulevikus.

Käesolevasse numbrisse koondatud artiklid ja intervjuud põhinevad interdistsiplinaarsel lähenemisel, pakkudes viljakaid mõttearendusi semiootika ja tuleviku/e kokkupuutekohtadest. Me loodame, et need loovad pinnase uutele viisidele, kuidas seda keerukat ja intrigeerivat teemat uurida ja sellest mõelda.

Numbri toimetajaks olid Katarina Damčević, Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri ja Hongjin Song, abalisteks Katre Pärn ja Nelly Mäekivi. *Hortuse* toimestusse kuuluvad Andrew Mark Creighton, Eleni Alexandri, Katre Pärn, Nelly Mäekivi, Hongjin Song, Siiri Tarrikas, Andrea Barone Renolfi ja Karl Joosep Pihel. Erilised tänusõnad Ott Puumeisterile, J. Michael Ryanile, J. Augustus Bacigalupi IV-le, Tyler James Bennettile, Pauline Suzanne Delahaye'le, Erik Georg William Kõvamehele, Silver Rattaseppale, Mariia Cherezovale, Eugenio Israel Chavez Barretole, Daniel Viveros Santillanale, Thomas Bardakisile, samuti kõikidele retsensentidele.

THE BANG IN *MEMORIA* as the degenerate and genuine index in the dynamics of trauma

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Abstract: This essay explores the dynamics of trauma – as presented in the film *Memoria*¹ through the lenses of Lacanian *tyche*, Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, and the Peircean index with process ontology. The role of subjective interpretation in the retroactive construction and reshaping of trauma is examined. By analysing the differing interpretations of the bang as a degenerate index for elder Hernán and a genuine index for Jessica, the essay highlights the Firstness of a genuine index in enabling subjective interpretation and offers insight into the potential for integrating and overcoming the unrepresentable nature of trauma.

Keywords: *Memoria*; Lacanian *tyche*; Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*; Peircean categories; process ontology; degenerate index; genuine index.

Pauk *Memorias* kui mandunud ja tõeline indeks trauma dünaamikas

Abstrakt: Käesolev essee uurib trauma dünaamikat filmis *Memoria* läbi Lacani *tyche*, Freudi *Nachträglichkeit*'i ja Peirce'i indeksi protsessioontoloogia. Täpsemalt uuritakse subjektiivse tõlgenduse rolli trauma retroaktiivses konstrueerimises ja ümberkujundamises. Analüüsid paugu erinevaid tõlgendusi mandunud indeksina vanema Hernáni jaoks ja tõelise indeksina Jessica jaoks, toob essee esile tõelise indeksi esmasuse subjektiivsete tõlgenduste võimaldajana ning käsitleb võimalusi trauma mitterepresenteeritava olemuse ületamiseks.

Märksõnad: *Memoria*; Lacani *tyche*; Freudi *Nachträglichkeit*; Peirce'i kategooriad; protsessi ontoloogia; mandunud indeks; tõeline indeks.

1. Introduction

Memoria is a contemplative film offering a dreamscape that creates a rift between sound and image; past and present; and memory and experience. It presents

¹ Weerasethakul, Apichatpong 2021. *Memoria*. Anna Sanders Films.

fragments of the life of Jessica, an expatriate English woman living in Colombia, where she is on a search for the truth behind a repetitive, dull, yet sharp bang she has been hearing, which troubles her with insomnia. Jessica goes to a recording engineer, Hernán, to replicate the haunting sound. While Jessica and Hernán start to form a connection, he abruptly disappears. Later, Jessica meets a fisherman also named Hernán, but who is older. The elder Hernán asserts that he remembers everything in the town, even memories before his birth except for dreams, because he never dreams. Together, Jessica suddenly experiences a flood of memories of elder Hernán, all in sounds — of a massacre of a family, hiding from a burglary, and countless moments of life in turmoil, mixed in which there is the bang. In the sounds of memories, she feels all the subtle feelings, as if she were reliving them in the present. I argue that *Memoria* intuitively presents the dynamics of trauma. Before deeper analysis, I will first introduce Lacanian *tyche* and Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* for understanding the dynamics of trauma.

2. The Dynamics of Trauma

2.1. *Tyche*: A Failed Encounter and the Unrepresentable Suffering

A diagnostic classification for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM-III) in 1980. The DSM-III classifies a diverse but restricted number of traumatic events (specified in Criterion A) as causally related to a particular clinical criteria, thereby adopting a restrictive approach to determine what constitutes a "traumatic" event (Bistoien et al. 2014: 669). By defining objective particularities of the event as the cause of PTSD, it implies that "the traumatogenic potential of an event can be deduced a priori by charting the objective particularities of the situation" (ibid, 669). Such an event-based diagnostic approach is widely challenged in subsequent trauma studies, which prioritise the subjective reception of the survivor instead of definitive particulars of the stressor event. According to Cathy Caruth (1996: 4), "trauma is not locatable in a single violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on."

To understand the "unassimilated nature" of trauma from a systemic level, it is useful to turn to the psychoanalytic framework of Jacques Lacan. Lacan (1993: 8-9) divided the psyche into three orders, i.e., the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The imaginary is the realm where the ego is formed upon illusory identification with the specular image in the mirror stage. The symbolic is a realm of language, culture and society that governs the ego, with the symbolic system composed of differentiated elements. And the real is the undifferentiated and thus unrepresentable realm; it is the exact "point at which the symbolic fails" (Belau 2001: 16), and "the

impossible kernel of the symbolic around which it circles, what the symbolic attempts to cover over as its very industry” (ibid, 16). There is always a dynamic tension between the symbolic and the real, as they both try to engulf the other. As a constitutive of such tension, the “incursion of the real into the symbolic order” (Evans 2006: 25) is described by Lacanian *tyche*, meaning a “purely arbitrary” (Belau 2001: 25) chance in the real, contrasted by Lacan with *automaton* as chance events in the symbolic. In *tyche*, the traumatic event² is born, as the consequence of the impossible “encounter with the real” (ibid, 25).

2.2. *Nachträglichkeit*: delayed onset and retroactive causality

However, trauma is not formed immediately after the occurrence of the traumatic event³, but until a belated *realisation* of it (Bistoën et al. 2014: 677). Such phenomenon of delayed-onset PTSD is supported by evidence, in which a delayed traumatic response can be observed “in the first weeks, months, or even years following the event” (ibid, 671). This is pointed out in *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardsness, *après-coup*) by Sigmund Freud (Freud 1975a [1895]: 356). Bistoën (ibid, 672) cited Mather and Marsden (2004), explaining *Nachträglichkeit* as the process of trauma where “there are two etiological moments instead of one”. The logic of *Nachträglichkeit* is depicted in Figure 1 by Bistoën (2014: 674):

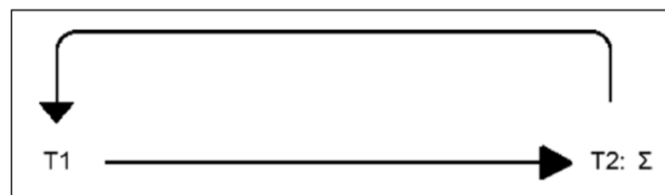


Figure 1. The logic of *Nachträglichkeit*. (Bistoën 2014: 674)

As summarised by Bistoën et al. (ibid, 674), there is a delay separating T1 (the experience of the initial stressor event) from T2 (the experience of “non-Criterion A events” or “life events” as the “agent provocateur”), suggesting that the initial event⁴ is not traumatic but only become traumatic at the time of T2 provoked by a life event that is “reminiscent of” (ibid, 675) the initial stressor event in a retroactive way. As summarised by Judith Herman (2001: 47, 121), it is then followed by traumatic responses, such as alternations between amnesia or hypermnnesia; emotional flooding and emotional constriction; and endless shame, guilt and self-blame, etc. Bistoën et al. cite Freud stating that “it was the *memory*⁵ that *became* traumatic, whereas the

² As will be argued in 2.2., the “traumatic event” here is traumatic-yet-to-be, hence will be later referred to as a “stressor event”.

³ ibid.

⁴ To avoid ambiguity, I will refer to the initial event at T1 before its revival at T2 as a “stressor event”, instead of a “traumatic event”.

⁵ Here, the memory should be understood as the “interpretation of memory”, when considered in its context of *Nachträglichkeit*.

experience originally was not” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 674). Nevertheless, when it comes to the reason why memory rather than experience evokes the traumatic response, Freud explains it by one’s change in puberty that makes possible an understanding of the repressed experience as a precocious sexual one (ibid, 675-676), which are often criticised as scientifically untestable and culturally insensitive.

A Lacanian reinterpretation explains the retroactive causality of *Nachträglichkeit* more convincingly in his semiotic-structuralist approach. As analysed in 2.1, the initial stressor event at T1 results from an encounter with the real and is thus unassimilable by a subject constructed upon the symbolic. Hence, after T1, a single signifier covers up the hole torn by the encounter with the real (Verhaeghe 2019). This single signifier stands in for and consequently “condenses” the unassimilable stressor event by “bordering the nonsensical event” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 677) so that the subject may deal with it in an “asubjective” (ibid, 677) way, because a single signifier makes no sense. Generally, meaning is only constructed in a net of differentiated signifiers and defined by the difference between them. If, however, the wound becomes an enigma, it won’t hurt at all, and we shouldn’t even call it a wound until it is deciphered. It is deciphered at T2, triggered by a life event that is reminiscent of the initial stressor event, with new experience and hence understanding of T1 gained during T1 to T2. At this moment, T1 is finally able to be “fully experienced [...] simultaneously” (ibid, 677) at T2 and thus become a wound.

2.3. Dynamics of trauma in *Memoria*

In this vein, the bang, stripped of meaning in *Memoria*, can be a single signifier that constitutes the enigma. Nevertheless, it’s a special one since it is only a single signifier in a certain sense. Normally, the single signifier would not confound the survivor since it ought to be “mute” (Bistoën et al. 2014: 676) and does not make sense. However, its plausible meaninglessness, in turn, intrigues Jessica and the viewers to unravel the truth behind it. I argue that it is the film’s artistic treatment of splitting the trauma borne by one person into two characters — the experiencer of the initial stressor event (elder Hernán) and the survivor with the symptoms (Jessica) — that allows the single signifier for elder Hernán to develop its meaning for Jessica with its connection to other surrounding signifiers. To put it another way, the retroactive causality between T1 and T2 is *broken* by a split of the traumatic temporality, with each part represented by two characters, respectively. While elder Hernán is the experiencer at T1, Jessica is the one who comes to explore the truth approaching T2. The entire film that unfolds itself through the perspective of Jessica can be a live stream of the decryption of the enigma, in which the bang that is initially a single signifier is getting away from its function as a meaningless cover-up and getting closer and closer to the critical point at T2 to revive the long-repressed T1, the exact moment of *realisation* of the survivor, which is artistically treated as the two characters. For elder Hernán, the bang and all other data in his memory are all isolated and meaningless

single signifiers, allowing him to avoid confronting the trauma (see 3.2.). However, for Jessica, who is not the experiencer of the unassimilable initial stressor event, the bang is not deprived of the possibility of generating new meanings, hence the repetitive bang is not necessarily traumatic for her (see 3.3.).

Moreover, I argue that the bang, in turn, connects Jessica and Hernán in the same way that the existence of the answer evokes a desire towards the solution to the enigma, and the solution to the enigma brings the answer (wound) into being. Given that the bang serves both as memory data (as a single signifier) for elder Hernán, and the enigma to explore for Jessica, a re-closure of the artistically split traumatic temporality is implied, showing the dynamics of trauma.

Furthermore, the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as the retroactive causality in trauma does not suggest that trauma is simply a time bomb waiting to explode but rather a complex process constantly being shaped and reshaped by new experiences and memories. In other words, *Nachträglichkeit* implies that “traumatic encounters are mediated by subjective dimensions above and beyond the objective particularities of both the event and the person” and “that the subjective impact of an event is not given once and for all but is malleable by subsequent experiences” (ibid, 668). Accordingly, the bang, as previously discussed in 2.2., is not a single signifier for Jessica, as it is open to subjective interpretations. In other words, the meaning of the bang is not fixed and can be interpreted differently by different people (see 3.3.). Through its artistic treatment of splitting and depicting one person’s trauma through two characters, *Memoria* turns the *memory* of the stressor experience of Hernán into the *experience* of Jessica. This allows for a different perspective and interpretation of the same event. In line with the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, *Memoria* implies a way to overcome trauma, i.e., through the subjective interpretation — the way to overcome trauma is just the same as the way it was constructed.

While the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* offers insight into the function of subjective interpretation in constructing and reshaping one’s reception of trauma, it does not provide a detailed explanation of how these processes occur. To fully understand this, it would be necessary to examine the framework of Peircean semiotics and explain how the bang functions differently as a degenerate index for Hernán and a genuine index for Jessica.

3. The bang

3.1. Degenerate index and genuine index

To illustrate the potential for subjective interpretation in constructing and reshaping the trauma, it is necessary to analyse the differing interpretations of the bang as a

Peircean index made by elder Hernán and Jessica (and younger Hernán). Before delving into the analysis, defining the terms being used would be beneficial.

An index, as defined by Charles S. Peirce (1998: 248), is “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object”. It “refers to objects which are in an existential relationship” (West 2012: 301). What is regarded as central in the definition of the index is Secondness in the Peircean category that refers to “a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is” (Peirce 1998: 24). Therefore, an index is primarily characterised by its pure indexicality which necessitates a physical co-existence with its referent (West 2012: 301). However, it is argued by West (ibid, 301) that the definition of index “extends even to Objects which do not co-occur in space and time with their referent”. To put it another way, it is argued that a Peircean index can also refer to “absent objects” such as “mental images” or “hypothetical or possible objects” (ibid, 302). As a result, the index is divided into two types: the degenerate index, which is with pure indexicality, and the genuine index, which refers to non-present objects (ibid, 302).

The difference between the degenerate and genuine indices is further analysed from the perspective of Peircean categories. A degenerate index “consists in the most central [...] of what characterises indexicality, namely, Secondness” (ibid, 302), and “intrinsically represents characteristics of the object”, hence is more likely to refer to the “immediate object, which is the Object as the Sign itself represents it” (ibid, 308, 314). Therefore, its use is “stripped of the typical perceptions, interpretations, and conventions which later attach thereto” (ibid, 303). As maintained by West, the degenerate indices “lack interpretants” (ibid, 308); if any, then it would be close to the “act to force the attention to the thing” (ibid, 304).

In contrast, the genuine use of the index relies on “mental, more dynamic objects” (ibid, 308), which is “the object outside the sign [...] the reality which by some means contrives to determine the sign” (Turino 1999: 226) through a “spatio-temporal” (West 2012: 307) distance. It shows “the perceptual in Secondness” (ibid, 302) that is driven by Firstness and has the potential to constitute “more conventional interpretants” (ibid, 302) of Thirdness.

3.2. The bang as a degenerate index

When the elder Hernán meets Jessica⁶, the first thing he says is, “I know where you live.....at Eduardo’s house”, and that “His father used to run a cinema, his brother is a detective [...]”. When explaining why he never leaves the town and never watches any movies or TV, he says, “I remember everything, so I try to limit what I see”, and that “there are plenty of stories already”. He then picks up a stone nearby and begins to tell a story from the stone’s point of view, describing a robbery and violence between a man and his two friends. He goes on to give examples that are engraved into his memory data and become the “vibrations” in his body, such as rocks, trees,

⁶ *Memoria* at 01:19:35.

concrete, food, weather, and movements. He concludes that experiences are harmful. When Jessica asks him if he remembers the details of his dreams as well, he pauses for a moment and says he never dreams.

I argue that all the memory data stored in elder Hernán's mind function as degenerate indices, and that he experiences the world primarily through pure Secondness. This means that everything to him is mere referential indexical relations. Overwhelmed by a world full of degenerate indices, he is constantly drawn to every detail in his experience, yet these pure indexes that direct to immediate objects exclude any subjective perception or interpretation — he remembers everything but dreams nothing.

Moreover, not only does everything in his experience demand attention, but, once experienced, they also seem to remain as memory data that are unforgettable, leading him to limit his experiences and perceive them as harmful. This can be explained by analysing his status in the split traumatic temporality at T1, as discussed previously, where single signifiers help to cover up the unassimilated nature of the missed encounter with the real. In this regard, it can be maintained that these memory data in the form of single signifiers are not time-sensitive and that for Hernán, "past memories" are neither truly "past" nor truly "memory" but rather, frozen in time. That's why I refer to them as memory data rather than past memories.

3.3. The bang as a genuine index

As the one approaching T2 in deciphering the enigma of trauma, Jessica is not prohibited from a subjective interpretation of the meaning of the bang. Confounded by its meaning, she turns to younger Hernán, a recording engineer, for help. Together, he experiments with different parameters to create a sound that matches her description⁷: like "a big ball of concrete that falls into a metal well surrounded by seawater" with "more metallic" and "more earthy" characteristics, like "a rumble from the core of the earth". In the process, Jessica is getting closer to hearing something that resonates with the bang in her head. One day, younger Hernán shows her a piece of music created using the bang sound they had made together. The music moves Jessica, and they discuss Hernán's plans to perform the piece in a concert in Tokyo.

In my opinion, the bang functions as a genuine index for Jessica. Its spatio-temporal distance from the original object allows for possible separation from the context and situation of its original use, making it represent a dynamic object for Jessica. This enables Jessica and younger Hernán to develop subjective interpretations of it, which facilitates the creation of a sequence of signs in the process towards infinite semiosis. As pointed out by Pape (2015: 419), "process is the ontological backbone of any dynamical account of objects", which is further clarified by Peirce (1992a: 161):

⁷ *Memoria* at 00:21:31.

What is reality? Perhaps there isn't any such thing at all. As I have repeatedly insisted, it is but a retrodution, a working hypothesis which we try, our one desperate forlorn hope of knowing anything. Again it may be, and it would seem very bold to hope for anything, that the hypothesis of reality though it answers pretty well, does not perfectly correspond to what is. But if there is any reality, then, so far as there is any reality, what that reality consists in is this: that there is in the being of things something which corresponds to the process of reasoning, that the world lives, and **moves**, and **HAS ITS BEING**, in [a] logic of events. We all think of nature as syllogizing.⁸

In a genuine index, the ability to engage such processes of dynamic inquiry of reality is made possible by the presence of Firstness, which is also accepted as one of the distinctions between a genuine index and a degenerate index. Peirce (1992b: 171) defined how Firstness is intrinsic in the genuine index:

The Genuine Index represents the duality between the representamen and its object. As a whole it stands for the object; but a part or element of it represents [it] as being the Representamen, by being an *icon* or analogue of the object in some way; and by virtue of that duality, it conveys information about the object. A Degenerate Index is a representamen which represents a single object because it is factually connected with it, but which conveys no information whatever.

Hence, a “mnemic trace” (Bistoien et al. 2014: 676) for a traumatic event can be transformed into a musical element in a song that facilitates a concert performance's promise. This development into Thirdness is enabled by the presence of Firstness (iconicity) in a genuine index, which saves information that is “independent of interpretation” (West 2012: 304). As a genuine index, the bang contains information such as timbre, pitch, tone, energy, force, motion, etc., all of which are indexical to the dynamic object in mental images. These elements are waiting for a sequence of interpretations, rather than a fixed and limited answer. In the sequence of interpretations, endless retroactive causal cycles between T2s and T1s shape and reshape one's understanding of “trauma” as a dynamic object. In this regard, replicating the bang in the sound studio does not necessarily replicate the traumatic event it represents.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that trauma is constructed and reshaped in a tension between the symbolic and the real. Through the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* and Peircean semiotics, it becomes clear that the trauma is not fixed and is subject to interpretation. The differing interpretations of the bang as a degenerate index (pure Secondness) for elder Hernán and a genuine index (as Secondness with Firstness and potential to Thirdness) for Jessica illustrate this. Through the endless retroactive

⁸ All italics, bold, and square brackets are from the original text.

causal cycles, new experiences and understandings gained when approaching T2s can constantly reshape one's perception of the traumatic event at T1s, providing a way to integrate the unrepresentable and potentially overcome it.

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HAUNTING FUTURES: Spectral value in retro semiocommodities

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Abstract: Jacques Derrida's hauntology has been explored on several occasions as a conceptual framework in the study of the production and consumption of retro themes in marketing and futures studies (see Ahlberg et al. 2021). Through this paper, we hope to contribute by outlining a speculative model for locating spectral semiotic values within retro-pop cultural consumer products. Guided by Mark Fisher among others, we will use examples of contemporary pop music culture characterised by postmodern retro-fascination in contrast with subversive countercultural music, and show that both are semiocommodities that homologously originate in the valuation and embodiment of the 'haunting' of abandoned futures and lost utopias of the past. The spectral presence of these abandoned futures grant retro pop culture its affective allure, but the process of this commodification is nebulous. For this we will turn to Jean Baudrillard's political economy of the sign, to examine the different forms of value of sign commodities and the processes of their transformation. We wish to demonstrate that the haunting of such utopias and abandoned futures, which were earlier excluded from the present system (of signification, Being and value) are, in the case of retro semiocommodities, forcibly re-instrumentalised as semiotic exchange— values. We will thus develop a model of the spectral semiocommodity as one of dual values — a dominant *differential value* following the logic of sign-exchange, and a repressed *spectral value* which follows the logic of haunting as a trace-value of its previous form as an extrasemiotic Baudrillardian symbol.

Keywords: hauntology, Baudrillard, semiocommodity, futures, nostalgia, retro

Kummitavad tulevikud: retro semiokaupade spektraalne väärtus

Abstrakt: Jacques Derrida tontoloogiat on kasutatud kontseptuaalse raamistuna retro teemade loomise ja tarbimise uurimisel turunduses ja tulevikuuuringutes (vt Ahlberg et al. 2021). Käesolevas artiklis loodetakse neid uurimuse täiendada, pakkudes spekulatiivse mudeli spektraalsete semiootiliste väärtuste uurimiseks retropopilikes kultuuritoodetes. Lähtudes teiste seas Mark Fisherist, toome näiteid nüüdisaegsest popmuusika kultuurist, mida erinevalt subversiivsest vastukultuurilisest muusikast iseloomustab postmodernne retrohuvi, ja näitame, et mõlemad on semiokaupad, mille algeks on minevikus hüljatud tulevike ja kaotatud utoopiate 'kummitamise' väärtustamine ja kehastamine. Taoliste hüljatud tulevike spektraalne kohalolu annabretropopi kultuurile selle afektiivse külgetõmbe, ent selline kaubastamise protsess on ebamäärane. Selle mõtestamiseks pöördume Baudrillard'i märgi poliitökonoomia poole, uurimaks märgilise kauba väärtuse erinevaid vorme ja nende transformatsiooniprotsesse. Meie eesmärgiks on näidata, et taoliste, varasemalt

oleviku (signifikatsiooni, Olemise ja väärtuse) süsteemist välja jäetud utoopiate ja hüljatud tulevike kummitamine on retro semiokauba puhul semiootilise vahetusväärtusena jõuliselt taasinstrumentaliseeritud. Sellest lähuvalt pakume spektraalse semiokauba duaalse väärtuse mudeli: domineeriv *eristav väärtus*, mis järgib märgivahetuse loogikat, ning allasurutud *spektraalne väärtus*, mis järgib varasema ekstrasemiootilise baudrillardliku sümboli vormi jälje-väärtusena kummituslikkuse loogikat.

