

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a research project on semiotic manifestations in different processes that are called crises - from the more general financial crisis and ecological crisis to more specific local crises (namely the Bronze Soldier affair). The specific phenomena discussed in this paper are the semiotic practices surrounding the current economic crisis and their influence on the development and proliferation of the overall sense of crisis in culture. Yet we bring also examples from other critical processes to point out parallels in what we call the rhetorics of crisis. These semiotic practices concern not only the use of specific semiotic markers pointing to crisis to induce further sense of crisis but also various tactics used to alleviate the pressure in culture. However, the study leaves out the issue of ontology or existence of the

process of crisis itself and proceeds only by analysing the crisis as a phenomenon in semiotic reality.

We analysed the use of the rhetorics of crisis in two layers: description (a cultural system uses the rhetorics of crisis to describe the state of another cultural system), and self-description (a system uses the rhetorics of culture to describe itself) (cf. Lotman 2001: 128-129). These can be seen as the basic mechanisms used by culture in general and any cultural subsystem more specifically for sense making and for achieving order. Both relate a semiotic system to the world outside its borders (cf. Lotman 1992) while also organising the inner space of culture. While these relations in culture make up the abstract cultural space, the logic and scale

of their change make up the temporal character of culture. Thus the system of culture as a whole involving multiple relationally acting systems and possible generalizable tendencies of development can be described in terms of chronotope as an indivisible whole of space and time (cf Bakhtin 1981).

We propose a four-stage model of the chronotope of crisis. These four stages describe the dynamics of the rhetorics of crisis between description and self-description, as well as its gradually totalizing effect in culture. Yet it should be noted that the model does not describe isolated phases, but rather stages that are embedded into each other and can simultaneously function in different cultural systems.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study showed that the development of sense of crises in culture has two mechanisms: firstly, the adaptation of the rhetorics of crises to different systems; secondly, the internalization of the rhetorics of crises through its use in self-description. Finally, these two tendencies result in the totalizing effect of rhetorics of crisis.

At the same time, the rhetorics of crisis is not only used to intensify the sense of crisis but also to alleviate it. Different phases have different strategies on both the level of description and level of self-description. Thus, the crunch chronotope gradually becomes an organising device for the internal composition of the whole cultural sphere.

This kind of escalation of the rhetorics of crisis and together with it, the sense of crisis in culture, can be explained also by the understanding of the nature of crisis in general. Thus, while the crisis is locally seen as negative and uncomfortable, it is also associated with positive changes as an aftermath of crisis. Therefore, the crisis is seen as good for the system - it eliminates old problems and creates new possibilities. This also motivates the usage of rhetorics of crises in the self-description of systems that feel the need for change or excuse to change.

Future research should reveal whether this model can be applied to other semiotic practices or not and what are the reasons behind differences in the spatio-temporal spread of different rhetorical practices in culture.

1. EXTERNAL PHASE

use of rhetorics to describe some other system / denial of crisis on the level of self-description

A crisis or a potential of crisis in one cultural system is noticed by some other cultural system. The latter uses rhetorics of crisis in an attempt to make sense of these phenomena outside of itself. For example, the financial system warns the real-estate system. On the level of rhetorics, the crisis is seen as a local one that concerns only one system and is not connected to other systems. On the level of self-description, the system potentially in a crisis avoids the use of rhetorics of crisis.

The use of rhetorics for alleviating the crisis is done through the denial of crisis as a self-description strategy of the system in (potential) crisis. For example, the answer given by Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip to a reporter at a government press conference: "If this is a crisis and collapse, then I would like to live only in this kind of crisis and collapse" (Press conference, 07.02.2008). Among the various strategies of denial, re-contextualisation is one of the most common ones. One example of this can be found in the arguments that are used for confuting claims about ecological crisis. Those denying the remarkable rate of species extinction or rapid climate change today often place these processes on a wider scale than those who admit the existence of a critical situation. By expanding the time-scale, the critical events become untraceable and disappear into the "natural rhythms" of change.

