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Between Homeworld and Alienworld. A Primer of Cultural Semiotics

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Abstract: Since it was first invented by the Tartu school, semiotics of culture has known very little theoretical development, with the exception of some articles by Roland Posner and by the present author. In this paper, we will have a look at the differences between these three approaches, and we will consider the theoretical reasons for going beyond not only the original Tartu school proposal, but also Posner's revision. Moreover, we will relate cultural semiotics to Husserlean phenomenology and to classical and contemporary theories of empathy.

Semiotics of culture was invented by Jurij Lotman, Boris Uspenskij and a number of other scholars in the so-called Moscow-Tartu school in the sixties of the last century (Lotman et al. 1975). In the original version, it concerned the opposition of Culture to Non-culture, conceived as a difference between order and disorder, and many other binary terms. This early version, as well as the later, much vaguer variety, in which the semiosphere is substituted for culture (Lotman 1990), have often been applied, but hardly ever been subjected to any further theoretical development. One notable exception to this is a seminal article by Roland Posner (1989). I have myself also written a number of articles in which I try to extend the original framework of cultural semiotics, by means of clearer, qualitative definitions and more differentiations (Sonesson 1992; 1994; 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002a, b; 2003; 2004; 2007a, b).

The original inspiration for my work was didactic: I wanted to present the Tartu school model in a more readily accessible way (Sonesson 1992). Soon I realised that, by way of making it more distinct, I also changed the theory. It was only at that point that I became aware of Posner's work, with which my own proposal has affinities, at the same time as presenting notable differences. Since then I have tried to extend the framework by relating it to Peirce's early triad in terms of personal pronouns, the hermeneutics of empathy, and much more. Meanwhile, at least two persons have applied my model, and thus thrown new light on it, one in the study of a historical material, the voyages of Mme de Stael (Cabak Redei 2007), and another in relation to the contemporary situation, viz

the way the Swedish furniture warehouse IKEA manifests its Swedishness in Germany (Mazur, forthcoming). But it is only recently that I have become aware of cultural semiotics having been anticipated in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl.

1. At Home in the Lifeworld

As a scientific enterprise, semiotics in culture is concerned to study the models which the members of a culture make of their own culture, in particular to the extent that they oppose it to others cultures. In this sense, semiotics of culture is about the relationship between cultures, or, more dynamically, about cultural encounters (cf. Fig. 2).

Something like this was said already by the original founders of cultural semiotics, but it is neither of importance in their later analyses, nor in Posner's reconstruction of the theory. To me, this observation is fundamental. In cultural semiotics, it is not a question of studying culture as it really is, but the way it appears to the members of the culture. As I have often observed, the distinction is certainly not absolute. Once you come to believe that you live in the Renaissance or in a globalised world, you start to act accordingly. Nevertheless, it is this focus on the auto-models of a culture which makes cultural semiotics a potent instrument to study, as I have indicated earlier, the *discovery* of the *new world* by the Europeans (Sonesson 2000), the anticipation of communication with extraterrestrial beings (Sonesson 2007c), and, not least, the meeting of different cultures occasioned by migration. It also renders the model useful for studying the different interpretations of the same encounter between Mme de Stael and Rahel Varnhagen as described by each of them (Cabak Redei 2007), as well as the deformation of the image of Sweden as presented by IKEA to the Germans in the publicity spots used in Germany (Mazur, forthcoming).

In this sense, the culture of the semiotics of culture is really identical to the *Lifeworld* of Edmund Husserl, in particular if it is presented, as it was later by Alfred Schütz, as the world taken for granted (as first noted by Cabak Redei 2007). Husserl emphasises that the *Lifeworld* is a relative world – relative, he no doubt means, to a (type of) subject. But typicality is also characteristic of the *Lifeworld*: things have, as Husserl says, 'typical ways of behaving'. However, Husserl goes on to say that the structures of the *Lifeworld* are not themselves relative. They are found in each and every socio-cultural *Lifeworld*. When Husserl first talked about the universality of the structures of the Lifeworld, he was clearly thinking about temporal and spatial constraints: every point in time is embedded in a string of earlier moments (retentions) as well as of moments to come

(protections); and we always see a thing from a particular point of view, and yet the thing is what we see, not the perspective. In posthumous texts, nonetheless, Husserl pinpointed another such universal structure which is of particular interest to us here: the distinction between *homeworlds* and *alienworlds* (as referred in Steinbock 2003: 296ff.). In this sense, the *homeworld* (Heimwelt) “is not one place among others, but a normatively special geo-historical place which is constituted with a certain asymmetrical privilege” (ibid.), and which can be identified with a family or with a whole culture. In each case, what is outside of it is the *alien-world* (Fremdwelt).