Märksõnad: tontoloogia, Baudrillard, semiokaup, tulevikud, nostalgia, retro

Introduction

Derrida in the 1983 film *Ghost Dance* directed by Ken McMullen described the future as ‘belonging to ghosts’. He celebrated the emancipatory and deconstructive potential of the ghost as one that should-have proved to be an anti-hegemonic entity leveraged to disturb, reinvigorate and ‘set-right’ a world that is out of joint. It is curious, then, that today we do really ‘live with ghosts’ but perhaps not in a way Derrida would have envisioned. Instead today, ghosts are deployed by consumer marketing infrastructure, through retro-themed pop-cultural ‘semicommodities’. Hauntology has become by design the mode of production of cultural texts across popular media. The spectre has been described by Derrida to be an extrasemiotic¹ entity that disturbs the present semiotic order from outside (from the past or unfulfilled futures) — so our first objective in this paper is to understand the logics of this impossible commodification of the spectre into the realm of sign-exchange.

We will first introduce the retro semicommodity² as a hauntological device as described by Fisher (2014), Grafton Tanner (2016), and Massimo Leone (2015) to see how retro cultural texts are in fact ‘haunted’ by spectres of lost futures. Through their readings, we will note how this spectral culture industry can be read as a ‘phantomachia’ or spectral warfare between two sides — those spectres deployed on behalf of capital like in retro pop music, and those that deconstruct and subvert the

¹ Our use of the term ‘extra-semiotic’ (or extra-systemic) is rooted in our understanding of Daniele Monticelli’s (2008) articulation of theoretical procedures of totalization and detotalization. According to him, both Saussure’s and Marx’s systemic thought are characteristic of a procedure of totalization, wherein the “significance, identity and existence of (linguistic) beings” (Monticelli 2008: 13) that cannot be articulated in value are destined to non-existence or exclusion. On the other hand, and to our interests, the theoretical procedures of both Baudrillard and Derrida (alongside Juri Lotman, Jacques Lacan and others) are identified as detotalizing in that they critique this concrete delimitation of the inside vs outside in totalizing theories. In our reading, Derrida’s spectres and Baudrillard’s symbolic both occupy a space ‘outside’ of the present system, occupying a role of absolute anteriority and internal untranslatability. In this view, semiotic exchange value and its associated systems of commodification and spectacularisation are totalizing theoretical procedures.

² Our use of the term ‘semicommodity’ draws inspiration from Bifo Berardi’s concept of semicapitalism and semicapital, defined as “capital-flux that coagulates in semiotic artefacts without materialising itself” (Berardi 2009: 34). A semicommodity is thus a semiotic artefact with a distinct commodity fetish produced as part of a system of (capitalist) production.

present order by performatively bringing into focus the uncanny, haunting nature of the spectre that haunts. We will then look at Derrida's hauntology and his concept of the trace-sign, so that the trace-sign may be used as a fundamental unit of semiotic value to be applied to Baudrillard's tabulation of sign form values. Our observations on the conversions and reconversions in Baudrillard's table will lead us to conclusions about the multiplicity of values attached to any semiocommodity, the transformations required in such processes of semiomodification, and further about the trace-values 'trapped' within the hauntological semiocommodity.

We will conclude that in the case of retro cultural semiocommodities like retro pop cultural products or subversive spectral media, there are two critical value forms—a dominant *differential value* following the logic of sign-exchange, and a repressed *spectral value* which follows the logic of haunting as a spectre. This spectral value is the sign-value of the trace of the sign-object's previous form — when it was an extrasemiotic Baudrillardian symbol, outside the realm of sign-exchange that now has been impossibly brought into the logic of the dual values of the sign-object.

Through this essay, we will use Baudrillard's table of transgressive conversions of value forms to understand how an entity like the spectre, which earlier was violently excluded from and imposing onto the present semiotic system (of presence and value) has been impossibly 'trapped' inside the sign-object as a trace-sign, and how its haunting potential is mobilised in different ways by different retro semiocommodities. Commodified ghosts in media arguably have a dominant value form of the logic of sign-exchange, while subversive ghosts in media are a performative harnessing of the spectre's earlier form as a radically deconstructive haunting. Thus our hypothesis is that:

- Both the conciliatory and disturbing spectres of this hauntological conflict follow the logic of a dual value inside the retro semiocommodity – only with varying degrees of a power balance between the two value logics; and
- The impossible commodification of the extrasemiotic spectre in the production of both types of retro semiocommodities can be read through Baudrillard's simulative 'reinstrumentalisation' of symbolic exchange (which we have equated with the spectre) into the form of a sign-object. In one type, this simulation is spectacular, while in the other, it is for the purposes of subversion.

A foreword on Derrida's hauntology of lost futures

In our interpretation, Derrida's hauntology is the logic or study of the spectre as a conceptual metaphor for the trace-sign. Later, we will describe Derrida's concept of the trace-sign as a particular model of the sign, but first we must introduce how the trace-sign operates through the logic of haunting as a spectre. This will help us

understand how retro commodities are understood through the lens of haunting by lost futures as described by Fisher, Tanner and Leone.

The spectre is deployed by Derrida as a conceptual metaphor for the buried traumas of the past and the unfulfilled potentialities that 'haunt' the present. The spectre serves the purpose of an injunction, to demand 'justice' for a wrong that has been done, and thereby impact the future. This justice is a radical deconstruction of the present, and the spectre demands a productive setting-right of this disjunctive world: it produces the "chance of the future" (Derrida 2011 [1993]: 33). What haunts, then, is the spectre of what-could-have-been, of abandoned futures, of alternative presents buried under a repressive hegemony. "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (ibid, 46). The effort of the dominant hegemony in the present, for Derrida, is to mourn them, to repress them, to keep the ghosts dead. As Fisher writes, haunting can be construed then as "a failed mourning", where we fail to give up on the ghosts, or the ghosts fail to give up on us or allow us to slip into the banal everyday (Fisher 2014:30). Derrida's hauntology was developed as a response to the questions over the future of forsaken possibilities of social organisation based on Marxist ideas in the post-Soviet Western world. As Ahlberg et al. (2021) have articulated, that derelict future's foregone possibility still reverberates today, in social relations, in identities of self-becoming, and in the affective media of pop culture. The spectre is an entity that haunts and deconstructs the present semiotic order from an 'outside'.

But the spectre always needs a medium to haunt through. In *Ghost Dance*, Derrida describes cinema as a "battle of phantoms" – a 'phantomachia.' It is an "art of allowing ghosts to come back" – these are the ghosts of the subjects filmed who are long dead, cryogenized through the medium³. Derrida's phantomachia in tele-media and tele-discourse can be extended beyond film. In the extensive literature of a "minor academic industry" (Davis 2013) inspired by Derrida's legacy, many have already applied a hauntological lens in pop cultural media (see Blanco and Peeren 2013 for an overview of the field).

As we will argue, spectral media that mediate and are possessed by the haunting of the spectre require first a capturing of the spectre into the logic of sign production, differentiation and exchange. These media exist in a spectral battleground between commodified ghosts and ghosts that subvert the dominant culture industry – between 'friendly' conciliatory ghosts, and 'unfriendly' disturbing, deconstructive ghosts. We can now look at the two as both representing lost futures, shown primarily through pop music culture.

³ In the semi-improvised scene, Derrida spoke of the 'exchange' between film and psychoanalysis to produce an artistic science of ghosts. Derrida is interrupted by a phone call, and we are left to imagine what he could-have said about the phantomachia (the unresolved concept itself haunts us, lingering without being put to rest beyond all doubt). After the call, he talks of how modern technologies of tele-communication and film directly engage with ghosts rather than exorcise them as scientific rational thought does.

Pop Cultural Phantomachia: All that is solid melts into vapour

Fisher (2014) examines pop music such as those of artists like Adele, Amy Winehouse and Arctic Monkeys that draw heavily from retro production styles established in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. He argues that the sound of artists such as these that rely on styles of bygone eras suggest that the current cultural moment is in "the grips of a formal nostalgia" (Fisher 2014: 18). This formal nostalgia is read by Fisher as Frederic Jameson's 'nostalgia mode', which is a kind of performed anachronism, where the music sounds or feels historical enough to appear to be from a past epoch (ibid). But this affective historicity is uncanny – the synthetic texture of 21st century audio production is layered with the 'classic' qualities of music from the past, and the result is retro-simulative music that belongs to "some implied 'timeless' era, an eternal 1960s or an eternal 80s" (ibid). The new music in effect harvests the retro aesthetic from history, but this is solely a reproduction of form – it culls out the content and context so as to liberate it from the responsibility of teleology and becoming. However this 'dyschronia'⁴ has become naturalised into the banal absurdity of the everyday in postmodern capitalism. With artists like Adele, The Killers, Oasis, Arctic Monkeys or Taylor Swift, "anachronism is now taken for granted" and has *lost its uncanny charge* (Fisher 2014:23). The effect, and the task, of the nostalgia mode is to refurbish the old and thereby *disguise the disappearance of the future as its coming* (its return) (ibid).⁵

We can read Leone (2015) in parallel here. His reading of the "temporal tourism" that vintage objects offer to generations who never experienced the time to which the objects were contemporary is akin to a Jamesonian museum where the past is cryogenized for consumption and critique. As Leone writes, "It is no longer sufficient to argue, as recently proposed by Eco, that youths nowadays buy vintage clothes and watch retro TV series because fashion persuades them to do so through imposing a taste." (Leone, 2015: 12). Neither is the purchase of vintage objects the same as Baudrillard's (1968) purchase of antiques which is a suppression and capturing of time (death) – which would be more in tune with Jameson's postmodern retro-pastiche⁶. Nor is it simply a "temporal tourism" via the purchase of authenticity and a sense of manufactured originality. Instead:

Through vintage, young European individuals are now purchasing a nostalgic journey into the future [...] The future embedded in those objects was a future of hopeful

⁴ Fisher supposedly attributes this term to Simon Reynolds, but we were unable to locate Reynold's original mention of it.

⁵ Mark Fisher also adds to examples of such ghosts later by his term 'Party hauntology', referring to "the dominant 21st century form of pop, the transnational club music produced by Guetta, Flo-Rida, Calvin Harris and will.i.am." (Fisher, 2014, 163)

⁶ Retrospection and retro-pastiche are the two tendencies of Jameson's postmodernism, as according to Fisher (2014: 23). This 'retro-mania' has become naturalised, according to Fisher and Simon Reynolds.

expectation, vibrant incertitude, and energetic élan. [...] A 1950s' Brown radio meant existential progress to come when it was bought in the 1950s. Today, it sadly means nostalgia for that feeling of existential progress to come. It is a 'futuro anteriore,' as the Italian grammar denominates one of its tenses, a sort of future perfect that is used to designate actions that take place in a past projected into the future. [...] Like the Aymara, they do not see [the future] anymore as something that is ahead of them, to be seized, grasped, and conquered, but as something that, mysteriously, lies in the past, hidden in potential paths that history never took. Aborted threads of collective life, they linger in an invisible limbo, unfathomable to all" (Leone 2015:12).

Thus, these are examples of what we have termed 'conciliatory ghosts', deployed by the marketing apparatuses of capitalist production. What is captured for commercial reproduction in retro-affective cultural products such as these are the spectres of lost futures and the aura of youthful optimism and revolutionary kinetic potential of the 1960's, 70's and 80's proceeding from social processes of cultural and political imagination in Western Europe. It is important to note that although Leone has dismissed Eco's proposition of the function of the retro commodity being that of identity formation, authenticity and fashion according to the logic of sign-differences as 'insufficient', we will keep these aspects in mind alongside that of haunting, and elaborate on this duality of values in the proceeding sections.

Crucially, Fisher contrasts his critique of retro pop music with an analysis of underground hauntological music that deliberately and performatively brings into focus the anachronic nature of our present cultural malaise, without superficially 'retro-washing' it. These musical texts' "principal sonic signature [is] the use of crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl" (Fisher 2014:29). Deliberately introduced artefacts, glitches and errors such as these bring into sudden focus the recorded and produced nature of the music, and this self-reflexivity is crucial to the postmodern self-critical power of hauntological music. 90's Jungle music⁷, for Fisher, is emblematic of this radical reflexivity and provided an alternative to mainstream retro-pastiche music. Quoting Kodwo Eshun, Fisher argues that Jungle was a "libidinisation of anxiety itself" (ibid, 37), escalating the jouissance of uncertainties and precarities of late capitalism. Jungle, as any hauntological music, exposed the true inhuman nature of capitalism, and the music felt as if it were created independently of human intervention, and the producers were simply ventriloquists for a machinic narrative. Small-town nostalgia (simulated by pop artists today like The Killers, Taylor Swift, etc.) was rejected in favour of the uncomfortable, dystopian metropolis, celebrating the thrill of the cutthroat chase where strangers and corporations stalk each other in "the Hobbesian scenarios of 1980s films such as *Blade Runner*, *Terminator* and *Predator 2*" (ibid). Jungle was an accelerationist music, in the hopes to drive through rather than away from capitalism would lead to its self-destructive nadir and thus the *messianic*⁸ arrival of the future – "at a certain point,

⁷ Jungle music in the 1990's was (in retrospect) a revolutionary new type of electronic music – characterised by high-speed drum breaks and extensive digital audio manipulation, led by artists and DJs from low-income urban communities in post-Thatcherite London.

⁸ By messianic we are specifically referring to Derrida's use of the word to describe the returning of the spectre – who is both an arrivant (to-come) and a revenant (return). The

the unrelieved negativity of the dystopian drive trips over into a perversely utopian gesture, and annihilation becomes the condition of the radically new” (ibid). Interestingly from a hauntological perspective, Fisher also mentions Jungle’s characteristically alien feel, as if it emanated from an otherworldly artificial intelligence that only *ventriloquized* the human producers (ibid, 38).

Fisher, however, lamented that this radical alternative represented by Jungle has all but declined today (barring some examples of alternative music by artists like Burial). But a year before Fisher’s tragic passing, Tanner (2016) updated Fisher’s sonic hauntology by pointing to genres of vaporwave⁹ and synthwave as the successors to Fisher’s jungle or anti-rock Joy Division. Vaporwave music is “sceptical of capitalism’s promise to redeem us in the name of material goods and of the nostalgia that hangs over an era obsessed with the clichés of history” (Tanner 2016: 9), and attempts to subvert the deliberate capitalist commodification of nostalgia for a pre-9/11, pre-Internet era. “By forcing us to recognize the unfamiliarity of ubiquitous technology” (ibid, 18), vaporwave brings into sudden and often ridiculous focus the uncanny, unsettling and ghostly nature of electronic media through glitches, malfunctions, and looping repetition, to “undermine the smooth, professional-grade production heard in mainstream Western popular music” (ibid, 19). Through sampling of previous music as “an art form of remediation and appropriation” it exposes spectral “gaps in authorship, continuity, and the information needed to determine originality” (ibid, 16). Hauntological music too, then, is characteristic of self-reflexively deconstructive postmodernism.

Tanner also writes about vaporwave’s alien and ghostly ventriloquizing function, similar to Fisher, and engages with Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). Through malfunctions and glitches, the listener is afforded a glimpse of the supernatural at work,

[an] alien intelligence [which] could be the very inside-ness of the machine at hand, the interior workings that remain entirely hidden unless we disassemble the tool and risk facing the uncanny in its destabilising guise [...] These glitches interrupt our expectations while deceiving and annoying us. They undermine our notion of what the machine is supposed to do for us, not without us. In this way, our electronic machines take on lives of their own and appear capable of functioning perfectly well without humans – a complete transcendence into otherworldly sentience” (Tanner 2016: 19).

Thus, we have termed these examples as ‘disturbing’ or subversive ghosts that turn the spectral culture industry’s tools against itself in order to expose the hauntological nature of our times. We can already see the phantomachia being waged in the culture

messianic nature of the spectre is in its hope and promise for a future to-come. The ghost presents itself as a possible future – a polemic. (Derrida 2011: 33-45)

⁹ Vaporwave, synthwave, and associated genres were created in the 2010’s and are a combination of visual art of a specific aesthetic, Internet meme culture, and music characterised by slowed-down and glitchy audio samples of retro pop songs and shopping mall muzak. The surrounding discourse was widely recognised as satirical nostalgia and surrealism, critical of retro-fetishistic consumer culture.

industry of today, between mainstream retro-fetishistic pop cultural industry dependent on the endless recycling of the abandoned futures of the early and pre-Internet era into the productive commodity-forms of retro styles on the one hand, and subversive subcultures that perform hauntological counter-offensives against capital that seeks to colonise the spectres. Both 'sides' of this war of ghosts have weaponized spectres that lurk within and haunt through culture (in general, although we have only looked at a few music cultural references as our research objects here).

But the spectres that are recruited and deployed by both sides have volatile allegiances. For an example, 80's vaporwave and 80's retro-pastiche pop music draw from the same source of cultural haunting:



Figure 1: Frame from the music video of Save Your Tears (2022) by The Weeknd



Figure 2: Frame from the music video of Blinding Lights (2021) by The Weeknd



Figure 3: Frame from the music video of Excuses (2020) by AP Dhillon



Figure 4: Album Artwork of Future Nostalgia by Dua Lipa

The retro sound of mainstream big-budget 80's retro-pastiche pop productions like those of The Weeknd (Figures. 1, 2) or Dua Lipa (Fig. 4) that are anything but subversive of capitalism. Acoustically, they are unmistakably similar to those of synthesiser-based European electronic music from the 1970's and 1980's. The classic sound of then cutting-edge digital synthesisers like the Yamaha DX7 made legendary by pioneers such as Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream and Daft Punk. However, the same classic sound is sampled, manipulated and performed by hauntological vaporwave, synthwave and retrowave, as heard in some already-classics of the genre (Figures. 5, 6).



Figure 5: Album Artwork for Floral Shoppe (2011) by Macintosh Plus

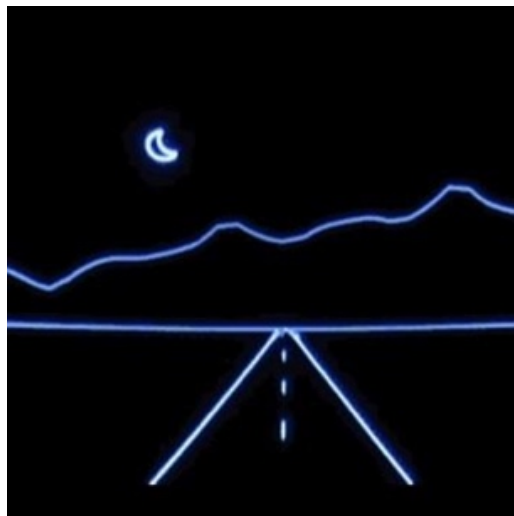


Figure 6: Artwork for All Night (2011) by Midnight Television

And the motifs of retro haunting go beyond the recycling of sonic production techniques. One can see the conscious recycling of visual aesthetics of cyberpunk themes made classic through films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and animes such as *Akira* (1989). See, for example, the omnipresent aesthetics of speed and acceleration, the use of geometric figures in the portrayal of cyberspace, the colours of neon pinks and purples, and the use of retro text fonts in the aptly-named *Future Nostalgia* by Dua Lipa (Fig. 4), in films such as *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), TV series like *Mrs Marvel* (2021) (whose cinematic trailer features the Weeknd's music), or in the album artwork of AP Dhillon (Fig. 4). But their vaporwave counterparts use and warp similar aesthetics as well.

Thus, these genres from both 'sides' are homologous¹⁰ — both capture the utopian impulse of the 1970's and early 1980's neo-futurism through recycled motifs and aesthetics of technological innovation, neo-modernist obsessions with accelerationism and cyber-transhumanism. But they deploy them in oppositional ways. If vaporwave is the viral ghost sent back in time to haunt the Reagan era, retro-pop is the programmer trying to code it back into existence.¹¹ ¹² This tendency of volatility of allegiance is characteristically one of the spectre — as Derrida has written that it is dangerous and difficult to separate and classify friendly and unfriendly ghosts as their intentions are never fully revealed (Derrida 2011 [1993]: 134). And

¹⁰We use 'homologous' because of their common source of haunting — what Massimo Leone called the 'youthful elan' or spirit of the times — and this is not simply a zeitgeist but the affective dimension of potentiality and anticipation for a future-to-come. In the sense that the two sides of our phantomachia share a common origin, they are hauntogenetically homologous.

¹¹ An adaptation of a tweet from Grafton Tanner.

¹² The subversive element of haunting weaponised in vaporwave and hauntological music is exactly that which is actively reified and commodified, gentrified by commercial music. In the Weeknd or Dua Lipa, the spectre's tendency towards anachrony and subverting of the time-iness of the present is commodified.

because we can never truly ascertain its true identity, it is easy for other subjects and objects, i.e., commodities, to usurp the identity of a spectre (ibid, 7).

This phantomachia is a confusing and chaotic battleground of murky intentions. However, we want to try to make sense of the logic of this marketing-warfare, and how the performative weaponization of hauntological texts on either side follows the logic of simulative commodification. First, we must dive into the technics of Derrida's hauntology so we may apply it to Baudrillard's sign exchange.

Derrida's trace-sign

Derrida's "theory of spectres" (Derrida, 2011: 152), is a theory of the unrepresented, of signs and subjects that are entombed beneath the repressive weight of paradigmatic and syntagmatic signification in the present. It is a theory of how all signs carry traces of other signs, from a national flag hiding ideology and genocide, to a note in a melody carrying the traces of previous and future notes, to a glitch or malfunction indicating a machinic non-human presence. Derrida's hauntology is a climactic synthesis of many of his major theses, including those of deconstruction (1972, 1976) and *differance* (1968).

