Editorial
Nature and culture: a semiotic perspective

There are several ways of defining ‘concepts and words’ and the very act of doing it is a semiotic exercise of mapping one’s identity, which coincides with investing “something” with meaning. The tracing of a significant individual map, within the borders of which every human being is able of building up their ‘own universe’ (geographically and historically located), means the developing of semiotic competence carried out through three important dimensions: a) the ability to circumscribe a territory (of the sign) and to identify it as belonging to oneself through acts of perceiving, investing and tracing specific characteristics; b) the making of the universe around our universe, our inhabited world through the power of observing, interpreting, remembering and preserving signs; c) the capacity of reading (of encoding and decoding a sign’s message) functions and codes within a system, which involves a dynamic change and exchange. These three dimensions foreground three other semiotic concepts – relation, relationship and relatedness –, which reveal nature and culture as “sign-complexes that we use to orient ourselves and to formulate our actions”. They also show the existence “in the middle” of a (C)creator/maker of signs as possessor of a grand quality, that of an “observing (our it.) subject”, able to modify the surroundings, to give them purposeful meanings and to communicate them through language. And, thirdly, we consider that they highlight the complementarity of nature and culture; it is this relationship that brings to light the (dis)harmony establishing itself between the two “sign-complexes”. It also enhances the process by means of which the world, inhabited by sign-makers and sign-users alike, gets a historical quality and shapes into culture through relatedness, consisting of the inner invisible threads of the fabric/context which make them exist, survive, develop, grow, become something/ somebody (= build up their own identities) and then, stand for something/somebody else.

That is the reason for which we consider that we cannot take the tens of definitions given to culture and nature separately as far as we refer to and are concerned with becoming, a process involving states of (dis)connectedness within the stages of turning nature into culture; on the contrary, the three r-s (relation, relationship and relatedness), while working in the semiotic universes (of the matter and of the mind), invite to a reconsideration of borders, a redefining of roles, a relocation of signs, and, implicitly, a rereading of discourses, according to new codes, models and modeling systems.

The papers of this issue map the three dimensions mentioned above, while making the “observing subject” inhabit various spacetime frameworks and, thus, allowing him/her to interpret cultural and natural phenomena which acquire their own identity through discourse.

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(Selected) Bibliography


1 See also the 2014 Editorial to CP on “semiotics of culture and/or cultural semiotics?”
2 For the way such dimensions work in nature and culture, see D. Cmeciu’s Signifying Systems in Literary Texts (2003).
4 Such an existence calls to mind Robert Frost’s poem The Secret Sits ("We dance round in a ring and suppose,/But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.")
5 Eero Tarasti (2000:155) considers that in a “semiotics of landscape”, there is always a “[c]entre, constituted by the observing subject whom the land-scape surrounds.”