

INTERVIEW WITH TIMO MARAN
about his new book *Ecosemiotics. The
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Interviewed by Pauline Delahaye



ECOSYSTEM OF ECOSEMIOTICS

PROF. TIMO MARAN

Illustration by Kaustubh Khare, 2020



Timo Maran is a specialist in biosemiotics and, more precisely, in ecosemiotics at the University of Tartu, Estonia. He is working on and writing about changing ecologies, their signs, their impact, and their implications for species, human or not, living in them. He agreed to tell us more about the stakes, the research, and the future of his discipline, mapping for us the ecosystem of ecosemiotics.

PD: Ecosemiotics is a relatively new research area, what is its relation to other disciplines like zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, and semiotics in general? Do you see them as ‘cousins’, ‘sisters’, ‘mother-daughter’ disciplines?

TM: There are many research frameworks inside semiotics from medical semiotics to political semiotics, from translation semiotics to musical semiotics. In my understanding, ecosemiotics fits into this broad semiotic landscape rather well. Ecosemiotics shares an interest with general semiotics, including semiosis, sign systems, codes, interpretation and communication. Ecosemiotics is naturally closer to biosemiotics and zoosemiotics as we all share Uexküll’s umwelt theory as a basic understanding. Umwelt being the idea that animals participate in the surrounding world in active but species-specific ways. What is specific to ecosemiotics, however, is that it allows for the semiotic potential of the non-living environment and brings focus on interplays and relations of semiotic processes of different complexity levels (distinguishing at least environmental, physiological, cognitive and narrative levels).

PD: Talking about focus, if you had to name just one, what would be the main interest in ecosemiotics today?

TM: This is not an easy question to answer. If I would need to choose, then it would be that ecosemiotics could provide us with suitable conceptual tools and methods for making fruitful inquiries about human-environmental relations. There has been a lack of research frameworks for studying semiosis in the environment. Only then, can we start asking the right type of questions, such as what are the specific semiotic mechanisms and processes that allow culture to keep up the dialogue with the ecosystem and why this dialogue sometimes fails. In the long run, the task of the ecosemiotics is to make natural environments meaningful again for the culture, to restore and elaborate cultural models that allow humans to perceive the environment as endowed with meaning and value.



PD: Ecosemiotics also allows to study very current concerns, and many of them are directly created by human actions; what is it like to build a discipline in which entire sections appear over time and which must be integrated into previous models?

TM: Working with ecosemiotics has been a very interesting exploration. Many relevant conceptual tools and models have been already proposed by historical authors (like Michael Polanyi's "tacit knowledge" or James J. Gibson's "affordance") or are present in adjacent paradigms (like Timothy Morton's "hybrid object" or Luisa Maffi's "biocultural diversity"). So, working with ecosemiotics requires a lot of translating and integrating between previously separate authors and traditions. At the same time, there is a distinctive core around which ecosemiotics develops. Ecosemiotics focuses on the semiotic activity in ecosystems including semiosis and communication of nonhuman species, emphasises prelinguistic and presymbolic components of human culture, scrutinises the semiotic causes of environmental problems, and makes it an endeavour to apply cultural and semiotic modelling to reconcile culture and environment.

PD: Talking about culture, and, more precisely, scientific culture – all researchers are said to be “dwarfs on the shoulders of giants”. Who do you think are the semiotics giants? Are there any unknown or underrated “giants” you would like to introduce to us?

TM: Academic genealogies are indeed a very interesting topic. There are bloodlines and peer relations even in today's very dynamic and nomadic academic world. And then there are subtle affinities of thinking that encourage you to read and cite certain authors and not the others. The semioticians who have influenced me most are Jesper Hoffmeyer, Almo Farina, Kalevi Kull, Juri Lotman, Thomas A. Sebeok, Charles S. Peirce, Jakob von Uexküll, Wendy Wheeler, just to name a few. It is very difficult to close the list. There are many relevant people whose work situates somewhere at the borders of semiotics: Gregory Bateson, Michael Polanyi, James J. Gibson, and Tim Ingold. In recent years, I have also read quite a lot of the French tradition of philosophy of science – works of Michel Serres, Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. I think this group is very relevant to semiotics and to ecosemiotics especially.

PD: Indeed, this group is one of your very personal and recent “discovery” in the field. In general, what remains to be discovered, what are the avenues you see in the future of semiotics in general, and ecosemiotics in particular?