This seems to be the same conception, clearly without there being any influence, as that formulated by the Tartu school. In this model, Culture is opposed to Nature or Non-culture, as inside is to outside, order to disorder, civilisation to Barbarism, and so on. Elsewhere, I have called this the *canonical model*, observing that it is defined from the point of view of culture, while implicitly placing the Ego inside it, looking out on Non-culture (Sonesson 2000). But this is clearly not the only extant model. Another alternative is what I have called the *inverted model*, in which case the Ego places itself within another culture, making it into its home culture, and alienating the culture of which it is a part, as exemplified by the Tartu school, without this example being developed into a model, in the case of Peter the Great who wanted to emulate Western culture, and in our time of course by all those trying to adopt American culture. But, even from the point of view of properly egocentric culture, all Non-culture cannot be of a kind. Sometimes, at least, we need to differentiate those cultures outside our own with which some understanding is possible, from those where this is not the case. According to the Tartu school texts, there may be something which they call Extra-culture, and which is ‘in the contiguity of culture.’ But it never becomes clear what kind of contiguity this is. Specifying the term, Posner and I happened to take it in different directions.

2. The qualities of culture and text

What, then, accounts for the distinction between culture, non-culture, and extra-culture (and, in Posner’s version, also for the distinction between centre and periphery)? Posner claims that they are found on a scale of increasing semiotization ending in culture (and, within culture, in the centre). Semiotization is a term already used by the Tartu school, but in other contexts: thus, for instance, the behaviour of the Decembrists is said to be semiotized, because they behave in the street as if they were on stage (cf. Lotman 1984a, b). This suggests semiotization is more like quo-

tation – or like the fictional frame defining the theatre. This interpretation does not seem to fit very well in the present context, however. Does semiotization mean increasingly being a sign? Hardly. Perhaps it is a question of some more general notion of meaningfulness. Although the Tartu school does not offer us any clear criteria, the oppositions between order and disorder, as well as culture and barbarism, give us a clue. But it is an ambiguous clue.

Since the text is that which is within culture, and the non-text that which pertains to its outside, we have better start with the notion of text. Posner (1989) tries to expand the notion of text from what it is understood to be in ordinary language, as a combination of written linguistic signs, generalizing it ever further to a combination of linguistic signs, a combination of signs which are alterable and obey rules of combination, and finally to everything alterable (Posner 1989). As I have pointed out elsewhere, such a scale does not account for the distinction between texts and non-texts (and thus culture and non-culture), because non-texts also fit these criteria (Sonesson 1998). Posner neglects what I would like to call the normative dimension of the notion of text in cultural semiotics. In fact, the Tartu school documents clearly show that a second hierarchy of textuality is presupposed, going from something as vague as everything which attracts attention and then splitting up along two lines, into, on the one hand, everything which can be interpreted, and, on the other hand, everything which is considered worth-while interpreting. But sometimes these two sub-hierarchies will not single out the same thing as text. Many religions use a sacred language in their ceremonies which is incomprehensible to all or most of its practisers, for instance Latin (for a long time) in Christendom. This means that there are at least two kinds of criteria for making a division between culture and non-culture (and so on): something could be part of non-culture because it was less valued, or because it was more difficult to understand. Thus, if, in the example given by the Tartu school, Peter the Great wanted to emulate Western culture, he followed an *inverted model* from the point of view of value, in which he projected his Ego to what was, from the point of view of understanding (and geographical situatedness), his non-culture; which means that his model of interpretable culture was different from his model of understandable culture.