Sigmund Freud's concept of a trace (1961[1924]) first appeared in a short paper entitled *A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'*, where he explored the concept of a memory-trace. Freud considered the child's toy of a cellulose writing pad as a metaphor to illustrate the unconscious that retains traces of whatever is inscribed on it. Derrida would later extend the trace beyond Freud's use as a metaphor. He uses the concept extensively (1976, 1972) in order to support his deconstruction of logocentrism and the binary opposition of speech and writing. In the transformation from speech to writing, there is no metaphysically identifiable point of origin. He critiques the Saussurean structures of sign-value and sign-identity being produced by a concrete and identifiable difference, and instead purports that this difference is not an identity nor a difference between identities. Writing as a system of signs is a system of traces, in which traces do not derive from an empirical presence (of identity), but instead from an "absence of another here-now [...] presenting itself as irreducible absence in the presence of the trace" (Derrida 1976: 57). Instead of a structural oppositional system, the trace offers a deconstructive tool. In his reading of Freud, memory and thus the psyche originates in the difference between the neural facilitations, metaphorized through the written trace. The identitarian quality of memory would only be produced by the set of periodic oppositions of memory

objects, and the trace-as-memory is the invisible difference between memories, i.e., objects that could be recalled into the conscious mind^{13, 14}

Derrida elaborates on the trace to show that it does not only occult and reject its own origins but is the "origin of origins" (Derrida 1976: 61) — the trace produces meaning, it is the "difference which opens up appearance and signification" (ibid, 65). This is because signs contain traces of other signs — for example, the word "gay" contains "happy", "homosexual", even "bear", and so on. This is a precursor to Derrida's *differance* (1968), where the absence of the adjacent signs are both spatial and temporal. The trace then is seen as a sign that conceals something, including its own production — the original movement that created the trace is occulted. Secrecy itself is held in secret. In this light, signs always manage to conceal something that they signify, and there is always some meaning that escapes explicit signification.

The purpose of the spectre is that of the injunction to remedy (remediate) the present through the trace-sign. Its intrusion into the semiotic realm where its voice is to be heard is a violent one. As we have described above through the examples of hauntological media like Fisher's jungle or Tanner's vaporwave, the spectre as the unrepresented and elusive haunting subverts and antagonises the present semiotic order. While the present semiotic order apparently represents the signified opaquely, the logic of this haunting is to bring into sudden visibility that which is excluded from the present signification. As shown above, they do this by using glitches and errors to bring into focus the mediated nature of the text and its methods of production, to thus signify a trace-sign i.e., the trace of that which is not opaquely represented.

Today, when the present semiotic order is itself hauntological by design, vaporwave for example brings into sudden focus the non-transparency or semi-transparency of retro-pop media by ironically turning the very motifs of retro-pastiche postmodernisms against itself. In another example, the unrepresented or unembodied form of the spectre in syntagmatic musical composition would be the unplayed musical notes in a sequence — literally, the aptly named 'ghost notes'.

We can then look at retro-pastiche pop, in turn, as a spectacular reproduction of the spectre. But the spectre is not a simple countercultural mechanism that can be reified seamlessly. Its haunting nature makes it a difficult thing to lay our finger on and thus categorise its transition beyond all doubt. The interstitial, volatile and ambivalent nature makes it necessary to locate this commodification in the process of the simulation of the symbolic.

¹³ The trace always contains a trace of memory, of what has already happened. This is never an absolute memory in a Peircean iconic sense, but is a trace of pre-adjacent trace-signs that differ through absolute temporality of periodicity and continuity. We may recall here Lotman's observation about how art and play type models do not have static meanings but "twinkle"-retaining memories of earlier meanings and possible future ones (Lotman, 2011).

¹⁴ For further reading, Andrade (2016) succinctly captures how Derrida's reading of Freud's temporalities in the psyche produce, metaphorically, his conception of language through difference in traces. Such an outlining is beyond our current mandate, however, we can continue with Derrida's concept of the trace-sign as the fundamental ephemeral unit of language and the psyche, as a quasi-concept that deconstructs the sign.

For this, we will need to look to Baudrillard's tabulation of sign-value forms and the simulative transformations of the extra-semiotic 'symbolic'. In doing so, we will attempt to read Derrida's spectre as an extra-semiotic entity like Baudrillard's symbolic exchange, that is then brought back into the logic of sign exchange through reconversion of its value form. However, we will then argue that this is not a zero-sum reconversion but that reconversion leaves behind a trace of the previous form before reconversion. This will lead us to a repressive model of dual sign-values inside the sign-object, between a sign exchange-value and a spectral value as the trace sign.

Baudrillard's table of values

We must first examine Baudrillard's value-forms that relate to the systematics of sign exchange in the semiotic political economy, as read through Genosko's (1994) commentary.

<i>Use value (UV)</i>	<i>Economic exchange value (EcEV)</i>	<i>Sign exchange value (SgEV)</i>	<i>Symbolic exchange (SbE)</i>
1. UV–EcEV	4. EcEV–UV	7. SgEV–UV	10. SbE–UV
2. UV–SgEV	5. EcEV–SgEV	8. SgEV–EcEV	11. SbE–EcEV
3. UV–SbE	6. EcEV–SbE	9. SgEV–SbE	12. SbE–SgEV

Figure 7: Genosko's tabulation of Baudrillard's logics of value

Baudrillard's table of values (Fig. 7) formalises the conversions and reconversions along 4 logics of value with their own forms, logics and operations:

1. *Use Value* (UV) based on logic of value of utility, based on functional determinations, in the form of an instrument
2. *Economic Exchange Value* (EcEV) based on logic of equivalence, based on commercial determinations, in the form of a commodity
3. *Sign Exchange Value* (SgEV) based on logic of difference, with structural determinations, in the form of the sign
4. *Symbolic Exchange* (SbE) based on logic of ambivalence, with psychical determination, in the form of the symbol

The table is organised in three clusters of conversions and reconversions: (Fig. 8)

<i>Production-Consumption</i>	<i>Transfiguration</i>	<i>Transgression</i>
C1—R4	C2—R7	C3—R10
	C5—R8	C6—R11
		C9—R12

Figure 8: Genosko's tabulation of the three clusters of conversions (C) / reconversions (R), referenced to Fig. 7 where C1 represents UV-EcEV and so on.

The first cluster (UV - EcEV and its reconversion) is the process of production and consumption in classical Marxist political economy, where the instrument becomes exchanged on the economic marketplace and is in turn consumed to gratify personal needs.

The second cluster (UV - SgEV and its reconversion, and EcEV - SgEV and its reconversion) enters into the domain of the systematic identity of material and sign production (Baudrillard has, throughout, emphasised the analogous structuration of the sign and the commodity). Through reorganisations according to the polar differential positions and combinatory rules of 'the code', (Baudrillard 2019 [1972]) the principles and forms of UV and EcEV are transfigured into SgEV. This is a magically immaterial transfiguration, where Marx's phrase 'all that is solid melts into air' comes to mind. This "vaporisation" of use value into "strange airs" is not of a single instrument but of the differences between the many; seen, for example, in the cultural qualities of the air of the sea as compared to the air of the country (Genosko 1994: 9).

Crucially, when we reconvert SgEV back into UV (or EcEV), one does not receive the restored UV that was first converted, but instead one consumes as well the culturally significant differences in a semiotic utility of sorts. This sense of secondary utility is a meta-functional and metaphysical function alongside the satisfaction of needs. When we consume the air of the sea, we are consuming it as different from the air of the country. This dual consumption is associated with the means of social, cultural, personal and aesthetic profit (ibid). This logic of dual consumption will be later extended by us to apply to other reconverted value-forms as well.

The third cluster (UV - SbE, EcEV - SbE and SgEv - SbE and their respective reconversions) are transgressive conversions into the realm of the symbolic exchange which is "the other side of political economy". The conversion occurs through "a symbolic consumption which liquidates value" (Genosko 1994: 10). In this process, "hyperconsumption replaces underconsumption" (ibid) and the logic of the potlatch of surplus replaces that of cold rational calculation. Baudrillard argues that the consumption of UV has become today the chaotic destructive logic of potlatch (Baudrillard 2019[1972]: 49). The notion of 'needs' and sign exchange is supplanted by that of a "hypersimulation of sign value, a pathological manipulation which overcomes and upends the differential relations of the sign system" (Genosko 1994: 10). The Baudrillardian potlatch in symbolic exchange highlights Marcel Mauss'

understanding of the gift-relation as a spiritual mechanism that is associated with the obligation of a return, and a return with interest.¹⁵

On the other hand, the transgressive reconversion and revaluing of SbE back into SgEV, UV and EcEV occurs through the symbolic's "reinstrumentalization as *a commodity or a sign*" (Genosko 1994: 10). We can examine the technics of transgressions while examining some important characteristics of Baudrillard's symbolic exchange (and noticing their parallels with Derrida's spectre).

Symbolic exchange and the symbolic-as-spectre

The symbolic is arbitrary, absolute and incomparable

Baudrillard's symbol is a semiotic object that represents a relationship between two individual or collective subjects. Baudrillard's primary example of the symbolic is the gift — for example, of a wedding ring between a married couple, or the gift of death. The symbol "is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged". For our purposes, we can read the injunction of the spectre as a relationship of symbolic exchange between the haunted and the spectre.

The symbolic is an absolute relation, in the sense that one can never quantify the value of a wedding ring, or the value of death, and if one were to do so, it would be in a transgressive revaluation or reinstrumentalization. The symbolic in fact has "neither use value nor (economic) exchange value". The object itself is arbitrary, but "the gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging and the unique moment of the exchange. It is arbitrary, and yet absolutely singular" and incomparable (Baudrillard 2019 [1972]: 68).

The symbolic relation is reciprocal

"The symbol refers to lack (absence) as a virtual relation of desire" (Baudrillard 2019 [1972]: 68). The logic of this desire is of reciprocity, but not a calculative transactional reciprocity that tends towards equalisation and hence an annulment of the relationship, but instead the reciprocity of the potlatch. Baudrillard's reading of Mauss' Trobriand Islanders sees potlatch to be a "provocation, a competition, a

¹⁵ This is where Derrida is at odds with Baudrillard's reading of Mauss because according to Derrida (2011), the exchange between the spectre and the haunted is unidirectional, univocal — we cannot reason or exchange with ghosts, only listen. Further, there is no reciprocal escalation in the exchange with the spectre, unlike that in the symbolic relation. However, this is an idealistic praxis of engagement with ghosts, not that which is practised today by industry. And we may choose to re-read Derrida's spectre's demand for justice and the endless debt to the spectre that inheritors find themselves as a parallel to the Baudrillardian symbolic relation's endless potlatch, to further bolster our comparison between the two concepts. While symbolic exchange tends towards escalation without calculation ad infinitum, the spectre is *always already* infinite, absolute, without calculation.

challenge" (ibid, 44). The gift received is seen as a threat against the social position of the receiver, whose legitimacy is questioned, and the receiver is obligated to overcompensate with an even greater gift. The nature of the symbolic relation is an arms race, accelerating and trying to one-up the other in scale. And the attitude in the destruction of the potlatch is one of insolence and defiance. Thus, the symbol refers to the most recent infraction or challenge that has produced a lack or imbalance in the relationship, and itself produces and represents the obligatory desire to reciprocate.

In our case, the spectre's injunction is a 'challenge' to us to re-order history and is a violent and traumatic call to action. The 'imbalance' it demands to set right is between the future that should-have-been or the world that could-be free, and the present order which represses those potentialities.

The symbolic is ambivalent, transparent and total

In a symbolic object, there is never an opaque positive or negative that is signified, as with the differential weights in sign exchange systems. Instead, symbolic relationships are ambivalent, they include both the positive and negative histories and contexts that have led up to this particular unique gift (e.g. all the particular unquantifiable moments of a relationship, both good and bad, that are represented by a wedding ring). This ambivalence of the relationship is what makes the symbolic a "concrete manifestation of a total relationship of desire". The symbolic also manifests "the transparency of social relations in a dual or integrated group relationship" (ibid, 69). This transparency is in the open challenge of reciprocity, and in the clear visibility of the depth of the relationship's totality.

The spectre can be read as a 'total' object, one whose true identity we can never ascertain for sure. We only know it through the visor and armour it wears for our gaze, and we can only converse with it through its spoken injunction. It oscillates between visibility and invisibility, transparency and obfuscation.

A reexamination of transgressive reinstrumentalization

The transgressive reconversion of SbE back into SgEV, UV and EcEV can be reexamined. In each transgression, there is an attribution of value and an annulment of the incomparability of the object. The object becomes like any other, interchangeable and valuable in a system of differences.¹⁶

In the reconversion of SbE into SgEV or EcEV, we firstly see the repressive conjuring away of ambivalence, instead becoming the opaque currency of exchange.

¹⁶ In SbE - UV, we can see the logic of the gift and destructive hyperconsumption being replaced for sake of the gratification of needs. However, this is not a reduction in the same way that SbE becomes reinstrumentalized into exchange value, and we will revisit the curious homology between UV and SbE later.

"The symbol is reified as a sign whose value emanates from the system, its ambivalence becomes structural equivalence, rendering social relations of production and consumption abstract and opaque" (Genosko 1994: 5). This opacity is that "of social relations of production and the reality of the division of labour [...] the total constraint of the code that governs social value: it is the specific weight of signs that regulates the social logic of exchange"(Baudrillard 2019 [1972]: 69). This reorganisation of the principles of the symbolic by "the semiotic disposition to heterogeneousness 'unsettles' the homogeneous transparency of the symbolic" (ibid).

When the spectre is reinstrumentalised, it loses its total potentiality and ambivalence. It is taken literally at 'face' value¹⁷, i.e., the value of its possessed body as an affective medium. Its haunting becomes opaque, reduced to the differential value of its visor or armour.

Also, when incomparable symbolic objects become autonomous from their manifested relations and freely codifiable, they begin to signify an annulment of the reciprocity and thus the death or abolishment of the relationship. "It is no longer the mobile signifier of a lack between two beings. [...] Whereas the symbol refers to lack (to absence) as a virtual relation of desire, the sign object only refers to the absence of relation itself, and to isolated individual subjects" (ibid). The erstwhile symbolic object becomes a sign of difference or imbalance between two subjects, of "coded difference" i.e., an IOU.

For our purposes, we can read this as the 'annulment' of the injunction of the spectre and imbalance between the abandoned futures and the present. The 'reinstrumentalisation' of the spectre amounts to the reduction of the haunting potential to the logic of difference.

The symbolic is repressed by the sign-relation

Baudrillard also aims to show how the symbolic is a heterogeneous entity that exists outside the homogenising logical domain of value. He does so by exploring two equations and considering the logical impossibility of their horizontal coherence. Below we have shown a combined expression of the horizontal expressions of the first (Fig.9), and in the second we have shown Baudrillard's homology of the general political economy of commodities with that of the sign (Fig. 10).

$$\frac{\mathbf{SgEV}}{\mathbf{SbE}} = \frac{\mathbf{EcEV}}{\mathbf{UV}}$$

Figure 9: The horizontal implications of Baudrillard's domain of sign value. This is an impossible equation as UV and SbE cannot be equated and the symbolic lies outside the semiological (Fig. 11)

¹⁷ Or perhaps 'visor-value' – as the face of the ghost is unknowable.

In this first equation, the two sides when taken in isolation are logically sound. There is a reduction in the concrete in both vertical implications, in SbE-SgEV and in EcEV-UV. However, they fail the test of horizontal coherence. UV and SbE cannot be equated because SbE is incommensurable, transparent, ambivalent and incomparable. However, there is an unmistakable resemblance between the two in that they are both subjects of repressive reductions (Genosko 1994: 14-15).

$$\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}} = \frac{\text{Sr}}{\text{Sd}}$$

Figure 10: The domain of general political economy equated with that of the sign expressed in Baudrillard's horizontally and vertically coherent equation

The second equation highlights Baudrillard's homology between the commodity and the sign (Fig. 10). Both "exchange value and the signifier have a 'strategic value' greater than the 'tactical value' of use value and the signified [...] Use value and the signified are 'effects' or 'simulation models' of their antecedent terms" (Genosko 1994: 5). The signifier and UV both are exploited as sources of non-differentiable value, before they become subjected to Marx's commodity fetishism and enter the market of difference and circulation.

The bars that separate the terms on both sides are Saussurean bars that guarantee the separation of the terms, but it also excludes the possibility of the copulation of the terms, and in doing so "conjures a phantasm of the unity of signification" (Genosko 1994: 15). SbE represents the *potential*/total reconciliation of the opposing terms of the signified and signifier¹⁸ in the logic of gift exchange. The ambivalence and totality of the symbolic is repressively excluded from this equation, as a potential value, represented as so (Fig. 11):

$$\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}} = \frac{\text{Sr}}{\text{Sd}} / \text{SbE}$$

Figure 11: The radical exclusion of the symbolic from the Saussurean sign-structure

This bar is a quasi-Lacanian bar "of radical exclusion" (Genosko 1994: 16) in that it censors and represses the transgressive symbolic potentialities.¹⁹ This "power bar is the archetype of all the disjunctions which found the simulative structure of the real" and "the referential real is an effect of the sign just as UV is said to be an effect of EcEV" (Genosko 1994: 17). The bar is a bar of repression, one between life and death

¹⁸ Thus SbE follows the logic of the spectre – what haunts from the outside is the potentiality of a total reconciliation, of a world that could-be-free today or of futures that can be reconciled with their abandonment.

¹⁹ However, in Baudrillard's reading of Lacan's semiopsychoanalysis, "the symbolic bears no relation to the repressed and does not occupy the place of the Lacanian signified" (Genosko, 1994:15). This is yet another place we have to decide to ignore Baudrillard – the spectre, like the symbolic, is repressed and returns as in a Lacanian crossing into the conscious mind. Baudrillard would disagree, stating that the symbolic never had a place in the semiologic so can never 'return'.

which interrupts the symbolic gift-exchange between the two. "The bar represses death. It is invested with the social power to do so" and its "power lies in its ability to block an ineluctable relation in which there is an incessant obligation to give, to receive and to return, and thus to enter into a symbolic communion." (Genosko 1994: 1). This bar is an unbridgeable gap that makes a crossing over impossible, and this crossing over is precisely the transgression of conversions and reconversions of SbE highlighted earlier. Genosko points out an excellent example of Baudrillard's critique of Roman Jakobson's model of communication as one of sign exchange that represses and excludes the symbolic, separating and silencing the receiver from the sender (Genosko 1994: 6).

Again, for us, the spectre is literally the figure of a repressed 'death', when 'death' is read as a gift in symbolic exchange. The spectre is according to Derrida repressed by the present semiotic order, i.e., by the present linguistic exchange and networks of signification.

The symbolic is deconstructive

But the symbolic is active in its effort to disbar this disjunction. It "continues to haunt the sign, to dismantle the formal correlation of signifier and signified" (Baudrillard 2019 [1972]: 196) by means of a "violent 'effraction' (break and entry) into the sanctuary of value by means of revolutionary consumptive practices" (Genosko 1994: 4). However, in its haunting, "the symbolic [...] cannot be named except by allusion, by effraction, because signification, which names everything after itself, only speaks of value, and the symbolic is not value" (Baudrillard 2019 [1972]: 196).²⁰

The symbolic-as-spectre

We may return here temporarily to Derrida to point out an important parallel between Baudrillard's symbolic and Derrida's spectre (2011 [1993]). Although outside the scope of the present essay, we can bring notice to Derrida's concept of the spectre as that which haunts the present, representing repressed traumas and unfulfilled potentialities, and demanding a 'setting-right' of the disjunctive present. Some similarities that we can note for now:

1. The spectre represents the unfulfilled potentialities of history, just as the symbolic as repressed represents the unfulfilled potential reconciliation of the

²⁰ Baudrillard here is at odds with Julia Kristeva (Kristeva 1980:146) when he notes the absolute purity of the symbolic and hence that the disjunctive bar is not exactly Lacanian. Kristeva's semiotic resembles Baudrillard's symbolic, while her symbolic parallels his semiotic domain of signs. For Kristeva, "the semiotic and the symbolic dispositions are in 'permanent contradiction' and are thus 'inseparable'" and her semiotic has "the tendency to establish symbolic-like 'signifying apparatuses'" (Genosko 1994: 13). For Baudrillard, however, his symbolic never contains a trace of the semiotic since "it does not return, like the repressed, since it has never had a place in the territory of the sign." (Genosko 1994: 11)

repressive division of the signifier and the signified. The symbolic represents thus a potentially pure totality of meaning, but that is repressed and divided for the sake of sign-exchange in language and culture. The symbolic in its efforts to 'break' into the semiotic realm can be read as a haunting.

2. The spectre like the symbolic is repressed by the hegemonic ontology of the present. As a conceptual tool used by Derrida, the spectre is deconstructive, and rejects the binary oppositions and structuration of the ontology of presence.
3. The ambivalent totality of the symbolic parallels that of the spectre, in that the spectre oscillates between presence and absence, and is marked by the visibility of the invisible and the presence of absence. Transparency, ambiguity and incomparability means that neither follow the logic of differences- neither can be taken at face value.
4. The "aneconomical" surplus generated and demanded in the obligatory reciprocity of the gift-exchange in SbE can be seen as similar to the spectre's demand for justice as one that is "beyond law", beyond economic calculation, beyond exchange (Derrida 2011 [1993]: 26). Referring to Heidegger's Dike, Derrida says that the surplus of the gift is excessive- it has to come from what one does not have- what properly belongs to the other already (ibid, 29).
5. The symbolic as that which cannot be named and that presents an incommensurable gift (of death) is arguably characteristic of the spectre's "messianicity without content" or "messianicity without messianicity" (Derrida 2011 [1993]: 74), which does not adhere to the logic of value and difference. The example from Derrida of the spectre's messianicity without messianism is that the spectre does not adhere to the messianicity of structures as is the case in Marxism or religion.

We can note then that the (re)conversion into SgEV from SbE or UV, when all that is solid melts into air, is a vaporisation into the spectral.

Value-forms of the trace-sign

There are necessarily traces left behind in the transformative processes of conversion and reconversion of value-forms. We must agree with Genosko's reading of Kristeva's inseparability of her semiotic and symbolic, and so emphasise that there is always a trace of the logic of Baudrillardian sign-exchange in his symbolic, even if this is difficult to imagine in a concrete relation using his example of the gift. We similarly see the trace of the logic of signs in the homology of UV and SbE as pointed out by Genosko, in that "even beyond the semiologic, through the mirror of use value, one

finds a strong pair, a trace of the binary logic of the code. Burnt signs leave ashes." (Genosko 1994: 15)²¹

We earlier highlighted the dual utility of reconverted UV, i.e., a metafunctional 'semiotic utility' in the consumption of differences alongside its classical satisfaction of needs. When we reconvert SgEV-UV, there is something necessarily gained that is residual from the earlier conversion (UV-SgEV). The air reconverted into solid is not simply solid but retains traces of its earlier converted form of SgEv. This secondary metafunction is a result of the trace of its earlier form. We can designate this earlier form as SgEV'. Therefore, UV in isolation is always lesser than its form returned after reconversion, which we may describe as (UV + SgEV').²²

Just as UV contains not just UV but EcEV' or (and) SgEV', we can take the liberty to extend this reading of metafunctional residue after reconversion to the other value forms as well.

