

Semiotics of Conflicts
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Abstracts and bionotes

Anna Maria Lorusso, “Temporal Conflicts: The Case of Cancel Culture”

From a Lotmanian point of view, it is normal to think of cultures as sets structured by different temporalities: different speeds of evolution, different historical durations, different extensions of memorial practices. However, the temporal heterogeneity that characterizes the semiospheres does not represent an “easy” aspect of cultures, on the contrary: it often constitutes a factor of tensions and real clashes. This is what those initiatives that go by the name of “cancel culture” express today: practices of deleting cultural texts (statues, novels, films...) that are perceived as not aligned with the present. In my talk, I will try to show how the conflictuality of cancel culture, even before being based on a conflict of values, is based on different conceptions of history and how in its various, different forms (which I will differentiate), the cancel culture expresses an essentially ideological attitude towards the past and temporality.

Anna Maria Lorusso is Associate Professor in the Department of Arts of the University of Bologna, where she teaches semiotics, semiotics of culture and analysis of information. From 2017 until 2021 she was President of the Italian Association of Semiotics. Her research is focused on semiotics of culture, with two main fields of research: logic of information (post-truth, fake news etc..) and cultural memory. Among her latest books: *L'utilità del senso comune* (Il Mulino, 2022); *Post-verità. Fra reality tv, social media e storytelling* (Laterza, 2018); *Cultural Semiotics* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016).

Mari-Liis Madisson, Andreas Ventsel, “Understanding Conflicts in Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Perspective”

Employing Juri Lotman's framework of culture/anticulture and culture/nonculture, Chantal Mouffe's concepts of antagonism/agonism, and Umberto Eco's approach of conflict as a topic, our presentation offers an exploration of strategic conspiracy narratives across marketing, alternative knowledge, and politics. We explore marketing narratives, focusing on their creation of engaging villainous figures and their fusion of brand identities with recognizable conspiracy codes. Within the domain of alternative knowledge, we underscore the heightened conflicts between mainstream bodies and alternative authorities, with a specific emphasis on the pivotal role of institutional manipulations. Within the sphere of political narratives, we bring to light an existential contest between the conspirators and those in the know, illustrating the construction of value systems through profound opposition. These arenas provide varied methods of conflict construction, each influencing how characters are depicted, the possibilities for conflict resolution, and the creation of an “us versus them” narrative framework. Our multi-faceted semiotic approach not only unveils the power dynamics inherent in these narratives but also illuminates the crucial role that the audience's meaning-making practices play in the success of these strategic narratives.

Mari-Liis Madisson is a researcher of semiotics at the University of Tartu. Her research interests lie primarily in cultural semiotics, media semiotics, and political semiotics. She is the author of *The Semiotic Construction of Identities in Hypermedia Environments: The Analysis of Online Communication of the Estonian Extreme Right* (Tartu University Press, 2016) and *Strategic*

Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach (Routledge, 2020; co-author Andreas Ventsel) and has published in academic journals *Semiotica*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *European Security*, *National Identities*, among others.

Andreas Ventsel is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. His research is interdisciplinary, which includes semiotics, discourse theory, strategic communication and political analysis. He has presented the results of research on these topics in journals *Semiotica*, *European Security*, *Social Semiotics*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Media, War & Conflict*, among others, and he is the author of *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives: A Semiotic Approach* (Routledge 2020, co-author Mari-Liis Madisson) and *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020, co-author Peeter Selg).

Francesco Mazzucchelli, Martina Grinello, “The Fractured Semiosphere: Clash of Meanings in the Age of Political Correctness”

The debate that has recently developed around the so-called “cancel culture” increasingly takes the form of a polarized dichotomy between the defenders of free speech at all costs and the supporters of a language that is cleaned-up as much as possible of elements that are considered offensive or harmful to individuals or groups. The discursive regime of “political correctness” is seen by some as a “cancel culture,” i.e., an attempt to purge the semiosphere of texts deemed out of step with prevailing values of inclusion; by others as a “woke culture”, i.e. as a defense strategy and, according to a popular definition, as “vigilance against racial prejudice and discrimination”. The aim of our paper is to examine the so-called “cancelling” practices from a Lotmanian perspective, to propose a typology and to disambiguate the semiotic weight of terms such as “woke”, “cancelling”, “calling-out” and “policing” in different regions of the semiosphere and discursive domains. By means of some examples, we will refer to “cancelling” as a conflict strategy that brings about an internal specification within the semiosphere and makes visible fault lines and ruptures.