But even if we separate the scale of interpretability from that of value, another problem remains: the segmentation of culture, non-culture and extra-culture does not seem to be a question of degree. Rather, these are qualitative differences. There is only one *homeworld*, but, according to what I (Sonesson 2000: 2004; 2007) called the *extended model* (Fig. 1.), there really are two kinds of *alienworlds*. There are those you treat as different but equal, with whom you are on speaking terms, those others

which are really other egos to you. These represent the second person of grammar, or, in other words, the *Alter*. And there are those you treat as things, as the third person of grammar, or, in other terms, as *Alius*. In this sense, Benveniste (1966) suggested in a famous analysis that what is ordinarily considered the pronouns of the first, second, and third persons, should really be considered the result of combining two different dimensions, the *correlation of personality*, which opposes the person to the non-person, and, within the former pole, the *correlation of subjectivity*, which opposes the subject to the non-subject. The traditional third person, in this sense, is no person at all, and it is opposed to two kinds of persons, the one identified with the speaker, and the one identified with the listener.¹ Tesnière (1969) later proposed to use the somewhat more enlightening, but more cumbersome, terms *autoontive*, *antiontive*, and *anontive*, respectively: i.e. the one who exists in itself, the one who exists against (the first one), and the one who, properly speaking, does not exist at all. It could be said, then, that Culture is the domain of the subject, or autoontive, while Extra-culture is the domain of the non-subject, or antiontive; Non-culture, finally, is the residence of the Non-person, or anontive. It seems particularly proper to describe Non-culture as that which does not properly exist.

Among the classical *discoverers* of the *New world*, Columbus, making lists of all kinds of resources and including human beings among precious metals, animals, and plants, is a good example of somebody conceiving the American continent as an *Alius*, while Cortez, employing an interpreter and using the myths of the Aztecs to integrate himself into their world, took the attitude one has to an *Alter*. Given these definitions, it might be better, following a suggestion by Cabak Redei (2007), to adopt the terms Ego-culture, Alter-culture, and Alius-culture. As most clearly recognized by Mazur (forthcoming), this makes semiotics of culture into a model of (the difficulties of) communication (cf. Fig. 2.)

3. Empathy for the Other

The question of how, starting out from one culture, one may have access to another, has been asked before, but usually in terms of the relations between individuals, rather than cultures. Indeed, it normally involves the relation of Ego to Alter. In the classical conception, there are two main alternatives: either both Ego and Alter are immediately known, because of

¹ In real grammar, you can of course refer to persons also in the third person, but then you normally do not invite them into any dialogue with you (The third person as a respectful address can be understood in this way).

the relation of empathy existing between them (Classical empathy theory); or only Ego is known immediately, and knowledge of the inner workings of the Ego, together with observations of the other's body, are used to create an idea of Alter by inference (Classical inference theory). Both these alternatives have long since been shown to be problematic, at least as theories of the relations between individuals. As against the theory of empathy, it can be argued that the other cannot be known immediately, or nobody would be able to tell himself and his feelings and other states of mind apart from those of other people. In the case of the inference theory, it has been observed that our understanding of the other often does not seem to work in a way which is laborious, time-consuming and conscious to the point of being adequately termed an inference; and it is not clear what would permit us to discover the analogy between Ego and Alter in the first place, if we only know the outside of the latter and the inside of the former (cf. Gurwitsch 1979). Contemporary conceptions of empathy, such as the so-called Theory theory and the simulation theory (cf. Bermúdez 2010: 363ff.), both would seem to be varieties of the classical empathy theory.

Logically, there are of course two other alternatives: only Alter is immediately known, and Ego has to be constructed from it. Or both Ego and Alter are really constructions made up from indirect evidence. No discussion of the knowledge of others which I know of recognises the reality of these conceptions, the first proposed, at least in some parts of his work, by Bakhtin, and the latter, on at least one interpretation, by Peirce. To Bakhtin, in fact, only Alter is directly known, since only he can be seen as a complete, finished whole. According to Peirce, on the other hand, Ego and Alter are constructions to exactly the same degree.