Thus, then Baudrillard's table of values can be rearranged and the reconverted value-forms can be interpreted as dual utilities including the traces of the prior conversion (Fig. 12):

	Conversions	Reconversions
<i>Production - consumption</i>	UV-EcEV	EcEV-(UV+EcEV')
<i>Transfiguration</i>	UV-SgEV	SgEV-(UV+SgEV')
<i>Transfiguration</i>	EcEV--SgEV	SgEV-(EcEV+ SgEV')
<i>Transgression</i>	UV-SbE	SbE-(UV+SbE')
<i>Transgression</i>	EcEV-SbE	SbE-(EcEV+SbE')
<i>Transgression</i>	SgEV-SbE	SbE-(SgEV+SbE')

Figure 12: Our synthesised table of reconverted values representing the presence of metafunctional residue-values of prior conversions^{23, 24}

²¹ We must also point out that if the symbolic is equated with Derrida's spectre, and the spectre-as-spirit that has been decorporalised is always displaced from an original corporeal body, then necessarily we must hypothesise that the first body is always that of an opaque sign relation, of a differentiated corporeal mass. So the symbolic-as-spectre contains at least a trace of its origins in the semiologic, even if the origins of the spectre are occulted.

²² This is, in essence, the nature of reconversion rather than conversion which is always a reductive process. UV-SgEv or UV-EcEV always implies a capturing of value, its reification into exchange of differences. This captured or repressed UV is not a trace UV'. Only in its reconversion back to UV do we achieve a trace of SgEV' or EcEV'.

²³ When we combine this hypothesis with the fact that, as pointed out earlier, the nature of the Derridean trace-sign is that it is inscribed with traces of other sign-objects' value forms as per the logic of the system of differences, then we begin to get an idea of the complexity of trace-signification contained within a single reconverted value form of an object. For example, for an object (a) the EcEV(a)' in the reconverted UV(a)+ EcEV(a)' also contains the traces EcEV(b)', EcEV(c)' and so on. So (UV(a)+EcEV(a)') is actually (UV(a)+(EcEV(a)'+EcEV(b)'+EcEV(c)'+...)).

²⁴ Then, in Kristeva's reading of her semiotic's tendency to always establish symbolic-like apparatuses, we can see that (if interpreted in the Baudrillardian equation) SbE as an always converted SgEV always contains a trace of SgEV'

Our particular interests are in the last listed reconversion, i.e., SbE-(SgEV+SbE'). This implies that the SgEV that is a reinstrumentalized SbE also contains within it a trace of its earlier SbE form, and this earlier form of the invaluable and incomparable symbolic is captured (trapped) inside the valuated sign-object. If we are to continue with our parallel of the spectre-as-symbolic, then this trace inside the sign-object can be identified as the effect of the SbE's haunting, in its present absence. But it is more than an effect, it is appropriated as a productive component of value, and so the differential value of the sign-exchange commodity becomes that of the sum of SgEV and the spectre that is repressed underneath it. The *re-* in reinstrumentalisation can be thus read as a very real return (of the repressed) of the spectre²⁵.

In the sign-exchange commodity, which we have chosen to interpret as a semiocommodity in line with Baudrillard's (1976) and Berardi's (2009) semiocapitalism²⁶, there is thus a repressive trapping of value. This is not a simple re-encoding of differences according to the logic of the sign-system, but necessarily an embodiment of a unique symbolic sign-object. The spectre-as-symbolic is effaced, and forced into the materiality of the object.²⁷ So SgEV+SbE' is actually SgEV/SbE', and we may now finally formalise the spectral semiocommodity as in Fig. 13:

$$\frac{\mathbf{SgEV}}{\mathbf{SbE'}}$$

Figure 13: In the spectral semiocommodity, the logic of systems of sign-exchange represses the spectre SbE' which is a trace sign of its earlier deconstructive extra-semiotic form SbE.

The dual values in the retro semiocommodity

If we apply the above model to the earlier discussion on retro futuristic pop cultural media, then the hauntological semiocommodity can be represented as (SgEV+SbE').

²⁵ We have claimed this for our present expediency, despite the fact that Baudrillard has categorically said the 'breaking into' of the symbolic into the semiotic realm is not a Lacanian 'return' of the repressed

²⁶ Although it is possible, we have chosen not to describe the spectral semiocommodity in terms of Eva Illouz's (2018) emotional commodity or emodity. This is because, although a robust and useful concept, it fails to capture the ambivalence and tumultuous forms of value that are trapped within the hauntological commodity, instead describing it merely as a cold calculative manipulation of psychic devices in order to produce certain emotional use values on consumption. However, we may interpret a hauntological emodity from the perspective of its emotional UV, as when the (SgEV+SbE') is further reconverted into UV+SgEV' or rather UV+(SgEV+SbE')

²⁷ However, this is never a perfect embodiment and the spectre is never fully converted. The spectre cannot become a loyal vassal to capital, and this is because, as we mentioned earlier, of the volatile ambivalence of the spectre and the impossibility of discerning its identity (and true allegiance). In fact, then, the SbE' inside the semiocommodity is not a trace-sign but a trace of a trace.

There are thus two functional values associated with the retro sign-object:

- A value of (social) difference with a *differential function* — expressed as *SgEV* for cultural, aesthetic and personal profit — the 'cool' factor, of say, retro photography²⁸. This fashionableness explains the viral copycat culture that scales the semio-commodities' effectiveness beyond their symbolic's origin — for example, through AP Dhillon, an Indian Punjabi pop artist that excels at imitating artists such as the Weeknd, even though the haunting of retrowave styles is characteristically a haunting by European and American lost futures.
- A trace value with a *spectral function* — expressed as *SbE'* or the psychical value captured from an unquantifiable presence of a revolutionary utopia of the lost futures captured into the sign-commodity. In effect, this is the reconverted sign value of the symbolic spectre of lost futures.²⁹

But the repression of *SbE'* is a violent one, and this spectral repression and the symbolic's effort to break into the semiotic can explain the instability and volatile nature of the hauntological semiocommodity. These two dual warring factors in the musical text also help explain why any music is not exclusively hauntological or not. Each musical text contains its potential for subversion, as with Tanner's vaporwave or Fisher's jungle, but also (and hence) the potential to be appropriated by industry, as with Dua Lipa or the Weeknd, and vice versa. Insightful commentary from those who identify fringe avant-garde pop as post-humanistic "anti-hauntology" but likewise agree with Fisher's diagnosis of hauntological pastiche (Bluemink 2021) cannot make claims in certainty that hauntology itself cannot be liberated from capital's yoke; and likewise on the other hand, a celebration of the emotional activism of mainstream pop as a commodification of disco (Rees 2021) cannot ignore these machinations of semiotic industry. This instability gives cause for both optimism and concern, as hauntological devices can prove to be powerful but fickle allies in anti-hegemonic mobilisation.

²⁸ As mentioned earlier, Leone (2015) pointed out Eco's misunderstanding of this fashionableness as the only value inside the retro commodity.

²⁹ It is also no coincidence that Fisher (2014: 27) points to "two directions in hauntology". The first is that which is no-longer but which haunts where there once was a real referent. This is anachronic tendency grants the spectre its propensity to store and recall affect, and hence its suitability for the nostalgia mode of Jameson, or in hauntological devices where the referent becomes virtualised, and the sign-object becomes a simulative substitute for it. This fiat semiotic-currency is nothing other than the differential logic of *SgEV*. Fisher's second hauntology refers to that which has not yet happened but "which is already effective in the virtual [as] an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour". This is the absolutist messianicity of the spectre, the anticipatory unquantifiable symbolic exchange arms race ad infinitum. It is purely virtual and never had a place in the material Real, but is pre-adjacent to the Real.

Conclusion

We have thus created a model with which to identify the multiplicity of values within (primarily artistic) semiocommodities that are produced from the reconversion of earlier semiotic forms. Specifically, we have suggested that sign-objects serve not simply the function of their current dominant value form but contain traces of prior reconversions, which provide additional metafunctional value based on the logic of the previous form. This dual presence is characterised by an unstable composition, where the dominant form represses the trace of the earlier form, in order to remobilise it for the new imposed logic of value.

Baudrillard's transgressive conversions and reconversions of value-forms allows us to track the impossible and nebulous commodification of the symbolic ghost. In the retro semiocommodity, the dominant value form is one of sign-exchange, which makes it 'fashionable' to consume. The metafunctional value is based on the logic of its previous form, in this case, the previous form was one of symbolic exchange. We have read the spectre as a model of the trace sign as initially existing outside the realm of sign-exchange, its injunctive exchange through haunting is a Baudrillardian symbolic exchange. So, in the case of the retro-semiocommodity, the initially extrasemiotic symbolic ghost is forcibly brought into the logic of semiotic exchange and differentiation during the process of reinstrumentalisation. The unrepresentable trace-sign is forcibly represented. Suddenly the spectre is no longer the symbolic haunting or a 'mobile signifier of a lack between two beings' (between the future and the present), but instead now 'refers to the absence of relation itself' (the absence of a specific injunction). What was earlier a specific injunctive haunting now is separated from its specificity, harvested for a vague affective indicator of haunting, and this reinstrumentalised symbolic spectre is repressed under the logic of sign-exchange.

Thus, we have explained the duality of the retro-semiocommodity — where on the one hand it follows the logic of sign-exchange, but on the other hand is a powerful medium of haunting by lost futures. We have hopefully reconciled two opposing views on retro commodities — that they are either only fashionable sign-objects, or that they are media of haunting that represent and perform time as out-of-joint. In this way, Fisher's Jamesonian retro-pop, Tanner's vaporwave and Leone's vintage objects can be read all in the same way — except each have varying degrees of balance between the two value forms. In retro-pop as with vintage, the haunting of lost futures is completely repressed and disguised and the spectre 'loses its uncanny charge', while in Tanner's vaporwave, the spectre-as-symbolic's violent 'breaking into' the semiotic is performatively brought to the fore. We have thus tried to read the hauntological phantomachia as a semiotic trade-war.

Further applications of this model, once suitably adapted and after revisions as needed, would call for an examination of a retro-semiocommodity, research into

its developmental origins, its scale and nature of its affective impact on audiences, and then an identification of trace-signs ideally through a process of eliminating dominant sign-exchange functions. Some limitations of our approach to this model include:

- Our exclusion of the study of affect theory, and emotional and psychological studies of commodities,
- A lack of a deeper dive into the technics of the repressive trapping of value through an analysis of spatial aspects of utopia and its embodiment into the material object, and
- Only a brief allusion to the analogy between Derrida's spectre and Baudrillard's symbolic exchange

These are directions we hope to pursue ourselves elsewhere. If Derrida's deconstructive hauntology is a quasi-religious "pathology of scepticism" (Fisher 2014: 25), then this paper is somewhat of a blasphemous attempt to formalise a logic of haunting. However, we must counter that we have only formalised a logic of the spectre in a semiocommodity, i.e., inside the logic of sign-exchange. We concede that the 'totality' of the spectre is difficult if not impossible to formalise, unlike the Baudrillardian symbolic exchange which is viewed as a detotalizing external which is very much real and sovereign (see Monticelli 2008).

Although we have only applied and designed this model specifically for the purposes of examining hauntological retro consumption, we hope this model can be applied elsewhere for general studies on semicapitalism. Specifically, this may prove useful in Marxian and post-Marxian subculture and counterculture studies, in order to decode the technics of capitalist re-organization of culture, affect and subjectivity. We hope this model may be adapted for use among practitioners and scholars of hauntology in the arts, in marketing studies on retro consumption and in semiotic studies on cultural and political futures, pasts and anachronic presents alike.

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THE PAST, THE FUTURE AND THE URGENT of climate change

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Abstract: Do we focus on a better future or a more stable past when discussing environmental problems? What do metaphors say about the urgency of climate action? What do those temporal references suggest for human-nature relations? To answer those questions, this article refers to David Attenborough's speeches at COP 24 and COP 26. It analyses the metaphors and temporal references of messages on climate action. Through this interpretive analysis of the two speeches, the following metaphor themes were identified: *'The People'*, *'Responsibility'*, *'The Number'*, and *'Tale'*. The comparison of both speeches identified a shift from prevailing future-oriented messages to those focusing on the past or future. Moreover, the temporality behind each theme of metaphors provided a more comprehensive understanding of the climate situation. It also illustrated how the speaker communicated the urgency of climate actions.

Keywords: metaphors, temporal frames, climate change, COP, David Attenborough

Minevik, tulevik ning pakiline kliimamuutus

Abstrakt: Kas me keskendume keskkonnaprobleemide käsitlemisel paremale tulevikule või stabiilsele minevikule? Kas keskkonnakaitsjate sõnumid on rohkem tulevikule või minevikule orienteeritud? Mida ütlevad need ajalised viited inimese ja looduse suhete kohta? Nendele küsimustele vastamiseks uuritakse käesolevas artiklis David Attenborough kõnesid COP 24 ja COP 26 kohtumistel, analüüsides edastatud sõnumite ajalisi viiteid ja nendes kasutatud metafoore. Metafoore uuritakse nii ajalise perspektiivist kui ka inimeste, vastutuse, arvu ja loo kategooriates. Kahe kõne võrdluses ilmnes nihe valdavalt tulevikule orienteeritud sõnumitelt minevikule või tulevikule keskenduvatele. Samuti pakub metafoorsete teemade ajalise analüüsimine võimaluse kliimaolukorra terviklikumaks mõistmiseks ning illustreerib ka seda, kuidas kõneleja kommunikeerib sellega seotud tegevuse pakilisust.

Märksõnad: metafoorid, ajalised raamid, kliimamuutus, COP, David Attenborough

Metaphors are inseparable parts of our communication, and they help us understand abstract concepts (Keulartz 2007; Thibodeau et al. 2017). When used in communication, the explanatory power of metaphors can also attribute a certain degree of persuasiveness to transmitted messages, as indicated by Paul H. Thibodeau et al. (2017). More specifically, metaphors can transfer speakers' disposition towards a certain phenomenon, wanting the receiver to create an identical approach (ibid). Metaphors can also direct our actions concerning different phenomena. They do so

by creating "normative dualism", which proposes the direction of our action, "such as health/disease or nature/artifice" (Keulartz 2007:28).

Metaphorical expressions have been intensively used to communicate science, as noted by Brendon Larson (2011), and they can be used as descriptive tools when discussing environmental sustainability. Further, Larson (2011) has gone beyond the so-called "epistemic dimension of environmental metaphors", calling for a revolution in this field (ibid, 11-12). That revolution was mainly concerned with integrating society in this endeavour. Larson put it as such:

Environmental metaphors derive from everyday sources, so they reveal, to some extent, the worldview of the society that coins them. It is not so much that we choose a metaphor; rather, we are chosen by those within our cultural context. Thus, there is a tendency for environmental metaphors to engender circular feedback between our view of ourselves and our view of nature (Larson 2011:18).

Drawing from Larson (2011), it can be considered that socio-cultural context plays a crucial role in the construction of environmental metaphors. They also help to understand the essence of human-nature relations.

Therese Asplund (2011) identified three main groups of metaphors when analysing climate change communication in Swedish farm magazines. One group was the greenhouse metaphors, which discussed climate change from a scientific lens while not elaborating thoroughly on the term (ibid, 3-4). Asplund (2011: 4) also found some game-related phrases, such as "key players" or "winner", which, according to the author, mainly related to the positive outcomes of climate change for farmers ("such as climate-labelled milk"). Swedish farm magazines also attributed some war-related features to climate change, such as "threat" or "surrendering" (ibid, 4-5). Moreover, a study of UK newspapers found that metaphors related to religion mostly portrayed environmentalism and activists in a negative light (Woods et al. 2012).

The studies discussed above illustrate what metaphors say about the different attitudes towards climate-related issues. They demonstrate that various metaphors have different implications about the urgency of the matter.

Similar to metaphors, temporal frames can also determine the effectiveness of environmental messages. Matthew Baldwin and Joris Lammers (2016) conducted several studies to support the hypothesis that conservatives are more attracted by past-oriented environmental messages than liberals. As the studies illustrated, in some cases, "conservatives liked past-focused environmental appeals more than liberals did (study 1) and allocated more money than liberals to past-focused environmental charities (study 6)" (Baldwin, Lammers 2016: 14956).

Although this current work does not concern the liberal/conservative divide in environmental protection, it is supposed that the analysis of the temporal frames can assist in interpreting the possible reception of texts among different groups of people, especially sceptics. Positive past-orientated messages could give hope for recovery (restoring the past). Positive future-oriented messages should not necessarily imply the possibility of 'full recovery' but a better tomorrow. While overly negative messages would take the hope out of recovery and make future action seem

redundant. Similar implications were suggested by Evi Zemanek (2022: 17) when analyzing David Attenborough's documentaries. The author illustrated:

Popular documentaries end up relying on a balanced rhetoric: If they did not communicate that we, animals and humans alike, live in fragile ecosystems and are thus vulnerable, the audience would not feel the need for action. But if the vulnerability is illustrated by images of irreversible destruction, it seems pointless from the outset to take action (Zemanek 2022: 17).

It is supposed that the analysis of temporal frames will provide more information about climate actions. They will also help understand the feasibility of recovery, as it is communicated in environmental messages.

Considering the functions and implications of metaphors discussed above and the role of temporal frames in information exchange, this study argues that they can help understand how the urgency of the climate situation has been communicated. They will also illustrate how human-nature relations are portrayed. To that end, this analysis examines the implications of metaphors from a temporal perspective. Concerning temporal frames, the analysis considers whether the messages are past-oriented and future-oriented.

This study analyzes two speeches by Attenborough (already transcribed)¹ from COP (The Conference of Parties) 24 and 26. The United Nations Climate Conference, the Conference of Parties, meets annually to describe and measure member states' efforts towards the ultimate goal of the convention.² For the first time, the COP met in Berlin in 1995³. The conference is a place where all countries, no matter how developed, are equally important in expressing opinions because decisions are based on consensus (Harvey 2019).

The rationale behind the choice of these two speeches has to do with a "tendency for environmental metaphors to engender a circular feedback between our view of ourselves and our view of nature" (Larson 2011: 18). It is believed that the texts on behalf of people, not politicians, would better illustrate the mentioned tendency.

Those speeches, one way or another, represent the public in climate discussions. The speech from COP 24, 2018, was the "People Seat Address" when the "People's Seat" was introduced.⁴ That initiative connected people to world leaders

¹Attenborough, David. 2018. The People's seat. In UNFCCC [Speech]. COP 24: 2018, Katowice, Poland. https://unfccc.int/documents/185211_06012023. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

Attenborough, David. 2021. David Attenborough COP26 Climate Summit Glasgow Speech Transcript. In Rev [Speech]. COP 26:2021, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/david-attenborough-cop26-climate-summit-glasgow-speech-transcript>. Retrieved 07.01.2023.

The references are made according to the lines of each transcribed text

²United Nations. Climate Change (n.d.). Bodies. Conference of the Parties (COP). <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

³United Nations. Climate Change (n.d.). History of the Convention. <https://unfccc.int/process/the-convention/history-of-the-convention#Climate-Change-in-context>. Retrieved, 31.08.2023.

⁴United Nations 2018b. Climate Change. Sir David Attenborough Launches UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People. Retrieved from: <https://unfccc.int/news/sir-david->

through the means of social media. The address contained a video with messages from different people who joined the social media initiative.⁵ The work also analyses Attenborough's speech from COP 26, where he was chosen to speak as the "People's advocate".⁶

This study also considered Attenborough's role and reputation in the endeavour. The 'Attenborough Effect' is a phrase related to the impact of his documentary *Blue Planet* on the increased interest in the matters of plastic pollution (Males, Van Aelst 2020).

As mentioned above, the temporal frames of messages were coded drawing from Baldwin and Lammers' (2016) approach, namely as past-oriented or future-oriented. The identified metaphors were grouped into themes following conventional analysis, meaning the themes are derived from the analysis. They were not decided upon in advance. The study also employed an interpretive approach to describe the possible implications of metaphors in relation to human-nature relations and the urgency of the climate situation. Thus, the results of the study are not explanatory, suggesting certain causal associations, but rather interpretive, providing subjects for further analysis.

The analysis: COP 24⁷

COP 24 was in Poland in 2018⁸. It was accompanied by protests against U.S. climate policy at the time (Chung 2018). One of the highlights of the event was David Attenborough's speech, officially known as the "People's Seat Address" to world leaders⁹. The analysis of the speech is below.

attenborough-launches-un-campaign-to-promote-climate-action-by-the-people. Retrieved, 31.08.2023.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶GOV.UK 2021. Sir David Attenborough named COP26 People's Advocate ahead of crucial UN climate change summit. Press Release <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sir-david-attenborough-named-cop26-peoples-advocate-ahead-of-crucial-un-climate-change-summit>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

⁷ The material of analysis: Attenborough, David. 2018. The People's seat. In UNFCCC [Speech]. COP 24: 2018, Katowice, Poland. Retrieved from: https://unfccc.int/documents/185211_06012023. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

⁸United Nations. Climate Change 2018a. COP 24. <https://unfccc.int/event/cop-24>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

⁹ United Nations. Climate Change 2018b. Sir David Attenborough Launches UN Campaign to Promote Climate Action by the People. <https://unfccc.int/news/sir-david-attenborough-launches-un-campaign-to-promote-climate-action-by-the-people>. Retrieved 31.08.2023.

Temporality

Attenborough's speech at COP 24 contained both future-oriented and present-oriented messages. One was as follows: "If we don't take action the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon" (Line 10-11). This was a call to act 'today' for a better tomorrow.

Attenborough's direct message to world leaders also had the same temporal implications about actions. He stated, "The continuation of our civilizations and the natural world upon which we depend is in your hands" (Line 36). Therefore, the speech was generally directed towards the future, implying that urgent actions mean a better tomorrow.

Metaphors

Attenborough's speech from 2018 was not rich in metaphors. It indicated that the existing environmental situation was the worst ever. Therefore, there was a need to stand up against that disaster. Although he did not use metaphors to compare war and climate change, his speech contained descriptions of human reactions to wars. One example is the following: "[people]...willing to make sacrifices in their daily lives" (Line 29). This quote resonates with Asplund's (2011) war metaphors that describe climate change as a threat to be fought against. Indeed, sacrifices are also made during other types of disasters (natural disasters), but the rhetoric of fighting brought the message closer to representing war-like situations.

