

# DO YOU MIND? DOES IT MATTER? SEMIOTICS AS A SCIENCE OF NOOSPHERE

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One of the most important and, no doubt, most difficult questions in semiotics is a relationship between semiotic and non-semiotic reality. In this essay I want to go a short length down the avenue that is far less explored than one would expect, given its practical implications. Semiotics is something that studies semiotic reality and the process whereby it is created and (self-)sustained. The idea of semiotics as a science of noosphere is, compared to the idea of semiotics as a science of semiosphere, unexpected and not nearly as explicitly treated – but not necessarily counterintuitive.

The concept of noosphere comes from Russian biogeochemist Vladimir Vernadsky and is a derivative of his concept of biosphere. Vernadsky uses the term biosphere to denote the “self-regulating system that embraces both the totality of living organisms (living matter) and their environment to the extent it is involved in the actual processes of life, that is, including the troposphere, the ocean, and the upper envelopes of the earth crust” (Levit 2001: 57). The basic determinant in the evolution of the biosphere is the growth of atom exchange caused by the life processes. Noosphere is a stage in the evolution of biosphere, where the functions of the biogenic energy created by living matter would be taken over by „the energy of human culture“ (Vernadsky 1977: 95).

Intriguingly enough, in 2000, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen made a call to announce the beginning of a new geological epoch: the Anthropocene, as by now humankind is by far the most powerful geological force on Earth. His call has been supported by many geologists in several published papers in later years. What has any of this to do with semiotics? Much, I would say. Do I announce semiotics as a new geology? Perhaps not. But I suggest – and I admit that this suggestion is rather trivial – semiotics has a lot to say about the force that seems to be the greatest transformative geological force on Earth – human culture. In the autumn of 2007 I attended a conference organized by Association of Peak Oil Studies (ASPO), Ireland, that featured several CEOs of the oil industry, among activists, scholars, researchers and industry engineers. They all stood applauding after a paper dedicated to the psychology of oil consumption and peak oil. At the time I thought that all the conclusions made in this paper were rather trivial – until I discovered that there are not much treatises focusing on the human side of

environmental crisis. And I mean on the human side, not technology, itself a product of the human mind and itself already a part of the noosphere.

Deep understanding of culture and its mechanisms is important at all times and at all ages, there is no doubt about it. But here we have another perspective: the rather grim implications of environmental change. In itself, the debates if and whether environmental change is induced by human activity - or not - is an interesting semiotic problem. All the more so that the rhetorics about the possible causes draws away our attention from the fact that the change is taking place – and there is a need for radical transformation of society to be able to adapt to these changes. And this is another point of semiotic interest. If culture, globally and collectively as well as individually and locally, is the greatest transformative power on earth – then what determines its capacity of self-transformation? How to describe or even be able to diagnose cultural resilience or its inertia?

What do I mean, then, if I say that semiotics is a science of noosphere? Semiotics is a discipline and research venue that studies – and is able to conceptualize – the very semiotic reality that underlies the creation of noosphere. Noosphere is the biosphere carved out according to the human semiosphere.

It was already Vj. Ivanov that proposed that “[t]he task of semiotics is to describe the semiosphere, without which the noosphere is unthinkable“ (Ivanov 1998: 792). Therefore it is not only the internal methodological demand of the distinct disciplines engaged with individual texts and systems, but the social applications of semiotics that render semiotic as the science about semiosphere vital (cf Ivanov 1991, 1998).

Last three years I have been working as a scriptwriter and content-editor for a documentary ultimately entitled „The Measure of Man“. For a long time, the working title was „Power of Habit“. For me it has been an experiment, and a venture, to portray the environmental crisis based on the premises that I outlined above: what if the environmental crisis is not the crisis of environment? Is environmental crisis rather the crisis of our expectations and habits? Indeed, how can environmental crisis be the crisis of environment, because crisis is not something per se – it is always so for someone for some reasons: an interpretation of a situation on the background of a set of expectations, rather than situation itself.

In 1907, C.S. Peirce posed a question „far from holding that a sign can be the „naked“, that is, the ultimate meaning of a sign, I was just about to insist that it cannot be so; and the great enigma that leads up to pragmatism – at least to my form of the doctrine – is, „What can this naked or ultimate meaning be?“ (MS318, quoted from Short 2007). According to Peirce, that ultimate interpretant, that ultimate meaning that ends the endless line of reference to further signs that still fall in the confines of mind only, is habit:

The real and living logical conclusion is that habit; the verbal formulation merely expresses it... The concept which is a logical interpretant is only imperfectly so. It partakes somewhat of the nature of a verbal definition, and is very inferior to the living definition that grows up in the habit. (CP 5.491)

According to Short (2007: 59), “it is only through the medium of purposeful action, even if only a potential action for a possible purpose, that words and thoughts relate to a world beyond themselves and acquire objects of or about which they are”.

In the context of semiotic resilience, Peirce's notion of belief-habit is both useful as well as intriguing: „Every habit has, or is, a general law. Whatever is truly general refers to the indefinite future... The future is potential, not actual. What particularly distinguishes a general belief, or opinion, such as is an inferential conclusion, from other habits, is that it is active in the imagination. [...] Conversely - and this is the most important point - *a belief-habit formed in the imagination simply ... will equally affect my real action should those circumstances be realized*“ (CP 2.148, my italics – K.K.).

The notion of habit, thus conceived, provides a bridge between semiotic and non-semiotic reality, this very bridging is at the same time a grey spot as well as one of the most intriguing questions of semiotics. This is the point where my minding (whatever that may be), matters – as it bears an impact on the circumstances that may fall out of the research scope of semiotics *per se*. The notion of habit thus has also a lot to do with the interference between semiosphere and noosphere, one forming the other according to its concepts, the other being the ultimate interpretant (in the sense Peirce provides) of the first.

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