TM: Semiotics is a very powerful conceptual and analytical device for making sense of the systems and processes in culture, nature, and society. Perceiving this potency, I am a patriot of semiotics and very enthusiastic about its future. At the same time, we are in a strange situation. If to look to the recent developments at an object level – multimedia



and AI, intercultural communication, big data, hybrid environments of nature and technologies – then the world is becoming richer in signs and mediation than probably ever before. We have not witnessed, however, a corresponding expansion in semiotic theory. At the theoretical level, semiotics is still mostly engaged in reflecting upon and elaborating the structuralist and poststructuralist views from 1960s to 1980s. I think what we are currently waiting for, is a theoretical rejuvenation – the next big step in semiotics – that would adequately reflect the changes in 21st century culture and technology. I believe that this turn will come soon.

PD: Talking about rejuvenation and change in science, there has been a “reproducibility crisis”, which affects certain disciplines. Are semiotics and ecosemiotics affected by this? How do you manage that in your own work?

TM: The reproducibility crisis appears to be more a problem to natural sciences and social sciences, that is, for those disciplines that rely on quantitative methods. Semiotics uses predominantly qualitative methods (interviews, observations, content analysis, and discourse analysis) that produce unique outcomes and are therefore non-reproducible from the start. The validity of the research in qualitative methods has a different basis than reproducibility: enough data, completeness of the study, relating with earlier studies and tradition of the field, transparency of researcher’s position and intents. What we should be aware of in semiotics, however, is not to make conclusions that are unsupported or far-fetched regarding our study object. Cultural semiotician Peeter Torop, whose work I value a lot, has compared semiotic research with “dialogue” indicating that you need to “listen” to your object for really making sense of it.

PD: Let’s talk about another kind of dialogue: for the past few years, you have also been supervisor of doctoral theses, and had to deal with researchers-to-be, their questions and their inquiries. How has that changed your vision of research and the future of your discipline?

TM: In semiotics, researchers appear to be quite independent, in the sense that we mostly publish as sole authors and have individual research grants and interests. This makes supervising a two-sided learning process where both parties bring something new to the table. As a supervisor, I may have more experience on methodology or how to organise the research, but my supervisees have also educated me a lot in Augustine’s philosophy, zoological gardens, and Estonian folklore to name a few topics. In the light of the variety of these topics, one general issue that frequently arises, is how to retain and develop a semiotic framework. So, the role of supervisor has probably made me more aware about the identity of the discipline and the necessity for grounded semiotic theory and methods.



PD: In addition to developing new topics you have discovered, are there any other new subjects or young researchers that you consider “rising stars” in the discipline that you are closely engaged with? Conversely, are certain subjects considered as “dead ends”?

TM: I am quite confident about the future of biosemiotics and ecosemiotics. These fields have gained a lot of strength in the last twenty years and there are many young scholars actively involved. In the last Gatherings in Biosemiotics held in Moscow 1–5 July 2019, the majority of participants were my age or younger. This is the clearest sign about the potential of the academic field – if it attracts doctoral and post-doc researchers. I think semiotics of education has been developing quickly in recent decades and so has cognitive semiotics. Both have active research groups, conferences and publications, and good outlooks. There appears to be a certain standstill in semiotics of literature and language – the very fields in which semiotics was originally born. Hopefully, this is temporary. But I can’t pretend to have a complete overview of what is going on in each and every corner of semiotics. Our discipline is thematically, geographically, and linguistically just too diverse and extensive for that.

PD: One last question about the future of the discipline and its extension, geographical but also socially: in Europe and, more specifically, in Estonia most of the exchange and research programs focus on the activity of popularisation and interaction between the public and researchers. It’s fairly new that so much emphasis is put on this aspect, what do you think about it?

TM: I consider this to be a very positive development and not just as a formal requirement of research applications. All knowledge and science are for the benefit of the people and it is a common thing to communicate about your studies. I understand that this may be sometimes challenging, but it is important to communicate your findings to different audiences in different manners. Another aspect of the same topic is educating the public. There is so much ignorance, superstition, conspiracy theories, and irresponsible politics in today’s world. This social context really makes it the responsibility of academic people to come out from their faculties and to participate in media and public discussions to rise the quality of the debates.