Overall, metaphors used in the speech at COP 24 can be categorized along the following themes: *'The People'* and *'Responsibility'*.

The People

Attenborough's speech was about considering 'the People'. Several messages implied the need for more participatory and democratic environmental policies. The expressions, such as "The People's Seat" (Line 16), "the world's people" (Line 18), and "the Voice of the People" (Line 20) are metaphorical at first glance, but when put into the context of Attenborough's speech, they take on literal meanings. The temporal focus of this group of metaphors is twofold. The phrases indicating that: "The People have spoken" (Line 34) or "[people]...willing to make sacrifices in their daily lives" (Line 29) implied that the people had made their decision. More importantly, they made it before the world leaders. The fact that people made that decision earlier gave them a certain advantage in that particular context. It appears that the people have fulfilled their share of the responsibility to the given extent. Thus, the temporality of this message is not explicitly about the future or past but about who follows whom in climate-related actions.

Moreover, “People’s Seat” (Line 16) is “giving everyone the opportunity to join us [participants at the COP 24] here today” (Line 17). Thus, this group of metaphors is also about the here and now, indicating the immediacy of the matter.

Responsibility

The speech mentioned: “The continuation of our civilisations and the natural world upon which we depend, is in your hands” (Line 36). The fate of human civilizations cannot be literally in politicians’ hands. This very metaphor can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the message directly indicated the politician’s share of responsibility for the planet’s future. On the other hand, Attenborough thereby accepted their significant role in climate action. However, certainly, the responsibility belongs to more than just the world leaders. At the same time, with the expression “in your hands” (Line 36), the speech put the responsibility of possible delays (in climate action) on the leaders.

Thus, in this group of metaphors, time and temporality were expressed through delays. That, in turn, indicated the vector of responsibility in climate actions.

To sum up, Attenborough’s speech at COP 24 was oriented towards the future. It can be assumed that human-nature relations were divided into two categories: ‘People’-nature relations on one side and world leaders-nature relations on the other. Although leaders arguably have more power in heading climate actions, the speech gave more authority to the ‘People’ because they had made their decisions on climate before the leaders.

Similarly, in the case of metaphors, time and temporality did not only have a strict binary division between the past and the future. They were also interpreted implicitly in terms of the temporal precedence or delays. Those implications helped to interpret how responsibility and the urgency of the issue were approached throughout the speech.

The analysis: COP 26¹⁰

COP 26 took place in Glasgow in 2021. It is known for reaching some agreement on

¹⁰The material of analysis. Attenborough, David. 2021. David Attenborough COP26 Climate Summit Glasgow Speech Transcript. In Rev [Speech]. COP 26:2021, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/david-attenborough-cop26-climate-summit-glasgow-speech-transcript>. Retrieved 07.01.2023

the approach and actions to combat climate change.¹¹ The conference was also marked by Attenborough's speech, which Forbes magazine called "powerful" (Vetter 2021). An article in the Global Citizen referred to it as a "desperate plea to leaders" (Lock 2021).

Temporality

Compared to the speech at COP 24, the temporal frames of Attenborough's messages in Glasgow were more diverse. Future-oriented texts were no longer the core of his speech. Moreover, he referred to the past, implying that the past climate situation was more stable than the existing one (creating past-oriented frames). That idea was implied from the following message: "Everything we've achieved in the last 10,000 years was enabled by the stability during this time" (Line 15-16, 00:48).

Future-oriented messages existed in the speech, but there was an implicit call for caution to remain realistic. The speech pushed not focusing on "some imagined future generation, but young people alive today [...]" (Line 32-34, 03:16). Thus, similar to COP 24, this speech stressed the importance of acting urgently.

Overall, the time frames of delivered messages were mainly placed between the past and the present, which was also manifested through words like "restoring", "recapturing", and "bring[ing] back the balance" (Line 44-46, 04:37). Attenborough also indicated about a possible new industrial revolution, which could imply a reinterpretation of the historical phenomenon in the present.

The general message of the speech was about urgent climate action, similar to the address at COP 24. At the same time, compared to COP 24, Attenborough refers to the past as 'better times'. That was especially obvious in the narratives about regaining or restoring previous stability. The speech was about 'bringing the past back to the future'.

Despite Attenborough's past focused speech, other speakers¹², who joined his address through a video, delivered future-oriented messages, mainly sharing concerns about the feasibility of the future given the current climate situation. They did not depict the future as a better place. Neither was it a bad place. The future did not exist for the speakers and had a low chance of happening.

Despite the rather pessimistic messages that the video (accompanying Attenborough's speech) showed, Attenborough's references to restoring previous stability implied the possibility of getting back to 'better times for climate'.

¹¹ United Nations. Climate Change 2021. Glasgow Climate Change Conference – October-November 2021. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/conference/glasgow-climate-change-conference-october-november-2021>. Retrieved 07.01.2023.

¹² United Nations 2021. David Attenborough, People's Advocate for #COP26, Address to World Leaders | Climate Action. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7EpiXViSIQ>. Retrieved 06.09.23

Metaphors

Unlike COP 24, Attenborough's speech at COP 26 was full of metaphors about human-nature relations. Below, they are grouped under the following themes: 'The Number' and 'Tale metaphors'.

The Number

This speech is built around a so-called 'number' representing carbon emissions. As put by the environmentalist, "the emergency climate comes down to a single number, the concentration of carbon in our atmosphere" (Line 3-5, 00:01). The goal of suggested actions was 'the decreased number', decreasing the concentration of carbon. The speech called to "stop the number rising and put it in reverse" (Line 37, 03:16).

The reference to the 'number' could be related to the need to provide more factual information. From the perspective of a temporal focus, the given group of metaphors communicated the past, present, and future. The number indicated a situation that was the result of past actions. Moreover, a better tomorrow was symbolized by a reduced 'number'.

Tale metaphors

In this speech, Attenborough described the history of human civilization as a "tale of the smartest species [...]" (Line 30, 03:16). This kind of metaphorical description could suggest the possibility of *the end*, which was sometimes explicitly stated in the speech, as in the following phrase: "Is this how our story is due to end?" (Line 30, 03:16). Moreover, it was also indicated that the story could be "rewritten" by "turning tragedy into a triumph" (Line 35-36, 03:16).

The speaker compared people's lives to a literary work and that the people could change the genre of that work. The possibility of that change was there in the speech, but whether there was an opportunity to stop *the end* remained an open question. The tale metaphors made that point ambiguous.

When it comes to rewriting the narrative, Attenborough called for unity between humans and nature. That point was reiterated metaphorically, saying that "Nature is a key ally" (Line 44, 04:37). Thus, our tale is also the tale of nature. Moreover, the need for alliance suggested the creation of links with nature. That call is close to the concept of semiotic fitting in communities, put forth Kalevi Kull (2019). It can be assumed that Attenborough implied better ties with nature. That appears to be the essence of semiotic fitting, as in "functional or communicational match with [...] surrounding" (ibid, 9). Supposedly, the implication was that better semiotic fitting would prevent tragedy.

Therefore, human history was portrayed as a process with a starting point and a finale, which, at a glance, supposes a linear development. However, humans' time was also mixed with the time of nature, and at this point, linearity fades away.

Similar to the speech at COP 24, Attenborough again implicitly referred to the responsibility for possible delays in climate action. In COP 26, however, this was more in the form of pressure on leaders. Attenborough indicated, "the world is looking to you [...]" (Line 67, 06:09). The metaphorical expression suggested that the public monitoring of the process is inevitable.

In summary, the temporal focus of this speech was both past-oriented and future-oriented. It consequently had the potential to attract a broader and more diverse audience, as there were positive and negative messages delivered in the speech. The negative one was that climate change made the end of human history feasible or rather obvious. The good one was that it is possible to challenge climate change.

The temporality of metaphorical expressions delivered two messages. Firstly, the postponement of climate action was not feasible, indicating the urgency of the issue. Secondly, the call for an alliance with nature also implied that such a union could add to the efficiency and effectiveness of climate action.

Juxtaposing two speeches

The analysis of the two speeches suggested several similarities and differences in how the climate situation was communicated. It can be assumed that the metaphors of COP 24 were used to suffice their normative function, indicating the need for action (see more about the normative function in [Keulartz 2007]). They possessed a certain level of persuasiveness directed to the audience.

The metaphors from COP 26 were more descriptive (ibid), trying to make the situation more apparent and, therefore, encourage specific actions (see more about the persuasive influence of metaphor in Thibodeau et al. 2017).

Since persuasiveness was concerned, the temporal frames could have played a significant role, especially for those sceptical about climate change. Baldwin and Lammers (2016: 14954) noted that "conservatives can become more pro-environmental when being so aligns with morals and values that are consistent with their world view". Thus, it can be assumed that the speech at COP 26 should have been more persuasive for them. At the same time, regardless of the ideology, the second speech communicated the possibility of recovering things and the feasibility of the future if acting urgently. Thus, the speech was more enabling and empowering

and could have reached many layers of society (although it was directed at world leaders). Both speeches underlined the urgency of the matter, demanding action.

Conclusion

This paper illustrated the implications of metaphors and temporal frames in the environmental messages of David Attenborough at two COPs. Those speeches were selected because they represented the people in those discussions. The work identified metaphors and grouped them into broader themes. Along with that, the study analyzed the prevailing temporal focus of speeches, and then the possible implications of those findings were interpreted.

Both speeches by Attenborough underlined the urgency of the matter and implied who is responsible for the crisis. The speech at COP 26 appeared to be more comprehensive since it covered different temporal frames and described the situation through factual information and familiar themes. The relevance of the action became more evident through the help of tale metaphors, which resembled an advocacy campaign to preserve the human species in partnership with nature.

The interpretive approach of this study allowed us to reveal some meanings of texts, which put forward different themes for further analysis. Namely, this study interpreted the implications of metaphors related to climate change but did not delve deeper into their actual impact on the public and the politics of climate change. Analyzing possible quantitative and qualitative effects of speeches at the COP or other environmental events could help better shape the advocacy of the case.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTI RANDVIIR on Semiotics and the Future

Interviewed by
Eleni Alexandri

Anti Randviir is a senior researcher in semiotics, lecturer and programme director of doctoral studies at the University of Tartu, and member of both the Estonian Semiotics Society and the Finnish-Ugric Semiotics Society. Since 1993, when he began his BA studies in the Department of Semiotics at Tartu University, he has been actively engaged in research and contributing to the development of the field, with a focus on spatial semiotics and sociosemiotics.

I was thrilled to have the chance to speak with Anti about what attracted him to the field of semiotics, what encouraged and motivated him over the years, and what inspired his research. In addition, I wanted to know what he anticipates not only for our lives, but most importantly for our field of study in light of the anticipated yet extraordinary explosion of technological advancements, the hype surrounding artificial intelligence, and the shift in academic interest towards the future. I was captivated and inspired by our conversation, the stories of the early years of the Department of Semiotics, the insightful remarks regarding the definition of our domain, and the enthralling perspectives on artificial intelligence. Therefore, I would like to close this short introduction by thanking Anti once more for this incredible discussion.

Interview

Eleni Alexandri: Setting a marker as a starting point of your career in 1993, this year, you successfully reached a 30-year course in the field of Semiotics. Do you recall what drove you to this field and what your hopes and aspirations were at this early stage?

Anti Randviir: Like many other people I was also young some time ago, and after finishing high school, I had to make a choice of 'what to make of my future'. I sort of was driven since my kindergarten years at home, so to speak, since both my parents

were philologists and therefore we were surrounded by humanities literature at home. In a sense I was by default inclined towards humanities, or cultural affairs, so to speak. At that time in Tartu there was the possibility to study cultural anthropology, sociology, or psychology, which all seemed to be a little bit old-fashioned, a little bit too technical, and they could not answer my youthful questions about the meaning of life. Perhaps I should be ashamed to admit that my first sort of semiotic literature – which can be indeed regarded as semiotic literature – was *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts* by Rudolph Steiner¹, who is now pretty much thrown out of the academic circles.

So, when I graduated high school, it was the very first year when there was offered a combined admission to psychology, philosophies, semiotics, social work and something else. It was the year that the Department of Semiotics had opened its first curriculum for the study of semiotics; so it was kind of an experimental program, and the first time that other specializations were introduced in this five-item-study package. Those who got admitted had to pass all five specializations during the first year, and then it would be decided what will happen next. Quite soon it became apparent that psychology was indeed too technical for me, inclining towards experimental psychology, psycho-physical stuff, biopsychology, and so on. On the other hand, philosophy was pretty much about rehearsal of what one could actually read from books. Thus, semiotics remained on the sieve, whilst also preserving some intriguing enigma. That was also partially due to the fact that we had no semiotic literature, only information about the domain from our handful of teachers. So it was pretty much a mentor-based study of semiotics. The Department of Semiotics back then was located on seven square metres I think, and its library contained four to nine books on semiotics, which I went through in a couple of months.

Therefore, it was partially my choice, but also the choice of the head of the Department, Igor Chernov, that I was chosen to be amongst those five students who were eventually thrown into the pool of semiotics, instead of psychology or philosophy. From that time on I sort of stuck to that topic, and I smoothly transitioned from my bachelor onto master and then doctoral studies. Thus, I may modestly say that I am the first officially educated semiotician in the known universe who has passed semiotics from the base courses to the degree in the university studies; although it was pretty much a coincidental course of events, as it usually is.

EA: Did you consider at any point choosing a different career path? Perhaps moving away from humanities and going towards other fields of study and knowledge?

AR: For one year, in parallel to semiotics, I studied environmental protection at Maaülikool², but it was too much math and physics for me.

¹ Steiner, Rudolph 1973. *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts: Anthroposophy as a Path of Knowledge – The Michael Mystery*. London: Rudolph Steiner Press.

² The Estonian University of Life Sciences in Tartu. Homepage: <https://www.emu.ee/en/>

EA: What would you say was the driving force that kept your interest and commitment to semiotics and your research intact throughout the years?

AR: I think it is just the nature of life, which is always changing. If you have already touched the core of semiotics, it is very difficult to get out of it, because when you have realized the meaningful lessons of being human, then it is difficult to deny this. It is an essence which is constantly changing and evolving, and it required continuous learning, reviewing, and revisiting. In this sense, being a semiotician is a never-ending journey, and this realization shields your fate.

EA: Therefore, the core of semiotics is the source of inspiration and energy that has sustained your research; but have you observed any changes in your interests in the field of semiotics throughout the years? Were you devoted from the outset to a very specialized area, or did you have a plan to start from a certain point, with the eventual objective of focusing on metatheory and general semiotics when you would have acquired the skill and knowledge to do so?

AR: Originally I started from the semiotics of city, and then, as a natural continuation, I moved to the study of semiotics of space. But in as much as my teacher, Igor Chernov, was a very modern, western-oriented person, he picked up the notion of social semiotics – which he had not quite yet made sense of himself. Consequently, I was constantly pushed towards this area of social semiotics. By striving to cope with it and make sense of it, I developed an inclination towards this more theoretical area, which, again, happened quite organically, and it also enabled me to conceptualize aspects of the semiotics of city and the semiotics of space in a more concrete way. Finally, this theoretical sense-making of social semiotics, led naturally to issues concerning the very essence of theoretical semiotics or semiotics in general. And in this sense, those theoretical issues led me to metatheoretical issues, at which I am stuck at the moment.

EA: Since you mentioned Igor Chernov, how was it working with him? And how was he as a mentor?

AR: He was a very personal person, and he is very still very lively. He was always very dedicated, and I think one of the most important things was that he considered students as equal colleagues. He led his students very quickly to normal, serious scholarly business, and motivated them to take up quickly on practicing in writing, going to international conferences, organizing conferences, and so on. I remember we were second year students when we went to the Imatra International Semiotic conference and we very immodestly presented our pretty modest ideas. These presentations were attended by eminent semioticians of whom we had only heard or read from books, like Roland Posner or Alexandros and Karin Lagopoulos, or Thomas

Sebeok, or Jean Umiker-Sebeok, or, Julia Kristeva, or Vilmos Voigt, or Jeff Bernard or even scholars from the Northern spheres like Eero Tarasti, Göran Sonesson and so on. So we were quite quickly immersed in the international semiotic interaction and communication.

Personally, I had to get in touch with the leading semioticians of the 90s, because of my position in the Department of Semiotics, and due to the fact that professor Chernov was not a writing person, concerning also international communication and emails. So, I became a mediator and I had to be in contact with those pretty legendary names; which was embarrassing at first, but became normal very soon.

EA: In relation to what we said regarding the motivating factors in academic life... students, professors, and artists often face writer's block or lack of inspiration. Others consistently undervalue their efforts, which is also a factor that inhibits their development. Have you ever had a similar experience? What obstacles did you face in your career, and how did you overcome them?

AR: Of course, as it has been mentioned several times, semioticians belong to the writing type of scholars, which is a two edged blade. On the one hand, you can express more exactly your thoughts and ideas in writing form, and it should be a good way to communicate and interact with the international community; but it's getting more and more difficult, because people are writing too much. Some time ago it was very common to exchange ideas in book form; for instance, some scholar would write a book on a certain topic, and then the international community would spend a year or two before publishing a kind of discussion book on the basis of the initial monograph. This is impossible today due to the rapidity of publishing. There are so many publications that it is unfeasible to go through everything, while, unfortunately, it becomes even harder to discover decent publications and actually novel ideas.

Somehow, it seems that a personal communication should take the role of keeping up your motivation of continuing your academic research. In this connection I must stress the importance of the aforementioned Imatra gatherings and the merits professor Tarasti has for the rebirth and development of Tartu semiotics. But today this personal communication is also a little bit challenging to achieve, because of our growing travel difficulties, concerning not only COVID, but other circumstances as well.

So, I don't know how to keep up your motivation. You just have to. I think, one way of doing so is by forming smaller research groups. Ideally, these groups would be international, and then you can work in the line of your interest and receive decent feedback that will positively enable you to filter the information that is actually and heuristically relevant in the field of your specific scholarly undertakings. Otherwise, it is very easy nowadays to get lost.

EA: Do you think that our lack of collaboration in recent years has been caused by this overabundance of information and publications? Could it possibly be due to the increasingly antagonistic environment within academia? Do you believe people still desire to work together?

AR: I have met very eminent semioticians who have been disappointed in recent years, both in international cooperation, because they think that this amateurish impact is too great on semiotics, and because they simultaneously feel that they don't get enough support from their own academic institutions. It seems to me that those semioticians who have been lucky to have their own groups of students, they have somehow survived better than many people who have authored very substantial semiotic publications and who have been influential for semiotics in past years. The latter have somehow faded away into the background due to the lack of professional contacts and lack of support from their institutions. And this lack is in a way connected with the proliferation of semiotics in terms of international conferences where it is possible to meet less semioticians than representatives of other specialities nowadays.

EA: Since we are talking about collaborations, in 2009, you and Paul Cobley co-authored the introduction chapter "What is Sociosemiotics"³ which, according to the first lines, is a tricky issue; perhaps it would be even more difficult to describe in a few sentences, but how would you define semiotics at large? Or at least offer a streamlined explanation of what the field comprises.

AR: As we were discussing the other day, there have been many definitions of semiotics; in fact, semiotics seems to be, in this sense, a little bit different from other disciplines. Pretty much everyone knows what sociology is, or what mathematics is; even psychology is pretty much certain. But this trouble of defining semiotics seems to be an ongoing business, and indeed there have been many different definitions of semiotics. It is and probably will be an ongoing business, because the very boundary of meaningfulness and semiosis is and will be floating, possibly expanding. Expanding in two senses – on the one hand our knowledge of the universe is expanding, we discover meaningfulness in novel and possibly more minute spheres and phenomena, and on the other hand we shift the boundary of the human semiosphere through inventions by ourselves. Having said that, I don't know if we can call these 'definitions' of semiotics, but rather demarcations of the domain and the object field.

There are meaningful units that are the object domain of semiotics, and so, semiotics can be seen as the study of signs. On the other hand, it can be seen as the study of semiosis, or meaning-making, which means that semiotics can be associated

³ Cobley, Paul; Ranviir, Anti 2009. What is sociosemiotics? *Semiotica* 173(1): 1-39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/SEMI.2009.001>.

not with some certain units, but rather with some processes. And inasmuch as semiotics is the study of semiosis, as it comes from Peirce already, I think.

This question was also my first question in my own interview with Thomas Sebeok⁴. One of his versions was that semiotics is the study of relationships between the mind and reality. This could have been a possibility to go around the issue. However, he eventually discovered that he has to answer the question of 'what is the mind?' which was, and still is, a very tough question. Furthermore, it came to my surprise that he never questioned the issue of 'what is reality?'

Nevertheless, I think we can agree that semiotics can be regarded as the science studying semiosis; and this is a bit better than mediating processes in general, because there can be other mediating processes as well that are not engaging any meaningful aspects whatsoever.

However, besides questioning what semiotics is, or which is its object domain, another highly important question is what is the role of semiotics? Semiotics, in a way parallel to its object domain, is also a mediating paradigm or mode of theorizing, or however you choose to call it. It is mediating between the sciences and humanities, which nowadays is becoming more and more important, not only in connection with the emergence of cognitive science, but also in connection with novel areas of the human activity, concerning primarily, the most popular, artificial intelligence. On the other hand, semiotics is a mediating mode of theorizing that has a crucial role in transdisciplinary developments.

Ultimately, the question of what is semiotics should be answered from these two viewpoints, in my opinion. The first part should concern the issue of what is the domain of semiotics, in the sense of how you define its objects of study; and the second part should be the role of semiotics. I want to note here that when I refer to the objects of study, it is very important to dismiss the traditional idea of different disciplines as if they have their own specific objects, as sociology has the society, the social groups, or the individual, or cultural anthropology has the artifacts, and so on. The different objects, as such as units, do not belong to any specific discipline. They need to be regarded as objects containing an inherent transdisciplinarity. And in terms of defining the object of study of semiotics, I think it is useful to exactly define it through processes, not units; and semiosis is one of those mediating processes that can be taken as the key.

EA: Could this approach lead back to what Igor Chernov had said about semiotics being more of a metascience since it does not have an object of study⁵? Perhaps he meant that there are no specific units, but rather processes that we understand and

⁴ Randviir, Anti 2001. Intervjuu Tartus Thomas A. Sebeokiga. "Mis on Semiootika, tõepoolest?" (An interview with Thomas A. Sebeok in Tartu. "What is Semiotics, Really?"). *Acta Semiotica Estica* 1: 11–32.