Martina Grinello is a PhD student in Semiotics at the University of Bologna, with a project on “New models for Cultural Heritage”. She works on decolonization processes in museums, material culture and heritage studies from a semiotic perspective. She is a member of TraMe, Center for the Semiotic Study of Memory (University of Bologna).

Francesco Mazzucchelli is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna. He coordinates TraMe, Research Center for the Semiotic Study of Memory and is Vice-President of AISS, Italian Association for Semiotic Studies. His current research deals with on the narrative and discursive dimensions of cultural heritage and the processes of construction/transmission of collective memory from a semiotic perspective, with a particular focus on difficult/dissonant heritage (in Italy but not only). Among his last publications is *Transforming Heritage in the Former Yugoslavia. Synchronous Pasts* (Palgrave 2021, edited with Britt Baillie and Gruia Badescu).

Igor Pilshchikov, “Inner Conflicts as a Source for Artistic, Cultural, and Social Dynamics in Juri Lotman’s Semiotics”

The Russian Formalists debated with Marxists but adopted several metaphors from their discourse, such as “contradictions”, “struggle” and “organized violence”. However, the Formalists used these tropes differently, applying them to the dynamic construction of the poetic text (Tynianov) or poetic language (Jakobson), rather than class struggle and state violence. For Tynianov, art is dynamic because “the constructive factor” does not harmonize other factors, but “deforms” them. For Jakobson, inner tensions within any synchronic system produced by an inner disbalance are the driving forces of diachronic shifts. In his dialogue with Marxism and Formalism, Lotman started

where Tynianov stopped, focusing on the inner conflicts within poetic/artistic texts, which he reinterpreted as inter-level or inter-substructural tension and struggle. How can these conflicts be resolved? Lotman turned to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism for a solution, reinterpreting it in his own "post-pre-structuralist" way. He suggested that optimal correlation between conflicting structures is achieved when they are placed not hierarchically, but on the same level. The resulting dialogic conflict leads to "cultural equalization" and the creation of a "new semiosphere of higher order", where both conflicting parties are included as equals. In the Perestroika period, Lotman sought to apply this theory practically to solve inter-cultural and inter-ethnic conflicts in the collapsing USSR. He also emphasized the inevitability of globalized conflicts, stating that actions in one part of the world affect others, making it impossible to ignore the repercussions.

Igor Pilshchikov is Professor and Chair of the UCLA Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages & Cultures, and Research Professor of Cultural Semiotics and Russian Literature in Tallinn University. He is founding academic editor of the Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature & Folklore (feb-web.ru) and the information system CPCL: Comparative Poetics and Comparative Literature (cpcl.info), and editor of the journals *Studia Metrica et Poetica* (University of Tartu Press) and *Pushkin Review* (Slavica Publishers). He has authored three books and more than 200 articles on Russian poetry, poetics, verse theory, comparative literature, the history of East European literary theory, cultural semiotics, and digital humanities.

