

Literature and Semiotics (An Introduction)

Jelka Kernev Štrajn, Aleš Vaupotič

Today's emancipatory social movements are generally linked to considerations of the relationship between nature and culture, to the differentiation and affiliation of the two spheres, and to the extreme permeability of their borders. This topic is being pondered not only by natural scientists and humanists, but also by artists. It is precisely around the scope of the term *culture* that developments and changes have occurred in recent years. Research in the complex field of discourses and apparatuses (*dispositif*) has been equally intense. Here literature (and other arts) have an important function because they call into question existing relations and, at the same time, influence, as an inherent social factor, social processes, and man's relationship with nature and his attitude towards the world, transformed by new information and communication technologies.

With changes in human experience, methods of representation and communication are also changing. Culture in general is directly attached to the question of representation, and representation is possible only through the existence of the sign. That is to say, it closely depends on the understanding of the sign, as these two partially overlapping definitions show: "A sign [...] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Charles S. Peirce, *CP* 2.228); and representation, for its part, means that someone or something is representing someone or something. In this, the expression *representation* alludes to a number of fields, from philosophy and art to politics, economics, and the natural sciences, which means that the history of the term *representation* is also linked to all of these fields.

The notion of the sign cannot be conceived of independently of the theory and history of language. It is therefore no coincidence that semiotics, as an independent science purporting to make concepts found in different humanities comparable by means of their similarities and differences, took shape at the same time as, and in close association with, the linguistic turn in Western thought. At the same time, intensive research on the codes and conventions of non-linguistic signs led to further theoretical turns: the cultural turn, the pictorial turn, the spatial turn, the media turn, and so on. In handling the sign in general and the literary sign in particular,

it thus became impossible to avoid the visual dimension. Although it is tempting to remain at the level of the word, one must also take into account the visual dimension thereof, the semiotic “otherness” of the word; that is, writing and its ambiguous status as both image and textuality. Long before Derrida, St. Augustine pondered this subject. It therefore becomes necessary to include the problematic of writing systems in considerations of signs, and this is particularly so because writing systems can open the way to certain alternative observations of the relations between words, images, and things.

Although the purpose of this collection was not to study the history of the sign, one cannot ignore the historical dimensions of this problematic, nor would it be desirable to do so because the practices of the sign and strategies of literary-artistic representation always unfold in a given spatial and temporal context.

The original impetus of the treatises gathered here is rooted in the belief that semiosis starts at the point where life itself starts, life meant in its broadest sense; that is, as organic and inorganic life. This means that semiotics is understood as a transdisciplinary theory and, as such, does not limit one to that period when discussions of signs were at their most explicit—that is, to the 1970s—when, in parallel with the rise of structural methods, semiotics gained the status of a special science and became an academic discipline. The structuralists reactivated Saussure’s definition of the sign and applied it to a number of phenomena outside linguistics. Based on Saussure’s findings, they sought to establish an awareness of the sign primarily at its synchronous, theoretical level, a move that went in the face of the prevalent tradition of hermeneutic interpretation, which always took into account the specific historical situation in the sense of a comprehensive context and meaning. For this reason, it is prudent to re-examine the definition of the sign in light of the relations between structuralism, post-structuralism, and the hermeneutic tradition, and even more so in light of the distinction between Saussure’s semiology and the semiotic tradition of Peirce. Here there are two distinctive definitions of the sign. Loosely speaking, there are the dyadic and triadic sign. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that Saussure’s sign is in its essence arbitrary and conventional, whereas Peirce’s sign is everything that is interpreted as a sign.

The thematic section that follows juxtaposes a great variety of views on the practices of the sign and/or representational strategies in literature. This was to be expected because it is practically impossible to communicate about anything in any way at all without using signs. The approaches adopted by the individual authors thus offer possible explanations for the

ubiquity of the semiotic, from points of view that allow semioticity or signhood itself to become, for one reason or another, more visible.

One of these contexts is intermediality, in which the relationship between communication in the various media to which traditions linked to guilds, education, and other sociohistorical forms of regulation of interpersonal interaction belong sheds light on semiotic practices and offers them for reflection. In the article *Eklephrasis and Intersemiotic Transposition: Literature, Visual Arts, and Culture*, Vladimir Martinovski looks at the problem of literary signs from the point of view of translation between the artistic language of painting and literary (or, more precisely, poetic) language. He begins with an introduction to Leo H. Hoek's typology of intersemiotic word and image relations and then uses selected examples from world poetry and contemporary Macedonian poetry to illustrate, in a multilayered manner, the complexity of the transition between sign systems, which are always imbued with cultural contexts on both the production side and the reception side, both in the work of art described (e.g., in ekphrasis) and in the poetic reformulation itself. Theatre as a multimedia art form is in the foreground of Tomaž Toporišič's article *A Few Comments on the History of (Mis)Understanding between (Post-)Semiotic Performance Theory and Practice*. The theatrical text draws its special excitement from the tension deriving from the changing emphases in relation to the oppositions between text and staging, linear and non-linear communication, dramatic theory and theatrical practice, the theatrical and the performative, and, last but not least, art and society. Intermedial, interinstitutional, and intercultural dialogue between extremes is the productive core, and mass media are the context, which is no longer something that can be left out of a theatrical communication situation. Toporišič devotes particular attention to the new understanding of live performance in the context of mediatised forms of culture, and he considers works by the Slovene artists Emil Hrvatin (a.k.a. Janez Janša), Dušan Jovanović, and Simona Semenič.