⁵ Chernov, Igor 1988. Historical survey of Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. In: Broms, Henri and Rebecca Kaufmann (eds.), *Semiotics of Culture: Proceedings of the 25th Symposium of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics*, Imatra, Finland, 27th–29th July, 1987. Helsinki: Arator Inc., 7–16.

analyze, and this is a mental activity of understanding and realizing the interconnections and how eventually things make sense.

AR: I think that this is the point of any scholarly activity that has, as a target, culture, society, the individual, or others, since they are all meaningful things. So, I do not understand Chernov's intention here, and I think that metatheoretical activity should be a part of the ongoing identity process of any science in terms of its internal law of communication. But I think semiotics as an object cannot be listed in a kind of finite manner, because semiosis is unlimited. Not only due to the nature of human thinking, and the endless semiotic activity in the terms of Peirce's unlimited semiosis⁶, but also because we just cannot pin point the ending that marks where semiotic processes are finished with.

EA: Would you say that it is fair or even safe to come up with a definition that could be applied universally to the study of semiotics, or is this a bit unthoughtful, given that different schools of thought or different parts of the world may have a different approach to semiotics? Furthermore, we have many branches, and sub-branches, so perhaps a holistic definition cannot encompass everything.

AR: I think it is very unfortunate that we start to think about different sub-branches of semiotics. Indeed there are different target areas of semiotic study already formed, but they should not be regarded as special sub-semiotic disciplines; this leads to disciplinary schizophrenia, which I think has already happened. Different sub-semiotic disciplines have already been competing for being the most genuine semiotics for a long time now, and there have been questions asked, for instance, by cultural semioticians regarding the right of life of zoosemiotics or vice versa, and so on.

Somehow the process has already developed so far, unfortunately, that it is difficult to see how to bring semioticians back together under one umbrella, although it has been tried for decades.

One of the most effort-making people towards that direction was the late Roland Posner, President of IASS, who dedicated much of his life to the institutional integration of semiotics, and to the institutionalization of semiotics in the educational system in general. However, this institutionalization of semiotics, stemming from the most positive intentions, has been sadly and largely unsuccessful. Maybe it could be more effective if we could have semiotics formally institutionalized within academic circumstances, like universities. Right now, the very many sub-semiotic disciplines are not even connected with any formal institution, which means that they are also not responsible for their exclamations about the identity of semiotics amongst other disciplines. But the autocommunicative identity of semiotics is important also for communicating semiotics to other disciplines that, in fact, are using it or its selected vocabulary or selected methods in inter- or transdisciplinary research.

⁶ Charles Sanders Peirce 1960. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Volume II, paragraph 303, 1903. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 169.

EA: Now, since we have discussed, or attempted to approach a more objective and somewhat inclusive definition of semiotics, how about subjectively? Are there differences? What does semiotics mean to you? As in your very own definition, either in the manner you would explain it to somebody, in a creative form and based on your personal experience, or in the way you record it within yourself.

AR: I think semiotics is simply the study of meaningful units and meaningful processes; point, end, dot. But the problem is that this object domain of semiotics is in continual continuous development. Whilst it was some time ago a normal thing to agree that the domain of semiotics has to do with the limits of the semiotic reality – however you decide to call it... semiotic reality, or social reality, cultural space, or semiosphere, *lebenswelt*, and so on – the issue now is becoming more and more difficult. This trouble comes from the fact that it is tough to delimit human semiotic reality, nowadays, as we are going through certain processes.

Approximately a century ago, people started, more seriously, to talk about the semiotic essence of humans and their self-created realities, and reached the notions of the semiotic self and semiotic reality. Now we are in a very similar situation, yet way more difficult, since we have hardly any means to draw the boundary between the human, in the psychological and biological sense; now we also have to do that in a way more complicated technical sense. This was not on the table one hundred years ago, at least not at level. The human was discovered, multiplied and expanded from the inside; but now the human is expanding also in the technical areas. So we are facing questions that, I think, we are far from being able to answer. Questions concerning the expansion and multiplication of the human – we are in no capacity to even formulate those questions yet.

EA: As we were talking, I was thinking that semiotics and psychology are somehow similar in that they both cannot precisely standardize their object of study. Perhaps this is owing to the vast range of individual experiences and inner worlds, in the case of psychology, and given that the domain deals with complex and subjective phenomena. In a same vein, we are confronted with a similar situation since there are as many interpretations as there are people in the world. Would you say that there is such a connection between these two fields, and it is also linked with the problem of definition?

AR: I think psychologists can answer you quite precisely where the human psyche can be found from. It is, nevertheless, confined within the human body; whether from a more cultural-psychological approach, or tackling the issue based on biochemical processes that are taking place in the brain or even in other parts of the body. Be that as it may, psychology has more concrete, or at least, an easier possibility to answer what its object domain is.

For semiotics defining the human mind as its object of study, that is, as a meaningful thing of study, raises a problem, because the mind is floating out of itself. The mind is expanding in the environment, and it becomes even more complicated than when Charles Cooley defined the mind as a social⁷, meaningful entity. In this sense, when we have those difficulties brought along with AI, it is hard to say where AI starts, where it ends or stops, and where is the ‘meaningful’ ending.

EA: Moving away from the issue of definitions, I would like to ask what do you consider the proudest moment in your career or your most significant contribution to the field of semiotics?

AR: I think in terms of semiotics itself, it was good that Paul Cobley and me reached, or tried to bring, some clarity into the international general semiotic paradigm by attempting to define, or redefine, social semiotics⁸. Social semiotics had been used in a casually mixed manner alongside with sociosemiotics for some decades. There is a very significant difference between the two both paradigmatically and ideologically. In a pretty awkward manner, sociosemiotics which we considered as having to do with semiotics proper, allowed us to add a nuance to bring also cultural semiotics closer to the so-called Western semiotics (I think sociosemiotics was in fact first used by Juri Lotman in Russian, although sporadically). Thus, the whole volume of the journal was entitled as ‘Sociosemiotica’. Through this effort, we called for contemporary semiotics to return to its sources, which were in fact a unified scholarly theorizing paradigm that has been broken up nowadays. I think that was a good thing to do. I don’t know how successful we were, nevertheless, we at least tried to recall some basic principles of semiotic studies that had been defined by semioticians from the birth time of modern semiotics.

Finally, when it comes to practical terms, I feel pretty proud of having been lucky to contribute to the creation and development of the Department of Semiotics and its curricula, here in Tartu, and I am lucky that it is still alive!

EA: Again, picking up from our discussion so far, you mentioned AI; your most recent publication, “Space” (2022)⁹, concludes by emphasizing the significance of Lotman’s thoughts on space and its applicability to future study, particularly as we approach an even more digitalized era and with the rise of artificial intelligence. Months after your publication, we observed the proliferation of different AI-based programs and a worldwide interest in AI for the sake of experimentation, play, education, creativity, and general production. How are these changes reflected in meaningful space?

⁷ Cooley, Charles H. 1907. Social consciousness. *Publications of the American Sociological Society* 1(1): 97–109.

⁸ Cobley, Paul; Ranviir, Anti 2009. What is sociosemiotics? *Semiotica* 173(1): 1–39.

⁹ Randviir, Anti 2022. Space. In: Tamm, Marek; Torop, Peeter (eds.). *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 200–210.

AR: If we are talking about meaningful space, then this is where the humans live in. It is natural that this meaningful space is unlimited because it has to be potentially open in order to bring new information into the system of human culture. Because, otherwise, the system would wither off, even according to systems theory. Ultimately, humans have the right of their meaningful space to be undefined. They have the right for creating poetry, the right for creative and artistic expansion of their meaningful space; the right for innovation and imagination. They have the right to imagine how to live under water or how to fly to faraway planets, and they hold the right to actually accomplish those dreams eventually. So, in this sense, it is natural that the meaningful space is without borders.

Now, in connection with AI, there is the question of how ideas produced by AI should interact with actual human produced meaningful space. It is essentially a question of agency; who is responsible and who has the right of expanding the meaningful space of humans? And it is in fact a tough question, in the sense that eventually humans must handle that meaningful space. In a very curious manner, we may be meeting here a kind of “upper semiotic threshold” – something that we have never even talked about, or have talked about only theoretically under notions like ‘text of culture’ or ‘tradition of culture’ as so-to-speak self-managing functional entities.

EA: Perhaps I can expand this question a bit, as I believe I was somewhat vague. As you stated, the meaningful space is potentially limitless, so I was wondering if we could say that AI will further expand this boundless space, although this might sound paradoxical, given we are talking about an infinite acreage. But the point is, could we say that because AI is programmed and trained by humans, it is a pure circulation of human ideas and perhaps even biases, thus it does not alter anything? Or should it be viewed as a distinct realm of meaningful space that potentially interacts with ours?

AR: You are right. I think that there are at least two options, considering that out of AI production of textual units people on the one hand can possibly start running in circles inside their existing meaningful space. The developmental potential, which has been inherent for the human mind is somehow diminished by AI, because it takes up patterns of mental processes that have existed in the behavior of human mind for centuries and AI starts to repeat them. Thus, the meaningful space of the human comes to a standstill.

On the other hand, however, there is a possibility that AI would somehow exponentially expand the meaningful space of humans, by injecting impossible objects into human meaningful space. This can happen by introducing very long leaps in logical processes towards very novel information. This would maybe lead to some sort of cultural schizophrenia, especially if the existing human mind would not be able to cope with very long semiotic jumps.

EA: For the first time in India, an AI system was formally recognized as a co-author of a work of art in 2021¹⁰. Given the potential of AI programs like ChatGPT to generate whole essays, as well as the predicted progression of artificial intelligence into increasingly more powerful forces in the near future, how, if at all, do you believe this tool should be employed in the academic environment?

AR: I have no idea how to discriminate between human ideas and AI generated ideas in a text that is printed out from a computer. I would still like to think that we prevail over the technical energy and power-circuits, and that we, as humans, have the right to decide what is ours, what is decent, what makes sense, and what a casual combination of existing syntagms is.

I am not very certain that it is possible to claim the originality of the ideas of AI systems, or at least, I am unable to judge the originality of AI artworks, for example. It is a possible random combination of existing meaningful chunks, meaningful units, that can be brought together in an interesting manner, but then it is up to humans to attribute meaning to them. So perhaps, meaning is in the eyes of the human beholder, much like beauty.

The same goes for any scientific text, since it is not a matter of strictly pictographic artworks, but also scientific articles, and verbal texts in general. In a way, it is a very old discussion: is it culture or is it the individual that produces meaning. Eventually, from the semiotic viewpoint, it should not matter, whether we believe that texts are produced by texts or they are produced by human geniuses. What matters is the meaning we attribute to those texts, what those texts do with us and what we do with those texts. Again – the decisive part in the chain is the interpretant in the mind.

EA: What are your thoughts on the rising interest in these types of technology in the academic world? Do you believe that fields such as computational semiotics will gain strength and attract more people to this multidisciplinary research? Is it possible that the excitement will fade away after a period of oversupply of relevant research?

AR: There are several factualities that speak against recognizing the ‘mentality’ of AI; some of those have to do with the relationships between meaningful units, or semantic units and syntactic units. All this computational stuff, computer translating processes and computer generated texts, are based on the idea that syntactic units can be translated into semantic units and vice versa. That is, the meaningful units could, as if, be unidirectionally associated with certain syntactic units. This is the basis of how to create the ideal translation machine, or how to create...

EA: The semantic web?

¹⁰ <https://www.lexcampus.in/india-recognises-ai-as-author-of-a-copyrighted-work/>

AR: The problem is that the semantic web cannot be directly or univocally translated into a syntactic web which is the dream of today's machine translation and a view how AI could be put to work. The semantic web is a contextual web.

Umberto Eco was speaking about the two main characteristics of semiotic units, or cultural units, and one of those was the dictionary type of definition, while the other one was the encyclopedic type of definition of the semiotic units¹¹. Dictionary type of knowledge can be associated with more or less syntactic units; like any dictionary proper. But the encyclopedia type of knowledge is always contextual. Thus you cannot have a universal encyclopedia, since every semiotic unit is potentially open for whatever kind of meaningful contents according to its context. Encyclopedias are fluid, essentially and inherently, while dictionaries, in comparison, are more stable. However, it is the encyclopedic type of knowledge that gives us accurate information about the world, because this information goes for the 'here and now' of our communication. The accuracy of knowledge and semiotic units is therefore dependent on the agreement humans achieve amongst themselves.

Consequently, I think, it is a very idealistic hope that you can create such stable connections between the syntactic and the semantic units. Under that logic, considering these connections cannot be created, there can be no communication proper between AI and the human mind, and there cannot be any AI at all, because it can only operate with the dictionary type of knowledge; it is unable to connect with the 'here and now' of the human context. No matter how many parameters it can technically take into account, it nevertheless cannot interfere with or into our abductive logic, which as you know is a logic which is not logical. It may be logical for humans, because of our cultural competence, but this is too vast a knowledge, too deeply contextual, too motivated, too value-prevalent and spontaneous to be accurately translated into properly meaningful syntactic units.

Here lies this non-resolvable paradox of human communication: it is motivated, but it is unmotivated at the same time. It is unmotivated in the sense of not being subject to logic in the sense how we relate our mind with reality, and it is unmotivated in the semiotic sense of making signs. At the same time it is motivated, for we want our communication to be rational and understandable for the others. Yet even that motivation rather depends on our social and cultural realities, and is unmotivated in this perspective. Human communication is based on the creation of mixed up bundles of the motivated and the unmotivated, the logical and (seemingly) non-logical in both the semiotic and simply psychological aspects.

In this sense, the syntactic and the semantic fields are to be left disconnected in the technical spheres.

Furthermore, another aspect to be considered is the motivational, or rather psychologically motivational affairs that cannot be found in artificial intelligence, because this is also too spontaneous and in a way unjustified. Think about how Maslow describes the logical buildup of human behavior by the pyramid of needs,

¹¹ Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

which in fact is governed by the meta-needs, and how these meta-needs are defined by value preferences that can turn the pyramid of values upside down at any given point¹². I think AI simply cannot deal with this non-logical logic. Human behavior is too much based on abductive logic, which I think can be compared to what Vilfredo Pareto kept in mind when he was talking about the human non-logical conduct¹³.

So, this non-logical essence of human behavior has been maintained by many authors for many years already, but it seems to be somehow forgotten in this euphoric rush towards logical AI, nowadays. I think that in this sense, the human mind and the AI should be regarded as incompatible. However, there is a far greater lurking danger which is hidden in the topic and undertakings concerning AI systems. The basic hazard, and please correct me if I am wrong, is that AI will start manipulating the human life in the physical sense.

EA: You mean manipulating human life as for instance AI can assist in the generation of fake news, or propagandas and modify false information in a way that they sound factual? Or perhaps the practical implications it will create, or even already has, in various professions, taking over tasks that people were responsible for?

AR: Yes; although I think this has to do with aspects that are still located outside the human mind. Whether you are talking about tasks or operations AI is doing, or whether you are talking about fake news, it is something outside the mind of humans, even though the human mind will have to deal with them.

However, I am talking about a far greater danger. Humans have created AI whose operations may lead to homogenizing the human mind processes themselves, and in my opinion this is the most dangerous outcome; a result which will not be created by AI systems, but humans themselves.

EA: Perhaps the increasing dependence on AI systems for various everyday tasks will eventually lead to inertia, blocking in a way the process of semiosis. If we are just clicking buttons to be fed information, we don't even absorb any knowledge. We are just mechanically copy and paste things; we are no longer creating, we are no longer interpreting, we are no longer living... This also relates back to what we discussed about meaningful space becoming static.

AR: You are right! This would deprive us, as humans, from our agency in semiosis and turn us into some factors of a possibly only hypothetically semiotic process that does not engage any novel information any longer. It is highly doubtful, if relation-production can be considered as a semiotic process in the sense of meaning-making.

¹² Maslow, Abraham H. 1968 [1962]. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.

¹³ Pareto, Vilfredo 2003 [1935]. *The Mind and Society*. London: Routledge.

Meaning-making in a classical semiotic rendering of semiosis should be an open-ended process.

EA: Moving towards the end of the interview, I would like to ask how do you envision the future of semiotics, and what is your ideal version of that future?

AR: I think that there is no other way for the world and for the scholarly community than to recognize the role of semiotics and to start to regard it as a domain which becomes more and more important, even decisive. We are living in an increasingly informational environment, which means that we are living in an environment that is heavily inclined towards the semiotic rather than the physical or the actually ontological. It has been like this already for some – not so many – decades, but we can now observe clearly the informational overload which leads to the increasing fattening – and also flattening – of the semiotic space. That means that for human thought and for human conduct, the decisive factors can be found in human conduct itself. Human behavior is not, that much anymore, reality checked in the ontological reality; the reality check is being done on the basis of the social cultural reality, which means that scholarship should concentrate more at the study of this meaningful reality in order to keep the actual human conduct still on track. It is clear from the metalevel transdisciplinary developments that semiotics could be taking back the founding role it had one hundred years ago in the process of unified science. On the other hand semiotics must take more responsibility for the study of culture and human behavior, which is becoming increasingly more connected with the semiotic rather than the physical and ontological.

EA: And what about your personal future? Where do you see yourself in ten years from now?

AR: I see myself in ten years preparing my lawn tractor for mowing the first lawn in spring, exactly like this year.

EA: Lastly, is there anything further you would like to add? Perhaps some words of advice for our readers?

AR: I think that we as semioticians should, at least, try to keep our minds sound and our identity discourse on track through the autocommunicative process, and that we should try to value our predecessors more than they have been valued in the past decades. If we are able to keep the dialogue with our own founding fathers from a century (and more) ago, then we can keep up our self-identity, and if so, then we can be clearer in our research and purposes as well. It is a vital necessity especially today, because humanity has entered a novel developmental stage in so many senses and aspects, and those developments set novel settings also in scholarship. Without self-

identity we won't be able to even recognize our research object, not to talk about building a firm basis for our research viewpoint.

EA: Thank you very much!

AR: Thank you.

AN INTERVIEW WITH RAINE REVERE

Interviewed by
Eleni Alexandri

During the 15th World Congress of Semiotics, which took place in the summer of 2022 in Thessaloniki, I had the pleasure of meeting Raine Revere, over a lunch break. It didn't take me long to see that she is a driven and ambitious individual who has a profound respect for the field of semiotics. In one of our discussions, she shared with me her vision of integrating her knowledge on programming and semiotics in order to design and launch a mobile application that, in addition to its practicality and usefulness, would stimulate the brain and offer a cognitive experience to the user. Since that time, I have wanted to have the chance to talk with Raine about her entrepreneurial spirit, her dedication and commitment to lifelong education, and the journey through which she became interested in semiotics.

With a bachelor's degree in computer science, a master's degree in contemplative psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology, and great familiarity with semiotics. Raine possesses an amalgamation of knowledge-fragments. This amalgamation will allow an intriguing dialogue regarding technology and the future, in relation to our field of study.

I would like to thank Raine for this interview and wish our readers an enjoyable read.

Interview

Eleni Alexandri: Would you like to start with an introduction of yourself, your educational background, and how you discovered semiotics?

Raine Revere: Yes, thanks! I began my career in the field of computer science before moving into a clinical psychology program. Though seemingly disparate fields, I have come to see them as part of the same overarching program of learning—a deep and cross-disciplinary study of mind. Through the context-free language of software, we can understand the “forced” meanings that arise within formal systems. Through the context-laden language of our human-scale lives, we can understand the hermeneutic meanings that arise from intersecting spheres of culture and self. After

studying the nature of information and then the nature of self, it was no surprise that the study of meaning, qua semiotics, offered an ideal framework for understanding meaning in a way that accounts for first, second, and third-person realities.

I am currently developing concept mapping software that utilizes my diverse background, and is heavily influenced by my studies in semiotics. [Raine shares more about her current project and her approach to design below.]

EA: What would you say is the most fascinating thing about semiotics? Perhaps that one element or piece of information that immersed you into the field or something that you discovered along the way?

RR: Tough to pick one! I think for me it is the modally agnostic nature of semiotics. That is, the resistance towards “fixing” the ontology of meaning onto a single philosophical substrate. I believe it is the spirit of semiotics to recognize the ontologically multivariate and hypercomplex basis of meaning. Within this agnosticism (as opposed to fundamentalism), there is room for subfields to explore meaning within a given context or from a given set of conceptual premises that shape the kinds of answers that emerge.

EA: In a broad and general way, we can say that there is a tight link between semiotics and cybernetics, but also a deep connection between psychology and semiotics. On the other hand, equating a human to a machine that intakes feedback loops and carries different functionalities seemingly contradicts the aspect of the soul and the depths of the psychological world. Do you find any similarities and differences between these three fields of knowledge?

RR: Yes, there is a perplexing array of informational and interpretative forms of knowledge. Reconciling information and knowledge is not so easy. Practically, I see it as an issue of different types and levels of intelligence. What is interesting is the diversity of forms displayed, and it gives us a rich field of phenomena to study. Closed questions like “Is it intelligent?” can be supplanted by open questions of “What kind of intelligence?”, “How does it function?”, “What level of complexity?”, “Who is it intelligible to?”, and “What spheres of being are entailed?”.

In the field of AI, discussions on general intelligence have long had the tendency to ask binary ontological questions, as if waiting for the ghost to suddenly pop out of the machine. I think reductive questions that take the form of philosophical koans can stimulate interest, but cannot be expected to provide real answers about the nature of the subject. They only push us to go further. Astute observation and rigorous intellectual debate help reveal truth in forms commensurate with our current understanding of reality.

Going back to your question about different ways of looking at knowledge, I consider the concept of context to be a helpful through-line. Machines as such demonstrate isomorphisms through tight couplings in a context-free environment,

and thus precipitate “information”. Increasing levels of context-dependence (deixis) reflect processes of knowledge that are more distributed across time and space, and thus depend on entities that dwell in a relevant context. Such indwelling is made possible by deep agent-environment coupling over time. Our diverse approaches to studying knowledge reflect the diverse types and levels of contextualization and embeddedness of cybernetic systems in their milieu.

EA: Would you say that your acquired knowledge of concepts, theories, and semiotic models helped you identify and discover, retrospectively, new layers or aspects of your previous studies?