Verbal example: "Kriis meditsiinis või mõtlemises?" ("Crisis in medicine or thinking?") - PM 14.12.2004

Shifting time-scales is one of the devices the skeptical environmentalist Björn Lomborg uses for opposing claims about rapid species extinction today. On the geological time-scale the rise of the extinction rate in recent centuries is invisible (see Figure 1).

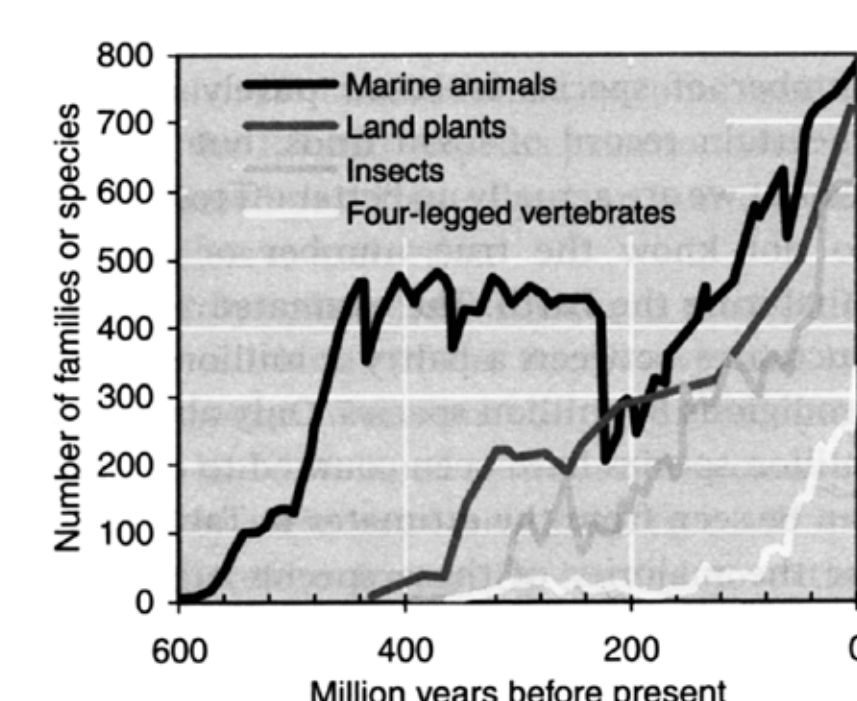


Figure 1 On the geological time-scale the rise of the extinction rate in recent centuries is invisible (UNEP 1995: 204, 206, 207; Lomborg 2007: 249)

2. PHASE OF MEDIATION

use of rhetorics to mediate and confirm the presence of crisis

One cultural system uses and appropriates the rhetorics of crisis to relate the system in (potential) crisis with some other cultural system that in it is not described as being in a crisis. Such mediation transposes the rhetorics of crisis from one system to another (from world financial crisis to every citizen's personal financial crisis - figure 2) and appropriates the initial specialized rhetorics of crisis to a less specialized, common lexicon. The rhetorics of the crisis is taken over by some system (e.g. advertising) and accommodated into its specific and already established language; due to their status as mediators, the "speakers" confirm to their audience the presence of the phenomenon they're mediating (the crisis). Creating this kind of rhetorical connections between different systems expands the sense of crises from local process in one system to spatial phenomena concerning already larger part of culture.

By introducing the rhetorics of crisis into everyday language use, crisis becomes a part of the description of culture more generally, thus creating the spatial dimension of crisis and so contributing to the further proliferation of the sense of crisis.

The unpredictable character of the crisis is toned down by appropriating it to the everyday practices and everyday language, as if nothing special is going on and we can overcome the situation simply by using old techniques (saving money, spending less, etc - figure 3).

Verbal examples: "Koolide renoveerimine on läinud säästuajal tunduvalt odavamaks" ("The renovation of schools has become a lot cheaper in times of frugality") - EPL 04.06.2009.

"Sampo utsitab endiselt säästma" ("Sampo still urges to save") - Ärileht 28.01.2009.