In his early work, Bakhtin (1990; 1993) is very much preoccupied by the differences between the self and the other, often masquerading under the terms Author and Hero.² Bakhtin points out that it is only the other which may be (and must be) seen from the outside, and thus is perceived

² Bakhtin is undoubtedly arguing for a parallel between the two couples, but it seems to me that he often forgets one of the pairs when suggesting properties that are plausible in one case but not the other. This is true, for instance, of the other as a partner in a dialogue, which hardly pertains to the Hero. Moreover, it is a fundamental fact of semiotic ecology that "precisely that which only I see in the other is seen in myself, likewise, only by the other" (Bakhtin 1990: 23), but this cannot apply to the relationships between Author and Hero. In fact, being a figment of the author's imagination, the hero cannot see anything at all in the author. Even if we take the hero to be the transposition into the text of a real-world person, this person becomes a non-person, to the extent that he is entangled into the text. Indeed, contrary to those that Columbus treated as non-persons in the real world, the hero has no possibility (however remote) of protesting his description by the author.

as a complete and finished whole; the self, on the other hand, is an unlimited process which can never be grasped in its entirety, indeed it is some kind of stream of consciousness, which only comes to a stand-still at death. This is so because “my emotional and volitional reactions attach to objects and do not contract into an outwardly finished image of myself” (Bakhtin 1990: 35; cf. Bakhtin 1993).³ Only the other’s body can be seen completely: there is an ‘excess of seeing’. In the case of ourselves, some part of the body is always lacking, even as reflected in a mirror. This difference translates to the mind. In this sense, the other, contrary to the self, has the property of outsideness, or transgression (Bakhtin 1990: 22ff., 27ff.).

It is not surprising, then, that Bakhtin (1990: 25ff., 61ff.) uses these observations to criticise the theory of empathy popular at the time: understanding cannot be an identification with the other, for, to begin with, this would be pointless, since it would only give us the same thing over again, and in the second place, it is impossible, because the other, by definition, can only be seen from the outside. Bakhtin (1990: 15ff., 17, 25f.) admits that we may imaginatively take the position of the other on ourselves, though what is gained from this outside position can only be appreciated once it is reintegrated into the stream of consciousness, as a phase of the ongoing process that is the self. In a very late text, however, Bakhtin (1986) suggests that a parallel can be made between the meeting of self and other and the interpretation of other cultures: in both cases, understanding is not possible by means of a total identification with the other, but only by entering the other culture and then returning to a position external to it. In our terms, *Alius-culture* can only be transformed into *Alter-culture* by taking one’s own ultimate stand in *Ego-culture*.

Indeed, while Bakhtin’s conception presents itself as an outright inversion of the inference theory, Peirce would seem to extend the latter to both *Ego* and *Alter*. Peirce thus proposes a symmetrical inference theory. It is the idea of the other that is different. Both Bakhtin and Peirce see the self as something which is not and cannot be concluded, something that exists only as developing in time. But while to Bakhtin the other is something static, essentially closed off, for Peirce (as quoted by Colaprieto 1989 and Singer 1984) it is of the same kind as the self, i.e. a stream of consciousness, which cannot be halted — before the moment of death. So from this point of view, the other is just another self to Peirce. On the

³ This sounds very much like Husserl’s notion of *intentions*, which are directed at objects, which they characterise, and which may be used to define the subject intending the objects only in the phenomenological attitude. Indeed, an orthodox follower of Husserl, such as Gurwitsch (1985), similarly denies the existence of the self as an entity given to consciousness (except under special circumstances).

other hand, Peirce claims there is no direct access to knowledge about the self, just as there is none about the other: both are only indirectly known through signs⁴. The access to Ego is thus as indirect as that to Alter. As far as access to knowledge is concerned, then, the self is merely another other to Peirce. The outsideness, or transgression, which Bakhtin attributes to the other is also a property of the Peircean self. Ego and Alter appear as two parallel (or perhaps imbricated) streams of consciousness.