RR: Yes, absolutely. Many fields of study come with a lot of ontological baggage. Computer science, and the data and information sciences in general, tend to reify information, decoupling it from its etiology. Semiotics was a much needed corrective for me to re-empower context, environment, and culture as the necessary ground for meaning. With today’s expansion of the data sciences and the foregrounding of AI, I am afraid that the situation is not getting better. Data-centric approaches are expanding into every field, and bringing ontological assumptions with them. We have been in a data-driven fever dream since the early 2000’s. To be clear, informationism is not a necessary corollary of these studies, but it is a legacy inherited from earlier generations of thinking in the computing fields. There is a pretty direct lineage from cybernetics to behaviorism to 1970’s era artificial intelligence. Only now are fields like cognitive science going beyond the “brain-as-computer” model of intelligence and meaning-making.

EA: How easy or tough is it to apply semiotics in combination with programming? I know that you are currently working on the creation of a mobile application, and your vision is indeed to integrate these two spheres in order to provide an efficient and practical but also stimulating cognitive experience. What can you share at this stage about your work?

RR: Since 2018, I have been designing and developing a piece of software that is intended to empower a user’s personal sensemaking process. That is, it provides an interactive medium to organize one’s thoughts, develop ideas, and refine conceptual structures. I envision the entire enterprise as a kind of applied semiotics project. Can digital technology increase the perspicuity of a user’s semiosphere? The aspiration is to help people become experts in their own sensemaking. When the semiotic relationships in which one is embedded suddenly become reflexive, it opens up so many possibilities for engaging with life with greater agency. I think this is something that will appeal to an increasingly meta-aware society.

In designing software that is in alignment with semiotics, clinical psychology, and 4E cognitive science, I have had to rethink many of the common design paradigms of Silicon Valley tech. So-called human-centered design gained popularity

in the 2010's, and has now branched off into various models that incorporate multicultural awareness, community accountability, and other reforms. Yet, I find these models lack vision. In their earnestness to increase engagement and decrease friction, they frequently resort to least-common-denominator design that demands nothing of the user and maintains the epistemic status quo. While I do ask how software can be as easy to use and intuitive as possible, I also ask: How can software help the user become more aware of their thought processes? How can it give them opportunities to exercise greater semiotic agency? What learning curves can I integrate into software that facilitate the development of cognitive skills? I think this commitment to the enrichment of the person is an important (and notably, non-consumerist) approach to software design.

Let me give a concrete example. Previously, I was building a habit tracking app. I wanted users to define the semantic landscape themselves, so I avoided labels or colors with pre-assigned meanings. They chose their own habits, chose the emoji to represent them, and even chose the color gradient that represented their progress. I did this by proffering iconic signifiers and intentionally withholding symbolic signifiers. Through the design, I allowed users to conceptualize habits and habit tracking in whatever way makes sense to them. They literally make sense to establish the norms and meanings of their habit formation experience. I am giving them more freedom, but also more responsibility. In this way, I hope to facilitate reflexivity with the user's sign world.

In my current project, I create a similar void for the user to fill with meaning. Except this time it is a trans-hierarchical knowledge graph that they create and evolve. It is like a canvas on which they can paint their thoughts in words and narrative fragments, and then observe the semiotic relationships in visual form. My personal experience suggests that using the software itself increases one's ability to work with language and meaning in more abstract and complex ways. The software has been designed as a mobile app to better integrate into everyday life—an accessible sensemaking companion that is always available to capture, integrate, and extend personal insights.

The software is currently in alpha stage, but a public beta will be coming soon.

EA: How do you imagine the next few years professionally and academically? Do you see yourself returning to academia and pursuing a degree in semiotics?

RR: This question has been torturing me since I finished graduate school! I love the academic community, and truly long to return to that intellectually satisfying environment. In the meantime, I am deeply committed to completing and releasing this software. While it is painstaking to delay my academic goals, I believe that the work I do now will pay off in terms of the new ideas and concepts it will spawn. I have a lot to write about. I see my work now as part of my larger calling to teach and expand human knowledge. Pursuing a degree in semiotics or a related field is definitely in the cards for me.

EA: Speaking about the future, it could be said that we are experiencing drastic changes and advancements in technology. With the last few months being dominated by the rise of artificial intelligence and their various models with different functionalities. Also, the escalated and drastic shifting towards Web3 (although its moment of ‘explosion’ could be traced to 2014, when Gavin Wood coined the term). What commentary do you have on this new technological era, and how would you premeditate the near future? What do you think we should expect in the following years?

RR: Both artificial intelligence and Web3 are truly groundbreaking technologies. This might seem obvious, but there are still people that speak about them as if they are trends. I can say for certain that they are here to stay, even when the hype inevitably dies down. That means we have to learn to live with them. Artificial intelligence will completely reshape the realm of human productive output. Yes, it will take jobs. We should embrace it, if only because it is inevitable. We are all specialists now, because AI can do the generalist activities better. We are pushed to the fringe. Yet this allows us to put all our creative power into more nuanced activities, and leave a lot of the rote execution up to machines. However, we are still the ultimate generalists, because we are feeling subjects embedded in the life world. Only we can engage philosophical and ethical questions. There is little use in being conservative towards technology (you will just end up on the wrong side of history), but there is great use in working to create a future in which technology supports a healthy ecosystem from the biosphere to the noosphere.

When the internet was first developed, the potential was obvious, but the scope of its true impact was unimaginable. People thought that being able to order pizza without leaving one’s home was a good example of the Internet’s potential. Today we have a similar situation with AI. Its power and potential exceed our creativity. An AI module in a word processor or search engine that gives us prompts for further ideas is only the most superficial application of the technology. Real usage will be more deeply integrated into society, shifting entire work streams. Think of AI as automation at a level of complexity never before achieved. Everything is now conceptual art; the medium and execution are secondary to the idea. The concept and the curation of implementations is where the work is. Story and narrative become even more important, because they are the only thing tethering technology to the human experience. With an infinite number of creative manifestations, the narrative that resonates is the one that rises above the noise.

EA: Do you think that semiotics could provide effective and efficient tools for the improvement of these technologies? For instance, could semiotics offer a solution to the problem of AI models in interpreting nuanced concepts and ambiguous words charged with subjective human values? What about the role of semiotics in the improvement of the Semantic Web?

RR: That's a good question, although I may not be the best person to answer it. I am more interested in how semiotics can help us do things that AI cannot do. The more that AI is capable of, perhaps this is even the greater need. AI will get better and better at emulating human behavior and pattern matching human intention and creativity, though I would note that this does not constitute “understanding” or “interpretation” on the part of the machine. This new age requires an increased reverence for the intimacy and spontaneity of intelligence. It will become harder and harder to distinguish, yet that small difference will be more profound in its inimitability.

I think with the advent of powerful LLM's, the traditional concept of the Semantic Web has become obsolete. We no longer need special semantic structures to help machines interoperate with human meaning. They can pattern match at the level of language itself, which turns the entire Web, semantic or not, into an API (application programming interface).

EA: Do you think that the machines might hold or potentially provide, in the future, some more clues that may aid us in our journey towards discovering ‘meaning’? On the one hand, machines hold a much-desired complete lack of subjectivity that humans can never achieve; on the other hand, they are still human-made programmes whose design and training might entail some human biases.

RR: As automated signifier manipulation machines, digital technology highlights the informational aspect of sign play. As technology evolves and gains new territory, it shows us in ever-increasing granularity how signifiers can be manipulated to productive ends. “Meaning” becomes more differentiated. Plus, new technology generates new affordances, which enable new forms of meaning.

It is interesting that you refer to a lack of subjectivity as much desired! I might suggest a different way of looking at it. Objectivity, in the moral sense, is actually a heightened subjectivity that is aware of injustice. It has little to do with an objectivism that lacks subjectivity and thus lacks the ability to respect the life world in contextually appropriate ways. In other words, bias is only bias when compared to a standard that is judged to be fair in culturally-specific ways. In Michael Polanyi's language, we are the adjudicators of our own hypotheses of truth. Our flaws are in our subjectivity, yet so is our hope.

EA: Thank you for the interesting discussion. Is there anything you would like to add or share with our readers?

RR: Thanks to everyone who took the time to read this. I hope it stimulates your sign world, and I sincerely hope to connect with you at the next conference or social event!

If you are interested in being included in the beta release of my software project, drop me a line at raine@cybersemics.org.

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE RITZER on presumption, McDonaldization, enchantment, and globalization

Interviewed by
Andrew Mark Creighton

George Ritzer is an American sociologist whose work has covered a variety of topics, including metatheory and the history of sociological thought and theory, globalization, consumerism, and rationalization. A Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland, he has been a prominent figure in sociology, and the wider social sciences and culture studies throughout this and the late 20th century. The justifications for this interview partially stem from these accomplishments and innovations Ritzer has contributed to sociology and greater academia, especially regarding his work on rationalization, presumption, enchantment, and globalization. The prominence and importance of these concepts within sociology and similar fields mark them as important for consideration in wider semiotic studies of institutions, media, behavior, and so on, as they offer valuable insights into human action and organization.

Further justifications come from my personal and professional perspective as a scholar interested in culture, zoosemiotics, and rationalization. I have taken a particular fascination with Ritzer's works, especially regarding McDonaldization and enchantment, as this theoretical framework serves as an important means to understand the treatment of animals within various institutions, such as zoological gardens and aquarium parks, as well as the human and nonhuman animal interactions within these settings. Consequently, I have also conducted this interview to gain further insights and clarifications from Ritzer on these concepts and associated terms such as nonhuman technology, simulated animals and humans, etc., to develop my own understanding of the sociologist's work.

A third reason for this interview is to help disseminate Ritzer's work within semiotic circles. With the continued managerialization of universities and other important institutions, the prevalence of ecological disasters and the Anthropocene, and the ever-present anomie and alienation within our societies, works like Ritzer's are increasingly important as they offer a critical framework to understand how and

why such issues are so pervasive throughout the world. As such, I believe Ritzer's work should be considered within semiotics as a voice capable of offering much to the field and its practitioners as individuals through informed critical analysis of the rationalization process, globalization, and their enchantment. Consequently, I intend this interview as a starting point for young and early-career semioticians to use as a stepping-stone into academics on McDonaldization, prosumption, globalization, and the wider sociology of labour and consumption. The interview was held over Zoom on March 6th, 2023, with me being in the doctoral student's room at the semiotics department at the University of Tartu, and with Dr. Ritzer at his sunny Florida home. Aside from a few internet connectivity issues, the interview went pleasantly well, and Dr. Ritzer covered a wide-range of topics from the above-mentioned McDonaldization, prosumption, globalization, enchantment and so on, to the importance of experience in developing sociological perspectives, all of which can be found in the following interview.

Interview

Andrew Mark Creighton: As a warm-up question, can you discuss McDonaldization in general? What are the negative and positive aspects of McDonaldization? How did you come to the idea? How does it relate to Max Weber's concept of rationalization?

George Ritzer: Well, there's a kind of a duel or multiple sources of my interest in McDonaldization. One is autobiographical in the sense that I was raised in New York. New York, when I was a kid, was the town of small entrepreneurs, small shops, maybe the beginning of supermarkets, but certainly no McDonalds or anything like it, or much like it. So, I remember in 1959, '60, I was going up to Amherst with a friend who was enrolling there as a student, and when we got there, we went past a McDonald's, and I'd never seen a McDonald's. For some reason, it made an indelible impression on me, and part of the reason for that was the fact that it was something new. It struck me as something significant. I don't think I knew at that point what the significance was, but I knew I wanted to attend to it at some point.

Then, from a sociological point of view, my work in the beginning was on production and the sociology of work. As I worked on that, I came to see the importance of consumption in concert with production, and so I came to the view that you had to look at both of them. Now, I had to overcome my initial focus on the sociology of work, and it took me a while to accord consumption the importance that it deserved. But eventually, I came to see consumption and production as co-equal parts in the importance of economic analysis, especially in capitalism, but anywhere. When I started teaching, I was teaching largely social theory, particularly the work of Max Weber. I was struck particularly by his work on rationalization, and he focused on bureaucracy, which was largely an organizational form oriented towards

production. What I came to see is that his thinking on bureaucracy had a parallel in the realm of consumption. And that parallel, eventually, that I came to see was the fast-food restaurant. He saw bureaucracy as a revolutionary development in his time, and the fast-food restaurant was, for me, a revolutionary development.

I think it clearly has been a revolutionary development in terms of its world impact, and even now, McDonald's ending its business in Russia reflects its global importance¹. Somehow, I was drawn to the fast-food restaurant as a parallel, in the realm of consumption, to the bureaucracy, in the realm of production. Gradually, as my focus shifted from production to consumption, it shifted from the bureaucracy and the kind of organizations that Weber was interested in, to the fast-food restaurant. The fast-food restaurant, to me, was a basic model, as was the bureaucracy for Weber², for the larger process, and that larger process is rationalization. Bureaucracy has served to rationalize work and production, and the fast-food restaurant came to rationalize, primarily, consumption. Although production as well, I mean the worker in a fast-food restaurant is also rationalized, as is the consumer, and now that is the great revolution that seems to be in fast-food restaurants and McDonald's in particular. It's one thing to rationalize the work of a worker that you pay and who has to basically go along with whatever you do, and it's quite another thing to rationalize the work of a consumer you're providing a service for, and they don't have to go along with it, but they did. They eagerly conformed to the norms as they developed and to the structure of the fast-food restaurants.

For instance, there were long lines, like being in Russia in the early 90s, huge lines at the McDonald's in Moscow. That's when Russia was first opening up; of course it's now closed again. But in any case, and in the United States, the lines weren't as long, but always there was a long line of people waiting to get to McDonald's. So, it's obviously very busy, and it became very proficient at handling a throng of people like that, and in rationalizing the work of workers to handle that number of people, and imposing work on the consumer. The consumer does a lot of work in the fast-food restaurant. It's not all provided by the workers; there are various things that consumers have to do. They have to stand in line, they have to get their food, they have to get the trays and go to the condiment bar, things like that before they can get to their tables. They have to serve themselves, and they have to clean up after themselves. So, I came to see the consumer as working. Just as I had come to see the producer as consuming, and eventually, I came to the view that you can't think of consumption without production. There's no such thing in my mind as consumption without production. You are producing something when you consume; you may be physically producing a part of the meal as you're doing at a fast-food restaurant, or

¹ Dr. J. Michael Ryan mentioned to me through email correspondence that *Vkusno i tochka* (Вкусно – и точка), which translates roughly to "Tasty, and that's it" has taken the place of McDonalds in Russia. Ryan also informed me that *Vkusno i tochka* has taken the place of McDonalds in Kazakhstan too, due to supply chain issues.

² See: Weber, Max 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. (Gerth, Hans H.; Mills, C. Wright, eds.), New York: Oxford University Press.

you may be producing the means that are necessary in such a setting. So, no such thing as consumption without production, and no such thing as production without consumption. Really, all producers are consuming various things or materials in the process of production. So, I came to think of those as inextricably involved. I had been reading Alvin Toffler's book, *Future Shock*³, and he, as part of his grand narrative, introduced the prosumer. He really doesn't do very much with it. It's kind of a throwaway in his broader grand narrative of what he's developing, and I hit upon that idea as being what I was trying to get at when I saw both consumers and producers as important, and both consumers and producers as consuming and producing. So, I came to see a continuum of producers, on the one hand, and consumers, on the other hand. With the middle as a kind of pure prosumption, but always, if you're a consumer, you're mainly consuming, but you're also producing. There's no such thing as consumption without production. At the same time, on the other end of the continuum, it is production, but there's no production without consumption. You have to consume things in order to produce. So that led to a kind of continual view of this, with prosumption in the middle and production and consumption related to the poles of this continuum and relegated, I think, to secondary importance.

That is, I think in the history of sociology in the United States especially, work was central. Whereas in Europe, eventually, they came to focus more on consumption, which I was really unaware of when I came to be concerned with consumption. But there's this bifurcation of work on production and work on consumption as if they were separate from one another. From my point of view, they were never separate and especially not separate in contexts where prosumption is the main form of activity. This is clearest, I think, on the Internet, where you're always producing things and consuming things almost simultaneously. So, I wrote about this in the digital age and about how important this is in the digital age, but it was always important.

AMC: You discuss this concept of prosumption, especially in regards to the new Cathedrals of consumption or the new means of consumption, and you give quite a lot of examples, including self-checkout machines and, again, cleaning up your own mess in fast-food restaurants. So, I understand that this concept of prosumer, and prosumption, is really beneficial for understanding consumption and production as being two processes within the wider dichotomy, I guess you could say. But within consumer societies, I think we see an emergence of these sorts of, I guess you could say, everyday occurrences of prosumption, where once there was some division between consuming and producing (Ritzer 2005; 2010; 2015). So, I was wondering, why is this happening? What causes or enables consumers to go along with this merging, or what you refer to as the implosion, of the different roles of consumption and production?

³ Toffler, Alvin 1970. *Future Shock*. New York: Random House.

GR: That's an interesting question. Why is it? Why do consumers not just do this work of production or work in general, but they do it happily or joyfully? They're happy to line up and get their own food and cart it to their table. I always marveled because I was older when I first came to McDonald's. I always marveled at the fact that people were cleaning up after themselves; weren't there workers to do this? Why was I going to do this?

So, this system was based on, I mean, the McDonald's system or others like it, was based on the idea that the consumers would do the work and they'd work for nothing. Now, that's critical because McDonald's and fast-food restaurants operate in a capitalist context, and capitalism is all about profit. And to gain profit when you have workers, going back to Marx, you seek to drive the wages of the workers down as close to zero as you possibly can. Of course, you can't get to zero because no one is going to come to work if you're not paying them. But consumers were coming to work, and they weren't being paid anything, and they were doing it happily. You didn't have the kind of alienation that you had in work settings where people were being forced to produce. I kind of marveled at this; why are people doing this for nothing? Why are they doing it so joyfully? My exposure in the sociology of work had always been to workers who were alienated workers who were angry. Workers on the assembly line don't like the production process. Now, it's clearly not a consumer or prosumer's main activity, but nonetheless, it is a significant activity, and they're doing it happily. In the end, what prosumers do is increase the profit of capitalism. You can get prosumers to do work for nothing that you used to have to pay low-paid workers, pay, in order to do it. So, there are fewer and fewer lowly paid, poorly paid workers and more and more consumers who are doing that work. That struck me as another one of the miracles of capitalism, that capitalism has accomplished the seeming impossibility of getting people to work for nothing and do it happily.

AMC: Perhaps you can discuss how your concept of the prosumer and prosumption differs from Toffler's?

GR: He doesn't develop the concept very much; it's not central to his work. It's a stage in this larger grand narrative, as sociologists call it, of the development of the economy, and it's largely undeveloped in his work. It's largely a throwaway concept, and so what I did was focus on it and develop it more. To flush it out to this continuum idea, as prosumption involves both production and consumption, consumption and production as production, and consumption as consumption, and consumption as production. So maybe that's a little complicated to say it that way, but basically, you have to look at the consumer side of the producer and the production side of the consumer. So, it's a much more, I think, elaborate model of the prosumer than it was in Toffler's work.

AMC: I believe you first published a text about McDonaldization in the 1980s, but it really became prominent in the 90s. It's been used to analyze a wide range of phenomena, from agriculture (Morris, Reed 2007) to academic libraries (Nicholson 2015). It's been applied over quite a large area, and I've seen a lot of applications. So, considering the duration, popularity and variety of applications of McDonaldization theory, do you have any criticisms on how it has been used? For instance, have you noticed oversimplifications in some papers, or have you noticed applications appearing too far out of its intended context?

GR: Well, first, let me say that I've been amazed at the impact that McDonaldization has had as a book. I mean, in the early years when it first came out, it sold very widely to students as a teaching book, and it is still used that way. What surprised me was eventually, that is also simultaneously, it has its impact on academics. And academics were using it in a variety of different ways. That's what you're talking about here: the ways in which academics have used the concept. I mean, it's still used in the classroom; it's a very teachable book, but the use of it by academics has proliferated, as you suggest. I don't know if I can go into the details; I'm not sure I've read them all. But the main criticism I had a lot when I was asked to review papers for journals, well for our colleagues, the main thing I objected to was the mechanical way in which my four — five — dimensions of McDonaldization were being applied. As a sort of mechanical exercise in taking these four concepts, five concepts, five concepts include the irrationality of rationality, and applying them to whatever you happened to be working on, and that was a simplification.

My main criticism of a lot of it was that they were mechanically applying those five dimensions of McDonaldization to whatever it was they were analyzing, and so there was nothing critical about it, nothing self-reflective about it; it was just mechanical. You could say in a way that the research was McDonaldized, as it was just mindlessly applying my model to whatever phenomenon they were interested in. Now, it did apply to a lot of different things, but it had to be more than simply mechanically applied. So, I'm sure I had specific criticisms of specific works, but that was my main criticism of the whole body of literature on McDonaldization: we see that model repeat over and over and over again.

AMC: When I was preparing for this interview, I went through the various editions of *The McDonaldization of Society*, and it's, quite apparent that we can't simply reject McDonaldization, and it's in a sense, becoming more and more ingrained within our society. Specifically, in the 2021 edition, you discussed how there seems to be less and less interest in resisting rationalization in general. So, I was wondering, is there still hope? Can we somehow resist McDonaldization or even overcome it?

GR: Well, a phenomenal number of people have accepted the model. They've accepted the fact, sort of like the academics using my McDonaldization model, we've accepted the model that McDonald's imposes on us and how we're supposed to

operate and get in line, march through, pick up our food, pay for our food, take it to the table, eat the food, clean up after ourselves, that sort of thing. There's very little obvious criticism of that model or rebellion against it. In fact, it's the opposite; I think more and more people have come to accept it as the way it goes. It's kind of depressing from my point of view, but people are not rebelling against the imposition of this model on them. In the area of the sociology of work, people who worked at assembly lines, actively rejected that model, which was being imposed on them; people who worked in bureaucracies actively resisted that.

I used to write about resistance to McDonaldization; escape routes from McDonaldization. I think in the last edition there was still a section on escape routes, but in the latest edition, I took it out because I don't think anybody is much interested in escaping McDonaldization. I think they love it, or like it, they'll put up with it, but they don't really rebel against it. And, of course, it's also class-linked. If you're wealthy, you can afford to eat in a non-McDonaldized restaurant and non-McDonaldized places in one kind or another. But if you're not wealthy you're really forced to eat in those kinds of places, if you want an inexpensive meal. And the relatively poor, or non-wealthy people, they're not rebelling against the model because it works for them. They're able to get things inexpensively. Ironically, the wealthy accept it as a basic model for basic things, but when they want to live a wealthy life, they go to a fancy restaurant. They can go to a fancy restaurant in the U.S. or in many places and pay \$500.00 for a chef-prepared meal. So, the wealthy go there; they don't go to the McDonald's to eat. Although, I think it's also the case that the McDonald's model is being extended to a higher and higher level of dining and other kinds of things. So, it's a model that is very attractive because, mainly, as I said before, those who run these places have a system where, well, they're earning money because they're not paying anybody to do the work. So, they want to employ this model as much as they can, and people are more and more accepting of it. It's hard to, as I said, I used to write about escape routes, and it's hard to write about that. I don't think anybody is much interested in escaping from McDonaldization; I think we're either resigned to it or like it.