Figure 2. Advertisement of a citibank



Figure 3. Poster of Slayer's concert in Estonia



3. INTERNAL PHASE

use of rhetorics of crisis in self-description, internally

The rhetorics of crisis is used in self-description by the system. It is fully recognised as a phenomenon which determines and influences the system's own behaviour. The system starts using it in its autocommunication. However, in the process of autocommunication, this rhetorics is reformulated as a result of the introduction of a second code - that of the system itself, and acquires new meaning during that process as the system uses it for self-description. The sense of crisis spreads thus to other cultural systems which see themselves as influenced by the crisis or as being in a crisis, i.e. use the rhetorics of crisis in self-description. In the process of self-description, these systems internalise the rhetorics, make it their own. The more exotic "financial crisis" becomes "masu" (a dulcet abbreviation for "economic slowdown" from Estonian "majandussurutis"), etc.

The system of alleviation is achieved by making the situation bearable with a "comic relief", using several parodic devices (figures about the parody of well-known brands).

Joonas Pärenson: "Kriis on jõudnud viimaks ka minuni. Söön juustu, mis on hallitanud, joon veini, mis on väga vana, sõidan autoga, millel pole katustki" ("Crisis has finally reached me. I eat cheese that is moulded, drink wine that is very old, drive a car that does not even have a roof" - bo.tr.ee/conversation/5974



Indrek Tarand used the economic crisis in his election campaign for the EU parliament to bring out the political crisis and mock about the crisis rhetorics.



Tarand elections campaign poster

4. PHASE OF TOTALITY

rhetorics of crisis is used everywhere for explaining everything

Rhetorics of crisis is used to describe anything in every level and crisis is seen as explaining everything. The perception of crisis changes from crisis as process occurring in a system into a crisis as a autonomous, even independent system that has the power to affect everything. The crisis remains as a signifier but the signification has disappeared - it has gained the status of an *empty signifier*, to use the term coined by Ernesto Laclau (1996: 36-46). Empty signifiers are the end result of a discourse that has become empty of specific meaning. Moreover, these empty signifiers can, in some circumstances, represent the discourse as a whole and incarnate the totality of the whole system of differences (Selg, Ventsel 2008: 175).

Such an overwhelming use of the "crisis reasoning" leads thus to its exhaustion of the rhetorics of crisis and opens up of the system for new social dominants. The emptying of the same rhetorics also serves as a false impression that the crisis has been overcome.

One of the rhetoric devices used is also the personification of crisis (verbal examples will show that crisis has a lot strength and imposes its power on all sorts of life).

Verbal examples: "Majanduskriis kihutas aasta lõpus täie hooga Eestisse" ("The economic hurtled into Estonia at full space" - PM 10.01.2009.

"Finantskriis külmutab vene filmitööstust" ("Financial crisis freezes Russian movie industry") - EPL 24.10.2008
 "Rahakriis kugistab lihtsate venelaste kodusid" ("Monetary crisis is devouring the homes of ordinary Russians") - EPL 10.10.2008
 "Majanduskriis laastab töötavate brittide tervist" ("Economic crisis devastates the health of the working brits") - PM 31.05.2009
 "Kriis viib ka keskklassi kuritegelikule teele" ("Crisis will drive also the middle classes to committing crimes") - PM 31.03.2009www

The totality and emptiness of crisis is accompanied also with the general discourse characterised by totality and emptiness of various nominators of the crisis. Accordingly, in 2009 the name of Bronze Soldier reached to all fields and levels of society, being an excuse or ultimate (historical, national, moral, etc) reason for anything. The Estonian exhibition at the 53rd La Biennale di Venezia "After-War" with its golden replica of the Bronze Soldier has this as its context of final creation and institutionalisation. The totality and emptiness of the general discourse can be seen as the reason for the emptiness of the media attention and the work itself, aiming to be from the significantly social and personal field of social art.



Bronze Soldier (erected 1947, relocated 2007) with "Eternal fire" in 1979 (Mesikäpp 1979).



A moment with "Golden Soldier" in making a video part of Estonian installation "After-War" at 53rd La Biennale di Venezia at Tõnisnõgi, May 9th 2009 (CCA, 2009).

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