Merit Rickberg, "The Semiotic Potential of Conflict in Arts-Based Environmental Education"

Contemporary environmental education is forced to address exceedingly complex problems, such as climate change, mass loss of biodiversity and species extinctions, pollution and other environmental crises that threaten life on our planet. Making sense of the global ecological situation requires the inclusion of multiple perspectives, which are often based on conflicting value systems and may therefore necessitate incompatible solutions. Moreover, the various contexts which are involved are in constant flux, and their interrelations are characterized by high levels of indeterminacy. In connection with these challenges, we can observe an increase in arts-based learning practices in environmental education. One explanation for this tendency lies in the capacity of art as a modelling system to incorporate conflicting viewpoints, contradictions, and paradoxes into a meaningful and coherent whole. Whereas the scientific models have traditionally sought to resolve incompatibilities, then, in the realm of art, conflict can function as means of generating new meanings. In this presentation, I will examine some examples of how aesthetic experiences have been used and conceptualized in environmental education to address contemporary ecological problems. Based on these examples, I aim to explicate how arts-based learning deals with the inherent conflictuality of complex environmental issues using the Lotmanian cultural semiotics framework.

Merit Rickberg is the Head of the Juri Lotman Semiotics Repository at Tallinn University and a PhD Candidate of the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. Her research interests are Juri Lotman's semiotics, educational studies, semiotics of conflict, and complexity theory. Her PhD thesis focuses on developing a Lotmanian framework of complexity thinking for analysing cultural dynamics in contemporary educational systems. She is a member of the Transmedia Research Group, which investigates new educational practices based on the Lotmanian semiotics of culture and develops digital educational environments on the platform Education on Screen.

Peeter Selg, "What is Political Conflict? A Political Semiotic Response"

In the presentation I provide a conceptual framework of political conflict based on post-structuralist political theory and cultural semiotics of the Tartu-Moscow School (with special emphasis on its roots in the communication model first proposed by Roman Jakobson). I argue that it is conceptually

felicitous to distinguish between substantial conflicts over disagreements regarding political/policy issues on the one hand, and formal conflicts where the issues under debate or contestation might be the same, but where different forms of political communication (e.g. phatic, emotive, poetic, conative, referential, metalingual) clash. I argue somewhat counterintuitively that the *formal*, not *substantial* conflicts tend to be inherently irresolvable, and bring examples of actual political conflicts that can be interpreted in these terms.

Peeter Selg is Professor of Governance and Political Analysis at Tallinn University. His research interests include relational sociology, political semiotics, governance, and wicked problems. His work has been published among other outlets in *Sociological Theory*, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *Journal of Political Power*, *International Relations*, *International Review of Sociology*, *Social Semiotics*, *Journal of Language and Politics*, *Semiotica*, and *Sign Systems Studies*. His recent book (with Andreas Ventsel) is titled *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). He is the editor (with Nick Crossley) of the book series “Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology”.

Nicola Zengiaro, “Conflict Between Semiosis in the Ecological Crisis: An Ecosemiotics Reading of the City”

In the last decade, biosemiotics field has directed its attention towards increasingly complex ecological domains, trying to show how different semioses coexist in a given ecosystem. The aim of the presentation is to show that these forms of semiosis exist precisely in relation to a continuous process of circular communication and conflict. Starting from Juri Lotman’s notion of semiosphere, Tartu ecosemiotist Timo Maran proposed the notion of “ecosemiosphere” that can provide a useful tool in dealing with conflicts with non-human and human semioses from cultural resources. The idea is to show how climate and ecological change is both a form and an effect of conflict that can threaten the system. To ground the concept of the ecosemiosphere, the city will be used as a case study to show the conflicts that always exist in different regimes of semiosis. According to Lotman, the city is a complex semiotic, culture-generating mechanism. Ecological crises set in motion increasingly complex forms of conflict that mixes nature and culture, in such a way that without one it is not possible to understand the other: from the loss of biodiversity to climate refugees, from the acidification of the oceans to increasingly hierarchical national economic relations, showing how living in a space is coordinated by semiotic conflicts. The methodology of analysis offered will be based on ecosemiotics, a branch that studies the role of environmental perception and conceptual categorisation in the design, construction and transformation of environmental structures.

Nicola Zengiaro is a PhD student in semiotics at the University of Bologna, where he mainly works on biosemiotics and ecosemiotics. He is part of the editorial staff of the journal *Animal Studies. Rivista italiana di zootropologia* and has published several articles in national and international journals on animality and biosemiotics.

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