



# Returning from the World Congress of Semiotics in Thessaloniki, 2022

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Of living things we cannot say the totality.

This condition applies to the World Congress of Semiotics that took place in Thessaloniki from 30 August to 3 September 2022. Not only because the format with ten sessions in parallel fatally excluded the possibility of a global (or minimally exhaustive !) grip of the event. Nor because the point of view of the undersigned has been further limited by participation in some panels rather than others, as well as by other sociosemiotic constraints that determine our experiences beyond individual will, such as a return flight one day before the closing of the work, due to other academic commitments.

In fact, the main reason for this impossibility is that in itself the polymorphous and overabundant dimension of the reports which were presented shows how much this congress was that of a living entity. More than 600 planned interventions (the program is available at [https://www.semioticsworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Semiotic\\_program\\_final\\_2022-08-26.pdf](https://www.semioticsworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Semiotic_program_final_2022-08-26.pdf)) and a book of abstract that counted 270 pages. In short, hundreds of scholars gathered to probe the many folds of meaning and signification. And this at a time of sanitary, economic and humanitarian crisis that limited movement and participation in presence, the only way of attending this year's meeting.

Of course, when it is impossible to see precisely the extent of a given space one may fear to miss its real identity. This is a risk to which the ritual of whatever

world congress exposes the most varied disciplines. However, this risk takes a particular acuity in the case of semiotics, perhaps because of its relatively young institutional life, of its plural roots, its constantly outdated intellectual status and its political positioning on the margins of power.

In Buenos Aires, where the latest world congress before the pandemic took place, the theme had been raised by Paolo Fabbri, not without arousing some discontent. Faced with the profound diversity of themes, and above all of approaches to semiotics present at the congress, the Italian semiotician proposed to distinguish between a *marked semiotics* and an *unmarked semiotics*. In my memory, that proposal indicated a form of coexistence, certainly in the paradoxical and provocative way to which Paolo had accustomed us, but still a form of coexistence : to some extent, Fabbri recognised (and asked to recognise) within the vast disciplinary field, on the one hand, a semiotics increasingly aimed at a form of (uncontrolled ?) hybridisation with other disciplines, in particular those of communication and cultural studies, and, on the other hand, a (minoritarian ?) semiotics that stubbornly kept faith in a principle of interdefinition of the concepts and in the need for a methodologically based analytical look at the world — an open and amendable posture, no doubt, but determined to keep alive the confrontation with a well-defined intellectual and disciplinary history, namely the structuralist one.

These two semiotics, if we correctly understood Fabbri at the time, are undoubtedly different, sometimes even in mutual dislike, but ultimately they need each other because they perform distinct functions in the life of the discipline, because such a duality allows them to define one another by their difference and maintains vivid an internal asymmetry that, as Lotman teaches us, is one of the primary sources of intellectual dynamism.

Surely, looking at things in detail, the landscape is much more complex. Unmarked semiotics certainly doesn't perceive itself as unmarked. It is not internally homogeneous. And within it different forms of marking do exist indeed. Likewise, marked semiotics is practiced in many ways. From the start it included different hypotheses for its future development. And it never disdained the encounter with other approaches. Translating them into its own language has always contributed to its building process.

The difference might be that whereas the one emphasises its being a *Semiotics* as such, the other rather tends to conceal its affiliation under other labels. Whereas the one is strictly attached to its own original metalanguage (hoping that this is not just a pose or an embalming of the theory), the other yields more easily to the fascination of surrounding theoretical-conceptual fashions (hoping that this does not mean a complete withdrawal from semiotics' originality or some indifference as regards internal coherence).

If I were to say what is going on with the internal tension between these two branches, captured in the mirror of the Thessaloniki conference, I would say that marked semiotics resists and persists. Maybe it even regains some positions. But this perception may be doubly biased. First because of my subjective positioning

within a series of panels with a strong theoretical-methodological component. Second, because the very location of the congress in the Euro-Mediterranean area may have favoured the presence of semioticians who preferably support a marked approach, which has its epicentre in this part of the world.

Letting apart these possible distortions, the atmosphere in the classrooms, in the corridors, in the moments of sociability seemed to me characterised by dialogue, conviviality and also a certain intra and inter-disciplinary curiosity. I think for instance of the many panels on translation as a shared concept of the discipline. And I would also mention the reopening of a dialogue with Linguistic Anthropology, the most methodological approach to the language-culture nexus in the English-speaking community.

It is quite possible that, in addition to the Greek gods, the role of guardianship entrusted to Jurj Lotman propitiated the success of the rite. A beautiful exhibition set up on the premises of the University of Macedonia celebrated the centenary of his birth with very interesting unpublished or rare materials — letters, newspaper articles, photographs, videos.

But the vitality of the discipline — the partial impression that I had of this vitality — was probably due above all to two other factors.

The first was the presence of many young researchers. As if new forces were pouring into semiotics, bringing lymph and energy to its body at present engaged in a complex and inevitable transformation. A risky generational passage indeed, after the loss or withdrawal of the founding generation (a touching ceremony remembered those who in recent years have left us, in some cases because of the pandemic) while, on the other hand, the new generations have difficulty entering in a stable way inside an academic world that restrains if it does not oppose the presence of semiotics.

In spite of this situation one could feel that such a gathering of the new generation of semioticians — accustomed to having the entire world as a horizon — as well as the increasingly transnational spread of the discipline open up new territories to find work and develop semiotic research. Such a condition is in itself explosive. This accentuated condition of transnationality is also evidenced by the way in which, more and more often, the major semiotic journals are edited by colleagues operating on different continents, calling together scholars who work in many different countries and sometimes not even know each other in person, thus generating an intriguing novelty effect — another sign that semiotics is a living being. A living being which is trying to adjust to the world, changing itself while trying to change the world.

The second effect of vitality arises, so to speak, reflexively. The conference was entitled “Semiotics in the Lifeworld”. As if to reiterate not only that semiotics is alive but also that it is more and more committed to thinking about life in its multiple and interrelated forms. The more the planetary life is at risk, the more the meaning of our lives cracks, the more we must feel obliged to study, understand and defend life. Semiotics does not want to avoid this task, always incomplete but today more necessary than ever.

In the coming years and especially at the next world congress (to be held in Warsaw in two years' time), we shall have the possibility to test the results of this ethical-intellectual challenge — a living discipline committed to putting itself to the test of lived experience and at the disposal of life in general, both under its everyday forms and at the planetary level.