4. *Compact persons* and ordinary persons

The three members of our cast, Ego, Alter, and Alius, should not merely be identified with individuals. They serve to define a world, so they are more properly considered to be collective subjects. In other terms, those of Peirce, they are “compact persons” (Singer 1984; Colapietro 1989). In the case of the publicity spots used by the German branch of IKEA to characterise Swedishness, the collective nature of the Ego-, Alter- and Alius-positions seems fairly obvious (Mazur, forthcoming). But also Mme de Stael brings her typical Frenchness with her on the trips to Eastern Europe (Cabak Redei 2007), and Columbus and Cortez have not forsaken their Occidentality in the New World (Sonesson 2000).

As applied to culture, the empathy theory is clearly irrelevant: there can be no direct access to the other culture. It could nevertheless be true in a general sense: Alter-culture is accessible to us, because, like Ego-culture, it is cultural. Unlike Alius-culture, it is part of the human world. This is just another way of stating the general claim which could be called Vico’s principle, according to which we can know that (and only that) which we have ourselves produced – that is, that which has been produced by other human beings, which, as, humans, are also producers of culture. The opposite of Vico’s principle consists in treating other cultures as nature, thus transforming the human world into Alius, as testified by Columbus’ approach.

No matter what it is worth in the explanation of interpersonal relations, the inference theory does seem, in important respects, to describe the relation of Ego-culture to Alter-culture. The inference does not simply yield a similarity Ego/Alter, but also a difference – the very definition of Alter as opposed to Ego. This is indeed a process which is often laborious, indirect, and time-consuming.

⁴ Here, of course, it is important to remember that practically everything is a sign to Peirce. In this context, at least, he must suppose that signs are somehow more indirect than something else, but it is not clear what the latter is, since even percepts are signs in his view.

Bakhtin's conception, at first, seems entirely unfeasible when applied to the interrelations between cultures. It will be remembered that it is a generalisation from the perception of the body: you can see the whole of the other's body, but not your own. Such a conception becomes absurd when applied to the mind, and even more so when applied to culture: no matter how little you know about yourself or your own culture, you certainly know more than about alien minds and cultures. However, if we focus on the point of view of the Ego, otherness is closed off, finished, complete, but there is no final description (before death) of the Ego. Alter is the black box floating in the stream of consciousness. From the point of view of the Ego, Alter is complete: Ego already knows all he wants to know – or can know – about Alter.

We have seen that Peirce proposes a symmetrical inference theory: we must infer the Ego, as well as the Alter, from the different states (*signs*) within the 'stream of consciousness'. At the level of cultures, at least, this makes sense: Culture is constructed in opposition to Alius-culture and Alter-culture. But if Ego and Alter are both constructs, our access to the 'signs' for constructing them may still be different

Also having recourse to the metaphor of the three common types of personal pronouns to describe analogies between persons and cultures, Peirce put them in place of what was later to become the three fundamental categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. But Peirce did not identify the second person, as one may at first expect, with Secondness, but with Thirdness. In his view, the second person was the most important, not the first: "all thought is addressed to a second person, or to one's future self as a second person" (quoted from Singer, 1984: 83f.). In terms that Peirce took over from Schiller, the first person stood for the infinite impulse (Firstness), the third person for sensuousness (Secondness), and the second person for the harmonising principle (Thirdness). Peirce called his own doctrine *Tuism* (from *Tu*, as opposed to *Ego* and *It*), and he prophesied about a 'tuistic age', in which peace and harmony would prevail. So the Peircean other is a friend and collaborator; he is not the spirit that always says no, the devil in a Biblical sense.

I would not presume to decide who is right, Peirce or Bakhtin, about the self and the other; perhaps we should consider their descriptions to be alternate, but equally possible, models. Semiotics of culture needs to develop models which accounts for different points of view taken by the Ego – apart from those accounted for in the canonical, inverted, and extended models.

5. Conclusion

Semiotics of culture, properly developed, may become a potent instrument for analysing all kinds of relations between cultures, going beyond the simple opposition of Husserl's Homeworld and Alienworld, and the Tartu school's Culture versus Non-culture. The extended cast of Ego, Alter, and Alius, permits a more complex study, which also allows us to profit from the classical and contemporary discussions of empathy. Beyond Columbus and Cortez, Mme de Stael and IKEA, cultural semiotics has to face the ultimate encounter offered by extraterrestrial intelligences.

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