Poetry in general, and lyric poetry in particular, tends to condense two dimensions—the communicative-ideal and the expressive-structural—to the extreme, and to merge them to the point where they fuse together. The language of poetry is not ordinary language, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why its semiotic dimension is so interesting. In her article *Poetic Representations of Uncertainty*, Bożena Tokarz considers the phenomenon of uncertainty in examples of texts by poets of the Kraków avant-garde (Tadeusz Peiper and Julian Przyboś) and the postwar Polish poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz and Wisława Szymborska and the three different poetic models connected with them. Uncertainty, which the au-

thor deals with in the light of the semiotic models of, on the one hand, Saussure's systemically closed tradition and, on the other, the open tradition connected to Peirce, Umberto Eco, and the Stuttgart Group (Max Bense), has the constructive function of awakening curiosity in poetry, expressing doubts and posing questions. Lyric poetry is also considered in Varja Balžalorsky Antič's article *How Does the Poem Signify: Benveniste, Meschonnic, Michaux*. In it, she presents the linked theories of signifying in poetic language, as observed in the works of Émile Benveniste and Henri Meschonnic. In methodological terms, it is an attempt to overcome the limitations of the structuralist semiological tradition, which pushes the concept of speech (parole) to the margin. This approach is quite close to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of discourse, although it maintains the connection with structuralist concepts (rather as Yuri M. Lotman does in his later work on the semiosphere). The presentation of the methodological framework is followed by a case study—an interpretation of Henri Michaux's 1937 poem *La Ralentie* (Woman in Slow Motion)—with a particular emphasis on rhythm and semantic prosody.

In her article *Against the "Natural" Order of the World*, Jelka Kernev Štrajn discusses the questions raised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The text links up with the author's commitment to ecocriticism in literary science and is therefore necessarily also tied to the political aspect of semiosis. In her reading of Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Prowadź swój plug przez kości umarłych* (Drive Your Plough over the Bones of the Dead, 2009), she shows a trans-human vision of the world that is describable in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, the pre-Romantic poet William Blake, and Tokarczuk's novel. The text draws attention to the frequently unreflecting limitation of the semiotic to humanity. When she cites the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, she is asserting that all living creatures—not only human beings—are not simply objects subordinated to nature but also subjects with their own worlds, within which animals are capable of perceiving signs. A political question is raised in e.g. a completely different manner by Alex Goldiș's article *The Ideology of Semiosis in Romanian Prose under Communism*. The article explores the mechanism of the colonization of this concept for political-emancipatory action. In Romanian literature, semiosis as a concept became an ideological connecting element that opposed the official ideology linked to the arbitrary installation of socialist realism in the literatures of the Eastern Bloc. In his conclusion, Goldiș clearly illustrates the asymmetry between the Marxist orientation of those that collaborated in the literary journal *Tel Quel* and eastern European formalist-structuralist movements opposed to Marxism—albeit Marxism operating at a different level.

The article by Aleš Vaupotič, entitled *Semiotics and Realism*, constructs a model of Peircean semiotics as an alternative to structuralist semiotics and links it to realism in nineteenth-century literature, taking as a starting point Hans Vilmar Geppert's theory of realism. It points to the various possibilities of a semiosis that renounces the synchronous, systemic view. However, such a shift is not simple: when faced with an unexpected phenomenon, interpretation does not simply appear from nothing. The process requires an explanation of where new meaning actually comes from in continuous Peircean semiosis. The author, citing Ivan Mladenov's article on the marginal ideas of Peirce, thus concludes that referentiality is essential, which for comparison requires an archival cause—something that Mladenov finds in Peirce's undeveloped concept of the effete mind.

The thematic section concludes with a polemical article by the researcher and literary author Iztok Osojnik entitled *The Iconoclastic Anonymity of Freedom-from-Art: Unconsciousness and Mystery*, the title of which is not intended merely as a critique of the neoliberal market economy, but also as a criticism and rejection of everything caught up in the revolutionary impetus of subversiveness, that subversiveness that the current form of "Art" constantly appropriates, counting on its own autonomy. Signs, even artistic signs, are in fact always connected to power, which necessarily means power over someone. This is something that also appears in the form of peer-reviewed scholarly articles. They do not relate to pre-existing reality, but reproduce discursive practices. Their referentiality closes the horizons of the possible, which is the main reason why particular care is required, both in the use of signs and in reflection on this use.