I think Disney World, for example, is a very regimented world, and people love that world, and they march from one attraction to another, and line up here and line up there, and nobody who goes to Disney World is rebelling against it. That's the other thing, of course, is the model exists throughout society now, and there is a debate about whether it's Disneyfication or McDonaldization. Fundamentally, from my point of view, they're the same basically, operating on efficiency and productivity, and things like that. So, the ubiquity of the model and the fact that people have come to accept it and not rebel against it is troubling for me because, as you can guess from the book, I don't much like this. I don't much like the world that's being produced here, and I think good sociology has to be animated by strong feelings, and I have strong feelings about this. They're not at the forefront of my work, but they're behind the work, and that reflects in various ways in the work.

AMC: Would you say that age also has a part, or plays a part, in the lack of resistance against McDonaldization? Where people who were born and raised within a very McDonaldized setting really don't understand what it means, or what it feels like, to be outside of such settings?

GR: Yes, absolutely. I think if you don't know that there are alternatives, if you haven't lived in other cultures, for example, most Americans live in America — they only know America, they don't travel to other societies very much, and so they don't see alternatives, so people are raised in this environment. From childhood, they're brought up in this environment, and they don't see any other alternatives, and they don't yearn for an alternative to it. It just comes to be accepted as a way of life, and I think that's generally what we see now; people are accepting of all this.

Of course, as I pointed out, I was born in a different era, and in my era, there were people who did the work for you, you didn't do the work for them. If I went to a delicatessen, the deli man sliced the meat and put it on bread for me, I didn't have to create my own sandwich. So that experience led me to see that there is an alternative to having this work imposed on the consumer, and so the older generation should see the difference between what the world was like when they were younger and what it's like today. On the other hand, as the younger generation gets older, they too, have only experienced McDonaldization. So, you end up with a very bleak Weber-like conclusion where we're in this iron cage of rationalization, and people don't know any alternative to it. Even if they go to another society, they go on a tour or take one of the most McDonaldized things, a cruise ship, and so they like these kinds of regimented sort of things. And in the main, even the older generation does not necessarily know the alternatives to a McDonaldized world.

AMC: In the 2002 interview between you and ecophilosopher Derek Jensen, you both discussed the rationalization of the means of escape, especially in regard to this sort of awe that nature inspires. You both come to the conclusion that due to various rationalized avenues, and being socialized into consumer culture, even when we are within a natural setting, we don't build a relationship with it. We just sort of go through it, and enjoy it, which prevents us from escaping rationalized systems; it's just another wall in a sense. And Jensen specifically noted, and I'm quoting Jensen here from the interview, "Even our interactions within the natural world are merely aesthetic; we consume natural beauty rather than being in relationship with nature" (Jensen, Ritzer 2002). And I think Jean Baudrillard also discussed something similar in his book, *The Consumer Society*, where he describes parks, nature reservations, etc., as being sort of, quoting Baudrillard, "background scenery for second homes" and he sort of, well, he categorizes this as a type of simulation (Baudrillard 1998: 100-101). So, I was wondering, can our relationships with nature be fully or absolutely McDonaldized, either with nature being completely simulated or with us being so acculturated to consumer codes that the awe of nature becomes fully dulled or consumable?

GR: Well, to some degree, the latter is true. I mean, our appreciation of nature is being reduced to one form of consumption. But the thing about nature is that it has its way of acting back on people and acting in unanticipated ways, and we have lots of examples of that with global warming. So, I live in Florida, and we have our hurricane season, and you have these events that nature brings about that upset the notion that this is a controllable world, like a Disney world. A woman in my community, or nearby community, and this happened a week or two ago, got eaten by an alligator. I have alligators in my little pond down here, and there are alligators all over Florida. They are part of the environment, but sometimes nature strikes back, and at one level, it's a hurricane; at another level, it's an alligator that eats a person. But at a higher level, it's climate change, and so in various ways, because we can't control it, nature takes on a different kind of meaning than does the rest of the social world.

AMC: So, I remember you discussed being on a trip with your son around Dollywood, and you were quite overwhelmed by how thoroughly McDonaldized this area was. Later on, however, outside of Dollywood, there was a traffic jam because a bear had appeared by the road (Ritzer 2010; Jensen, Ritzer 2002). So, in a sense, I think this is similar to what you were talking about just now about climate change and alligators. So, do you think this may offer some potential, the uncontrollability of nature, for a relationship that can ignite some resistance?

GR: It might, but on the other hand, what it does is spur efforts of control. We don't want unpredictability, we want a predictable world, we don't want people eaten by alligators, we don't want hurricanes, and we don't want bears in our way. So, we seek to expand our control over these sorts of things, and to a large degree, we're successful at that. I mean, there are these accidents, but they are rare accidents. The reality is I watch the alligators swim by in my pond. They're basically part of a tourist site. We have visitors who come to see the alligator swimming out here. So, mostly, we've controlled this, we've rationalized this. And so, the unpredictabilities associated with nature are progressively reducing, especially in rich developed countries where you have the wealth to handle this in various kinds of ways. Whereas in the less developed areas of the world, nature is much more at your doorstep, much more active, much more threatening, and much more dangerous. After all, McDonaldization is about, in part, eliminating all the dangers from your life. So, you have various things at Disney World, where you could be in what could've been a dangerous environment, with a lion or whatever, and it's neutralized, it's controlled. So, what people increasingly see more than the uncontrolled nature and the nature of nature is the way in which we're able to control nature. But you know, when a hurricane hits or when an alligator eats somebody, we're reminded of the unpredictability, just as the traffic jam was created by the bear on the road near Dollywood.

AMC: Perhaps we can look at your concepts of human technology and nonhuman technology. You describe nonhuman technology as being technology that controls its users, as opposed to human technology, which the user controls (Ritzer 1983). When you apply these two concepts in analysis, would you say there are significant absolute examples of nonhuman technology in our everyday life?

GR: Well, I think increasingly nonhuman technologies control us, and maybe the best example of this is the expanding use of artificial intelligence. We're increasingly communicating with the computer, and we're increasingly communicating with a smart computer that's getting to be as smart as we are, if not smarter. So, I don't think that is declining. I think rather it is increasing with advances in technology. And as technology advances, I think these new technologies will certainly have more control over us. Students are now researching topics based on what they see in artificial intelligence, what we're saying about things that we've seen in artificial intelligence, rather than researching what other humans have done. So, I suppose if you looked up McDonaldization, you'd get an analysis from the computer of what it is that concept is all about. You'd get a computer's version of what that concept is about rather than a human being's reading of what that's about. So, you get a pretty mechanical, by definition it's going to be mechanical, perspective of the concept, and then you end up with a mechanical view of the world rather than the more organic view.

AMC: Would you say the increasing popularity of this nonhuman technology and its ability to control us comes from us just going happily along with it?

GR: Well, yeah, I think students are probably happy to have artificial intelligence write their paper for them rather than to do the research themselves. And I think that probably applies in a variety of settings.

AMC: Do most nonhuman technologies control us despite behavior and norms, or on the other hand, do many examples of nonhuman technology rely on McDonaldized norms and behaviors, or codes, to implement control over its users?

GR: Well, I guess I would say that artificial intelligence would, as an extreme example. It doesn't rely on norms and values. It's a technical system that controls us. So, I think we're moving away from the control of bureaucracy, which was a combination of man and a rational system; it combined human beings into it. Artificial intelligence has taken human beings out of the equation, and it's producing things on its own rather than consulting with and relying on human beings. So, my view is sort of in line with my pessimistic view of the world, and I share that with Weber. Weber was a pessimist, talking about the iron cage of rationalization. I'm very pessimistic about all these things, because I think that these things increasingly being accepted by people are going to exert control over them, and exerting control on them that they never realized was inexorable.

AMC: In much of your work, you stress the global aspect of McDonaldization, so I'd like to explore how this relates to the concept of 'nothing'. You refer to 'nothing' as an ideal type, and I am quoting you here, "a social form, that is, generally, centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content" (Ritzer 2003: 191), and you place this on a spectrum with the other, the opposite side of 'nothing', that being 'something' which is indigenously conceived, containing substantive contents, yet still controlled. So, how much is 'nothing' a product of McDonaldization, especially on a global scale?

GR: Well, 'nothing', I think, is a broader concept than McDonaldization. The argument, I think, about 'nothing' and ultimately about the globalization of 'nothing', and globalization more generally, is in *The McDonaldization of Society*. My paradigm of 'nothing' is the fast-food restaurant. The fast-food restaurant is centrally conceived, centrally controlled, and lacking in distinctive content. So, in a way, I was generalizing from that to a broader theory of 'nothing', which, I saw as a definition of a McDonald's restaurant, versus 'something', which I saw as a gourmet restaurant, for example. So, I think in that kind of continuum terms, and I would say that McDonaldization is the basis of my thinking about 'nothing', not the other way around; I was led to the concept of 'nothing'.

I wrote about the McDonaldization process as a globalizing process, so what's being globalized if McDonald's is 'nothing'? Then, 'nothing' is being globalized. I think there's some truth to that, that culturally indigenous forms are being replaced by McDonaldized forms, and forms that are significant in certain ways are being replaced by those which are insignificant. McDonald's has globalized the fast-food restaurant and, in the process, has globalized the 'nothingness' of restaurants. And it's a basic example of the globalization of 'nothing', but it's far from the only one. In fact, there are broader examples of mass-produced products of one kind or another. Most products are 'nothing' in those terms, if you're mass-producing an automobile, it is 'nothing'; it meets my definition of 'nothing'. So, the great expansion of mass-produced products and their global distribution is another example of the globalization of 'nothing'.

AMC: So, perhaps I can focus a little more on this indigenous aspect of McDonaldization. And for instance, from what I understand, McDonald's itself was developed in California but has really gone globally, obviously. So, how indigenous is McDonald's still to California? How do you categorize something as being indigenous? Is it just when it is transplanted from another region? Or can something develop within a specific region but become alien to the region through its rationalization or development of 'nothingness'?

GR: Well, California was really the home of a lot of the early McDonaldized systems, and a number of fast-food restaurants have their origins in California. Part of the reason for that was the automobile and the drive-through restaurant, where you

could eat your meal in a parking lot or go through a drive-through window. California was the centre of that kind of culture. So, it was a model that developed in California. It developed, refined, and expanded in California and then expanded throughout the world. It works well in California, but it works less well in Uganda, for example, so I think these forms fit into a particular local environment, but when they get generalized globally, they fit less well. So that's the problem: how do they adapt to these other kinds of environments? How do other environments adapt to them? I mean, the paradox is that McDonald's, on the one hand, adapts to a local environment by serving different kinds of foods, so it serves foods that are familiar to the local population. But it doesn't adapt its methods or the way it prepares and serves food or doesn't serve food. So, the imposition on the rest of the world of this McDonald's model of eating, in that sense, is an imposition on the local environment of a model created in California.

Many of the other models are created in the United States and exported to the rest of the world. But now, we see lots of other examples of models that are being created elsewhere and being exported to the United States and exported to other parts of the world. Entrepreneurs in other countries have got it, and so they're producing taco chains that are modeled after McDonald's, or whatever one wants to think of. But in any case, it's the same model being globalized and being exported elsewhere, but it's also being exported back to the United States, and the whole of this model is being populated by these indigenous, if you can call them that, fast-food restaurants that are not native to the United States.

AMC: You discussed another set of ideal types, glocalization and grobalization, and you relate them to the concepts of 'nothing' and 'something'. You consider glocalization to be, simply put, the mixing of the global and local, creating new systems, products, etc., while grobalization refers to the imperialist behaviors and aspirations of nations, companies etc. So, you associate 'something' with glocalization, and grobalization with 'nothing', on a general level. You argue, using this concept from Weber, that these types relate to each other through elective affinity, that the pairs tend to merge together through one type's influence on the other and vice versa (Ritzer 2003). So, for instance, grobalization and 'nothingness' tend to appear in tandem, and both are fundamental for each other's growth. You present glocalization as being an alternative to the homogeny and hegemony of grobalization, as glocalization allows more creative and complex products: 'somethings'. As you've noted, it is difficult to construct glocalized products as it takes more resources to translate them, produce them, and sell them. While the 'nothing' of grobalization is easier to produce, sell, and translate across the world. So, from a viewpoint of production, this really makes sense to adapt to the grobalization model. But from the view of the consumer, why would products that are relatively devoid of 'something' have any appeal outside of some short-lasting novelty? So why do consumers continuously return to the 'nothing' products or nullities of grobalization?

GR: Well, first, I don't think people think in those terms. Secondly, grobal products, such as McDonald's or Coca-Cola, are mass produced all over the world, and they are advertised very widely, and advertising affects marketing; it affects what people buy. People buy into these grobal products and grobal systems. Whereas, on the other hand, anything that is glocal is by definition more local than the grobal and therefore lacks the ability to project its model onto the rest of the world. So, the result is that the grobal is much easier to sell worldwide than the glocal. And very few products that are glocal in nature are successful worldwide. Whereas products that are grobal in nature like McDonald's or Coca-Cola are relatively easily accepted around the world. It's partly the power of America, partly the power of advertising and marketing, but in any case, America is not pushing glocalization; America is pushing grobalization, and America benefits from grobalization. And lots of people around the world, even though they sometimes rebel against American products — Russians, for example, have recently rebelled against some American products — they love American products, they're eager to have access to American products, and if they don't have access to products and services they're upset. America basically, and American capitalist businesses and foreign policy exports this, and people come to associate a love-hate relationship with America. Some people love everything that's American, and hate everything that's American, but you know, most are in the middle ground. These American exports are generally accepted and loved throughout the world, and the profits all end up going back to the global companies like Coca-Cola, so they profit from this.

AMC: Perhaps we can turn to a concept that closely coincides with McDonaldization, the concept of enchantment. But first, I think it would be helpful to discuss enchantment and the spectacle. Specifically, how does your concept of the spectacle connect with Guy Debord's concept? I understand his work influenced yours, but you also further Debord's work by dividing the spectacle into two concepts: the spectacle and the extravaganza (Ritzer 2010). So, how do these concepts relate to each other, and how do they differ? Are they ideal types, for instance?

GR: Well, basically, I think an extravaganza, which is really not a central concept in my work, is something that is produced by some central organization, so Disney World produces these extravaganzas, and other organizations produce extravaganzas. Las Vegas is an extravaganza, or it's one whole series of extravaganzas within that setting. From my point of view, extravaganzas are centrally produced spectacles. Whereas, I think the concept of spectacle is broader, and hence spectacles are more naturally produced, not produced by organizations for profit. So, I think an extravaganza is seen as a kind of product of organizations that are seeking to profit from the extravaganza. Disney World is a good example, Las Vegas is a good example, and there are a lot of examples. A cruise ship is an extravaganza. Cruise ships that house 5,000 passengers and thousands of crew members and are sailing along peacefully are an extravaganza. It's very rationalized, and it's very often

off-putting, but yes, it's an extravaganza; it's being consciously produced. That's where I see the difference in the spectacle, which is a more naturally organic product. Falling stars or the northern lights would be examples of spectacles. On the other extreme is the mass-produced extravaganza for a population that is buying something or wants to buy something.

AMC: Just to elaborate on this question, you have discussed the enchantment and reenchantment of rationalized, or McDonaldized systems, especially in consumer settings. That this enchantment and reenchantment present these systems as attractive while hiding their rational structure and their dehumanizing destructive characteristics, the irrational rationalities (Ritzer 2010). However, I have difficulties understanding what enchantment exactly is, and how it relates to the spectacle. Can we differentiate between enchantment and the spectacle? Or does the spectacle create enchantment? What are the dynamics between these two concepts?

GR: Well, I would say that the spectacle⁴ is designed to create enchantment. So, they talk about Disney World as an enchanted world, I think they used that term, and it's an enchanted world, but it's a very rationalized world. It's an enchantment being produced by some central organization. Whereas, there's also enchantment that lots of people crave, especially in a McDonaldized society, which is that natural kind of enchantment, the enchantment of being at the beach. There's not a crowd, and it's not at a pier, but just being at the beach can be enchanting. So, I think the fundamental difference is the enchantment is produced, and the spectacle is produced artificially. Whereas in the natural world, it's produced naturally, not artificially. So, no one's producing the spectacle of being at the ocean. It's the ocean that's producing that spectacle, and nobody can control it. Whereas the spectacles that we're accustomed to seeing, the parade at Disney World, the reality of life in Las Vegas with all the lights and banging of machines and things like that, are artificially produced. It's a spectacle, and there's no question it's a spectacle, but it's an artificially produced spectacle.

AMC: We've already discussed Weber's iron cage to a certain extent, but perhaps we can discuss your concept of the rubber cage because it seems to note that rationalization does not always progressively control people within McDonaldized systems. Some are able to free themselves from this rationalization, or even use it to their advantage (Ritzer 2021). How does this concept relate to enchantment? Are those within rubber cages more likely to resist simulations, extravaganzas, etc., due to being positioned in the margins of society, or perhaps it's the opposite, they're in a very privileged and wealthy position? What kind of person tends to be in this position?

⁴ Here we are speaking about extravaganzas as intentionally produced spectacles in comparison to the more natural incarnations of spectacles.

GR: You have to be in an elite position to afford a rubber cage, to afford to be in a rubber cage. The elites often find themselves in cages of various kinds that have rubber bars, and they can get out anytime they want. They're very attractive cages; they don't necessarily want to get out, but if they want to, they can get out and it's a very pleasant world for them. Most of my world is like that, actually. I mean, I'm a privileged college professor, or retired college professor, and the world is a rubber cage for me, largely. So, I could avoid restrictions in the university that were placed on assistant professors that were not being placed on me as a distinguished university professor. I talked very little, I was teaching small classes, had very few administrative responsibilities and things like that. So, the university is an iron cage for an untenured assistant professor, but it's a rubber cage for a tenured senior professor, and the world, I think, is much like that. If you're wealthy, you can treat the world that way, so if you find yourself at McDonald's, you might have lunch there, but it's not an iron cage because you can go in the evening and have a gourmet dinner for \$600. And so, the wealthy, I think, if they're in cages, they're in rubber cages. I've actually called them velvet cages, it's not just rubber, but they're velvet. They love being in that cage, and they love rolling around in the velvet cage that rich people find themselves in. But most of the world finds themselves in an iron cage. Somewhere in the middle, there are people in rubber cages where they're able to get out occasionally, but mostly, they're kind of locked in.

AMC: So, I'll move on to my last question. In *Enchanting a Disenchanted World*, you mention two forms of simulations: simulated humans and simulated animals. Both are still humans and animals, but from what I understand, they are humans and animals within a rational system that structures their behavior. So, you give the example of employees at fast-food restaurants behaving according to the protocols of managerial regulations. While simulated animals are animals trained and structured along similar grounds, such as dolphins at Las Vegas casino water shows (Ritzer 2010; 2005). So, you largely focus on these simulations within the context of labor for humans, and captivity for animals. However, are there examples of these simulations specifically regarding, at least from an intuitive view, situations that aren't coercive? For instance, situations where there are no harsh employee-employer relations, or captivity and forced training regarding animals? So, examples of such simulations as much more voluntary.

GR: Well, maybe this would be a good example. I live in a gated community in Florida, and in a sense, it's a simulated world. It's not the world of the real Florida; it's been controlled. Alligators are allowed in, but they're being controlled. Cougars are largely kept out, anything dangerous is largely kept out, as are poor people, since these are relatively affluent communities. So, in a sense, I'm sitting, looking across my pond, at the other houses in this community, and this is a simulated community; it's a simulation of Florida. It's not the real Florida it's the creation of the developers, and so, increasingly, developers are developing Florida, and other places, and they're

creating their sanitized versions of Florida, and the people in these communities are very happy with that. They don't have to deal with the animals that are dangerous, or the poor people, because they can't get past the gate. While on the other hand, they still have the sun and warmth of Florida. So, it's a great world; it's a great world for the wealthy, but most of the world isn't wealthy. This is a simulated world. I don't know if anybody in this community sees it that way, but I see it that way. I've always lived in environments where, while living in that environment, I've also been critical of that environment. In fact, there is no environment that I've been in that I haven't been critical of, that I haven't critically analyzed; it's probably the disease of the sociologist to critically analyze things. So, I'm well aware that I'm sitting in the sun with warm breezes. It's wonderful, but it's a simulated world, and I don't like that. But I live here, and for most people that live here, it's a velvet cage. They're in a cage, and they can get out anytime they want, so it's a rubber cage as well, but it's not an iron cage. Unlike inside the ghetto, which, for most people inside the ghetto, is an iron cage they can't get out of.

AMC: Thank you, George; this has been really informative, and I could not have asked for a better interview. I really appreciate this, but before I go, could I just ask if you want to add anything else?

GR: I think you've got a sense of my thinking and orientations of the world and personality, and view of the world and the specific sociology that's come from that. I mean, first of all, sociology is always shaped by the personalities and the upbringing of the sociologist, and mine is very much like that. So, you need to understand the person and the environment of the person in order to understand the sociology that he or she produces. And I think that goes against what most sociologists would say, that as a science, we're not being shaped by these kinds of things. But we are very much shaped by where we were raised, how we were raised, and the world we lived in, and that affects our view of the world that we inhabit. In many ways, my view of the world is based on my experiences of, for example, living in the era before McDonald's, seeing the first McDonald's, and then seeing the explosion of cars and other fast-food restaurants. So, there's an autobiographical character to all of this, which couldn't have been done by somebody who was born recently, who has had other experiences, or someone born in other societies who would not understand, let's stay, the formula used at the fast-food restaurant. So, it's very much a dialectic between the personality and socialization of the person doing the analysis and the analysis that's produced. And, I guess the final thing I would say is you have to take that into account.

This is my view of the world shaped by my training and my personal experience and upbringing. And it's not necessarily right, of course it's not; there are no right answers in sociology, but it's my perspective on it, and the question is, does it resonate with you? Does it work for you, or does it partially work for you, or does it work at all? That is a judgement that anybody who reads my work or listens to me

has to make for themselves. What's your view of the world based on, after you've heard what I've said? Now, take your own experiences, integrate all those things, and come up with your own view of the world, which may or may not be affected by my view. I'm very conscious of the way in which this is my view of the world affected by my upbringing and experiences, and, you know, that's both the strength and limiting factor of all sociology.

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