

Kristeva as Semiotician Today¹

Abstract

Even a cursory exploration of the international semiotics scene today reveals that the work of Julia Kristeva is underrepresented. The radicalism of her texts is an abiding reason for the fact that *Sēmeiōtikē* remains stubbornly “inconvertible” (Nikolchina 2011) into mainstream semiotics. This essay elaborates two opposed philosophical temperaments and a series of functional dualisms, including *signification vs. communication* and *quasi-sign vs. fully fledged sign*, in connection with Kristeva’s own dualism, the *symbolic vs. the semiotic*. The quasi-sign doctrine is just one example of how Kristevan dualisms make possible non-reductive existential and social commitments and afford a written textual method applicable across the board in general semiotics. The Kristevan methods of *polylogue*, *narrativization*, and *auto-critique* are highest-order humanities tools for regulating ideology at the level of the text; they also contribute to the inconvertibility of Kristeva’s books as hermetic and seemingly incomprehensible artifacts. The interest of these methods is intractable to quantitative methods and non-describable by natural science. This is one reason we provide such an effective interdisciplinary framework in humanities research – as semiotics aligns more and more with the struggle to revitalize the problematic humanities, Kristeva remains/returns as a core theoretic coordinate.

Keywords

Existential semiotics, polylogue, signification and communication, Kristeva

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1. Signification and communication (and the two temperaments)

The titles of a few of Kristeva's major works give an accurate if still ambiguous picture of why she is inconvertible: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), and *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993). Theory-building enacts the superposition of codes and the transposition of terms between those codes. The most important books on semiotics have always been mostly solipsistic meditations on signification alone, with no clear demarcation between theory and practice – think of Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1964), Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), or Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966). "Nevertheless, in semiotics a distinction must be made between structures of communication and those of signification" (Tarasti 2000, 126). This is the methodological quandary of general semiotics: how to accept the provisional dualisms necessary for making normative judgments, while resisting the reification and mystification entailed by any neat separation of signification from communication? If we are to make any generalizations at all, some dualism is always required. But in order not to reify the distinction two points must be kept in mind:

1. Signification and communication do not exist in isolation from each other, and
2. The interest of semiotics is ultimately not in one or the other, but rather in their interpenetration

Necessary for social and existential commitment is the ability to draw a distinction between directions of movement in synthesis and analysis, descending or ascending levels. By means of accepting such provisional distinctions

one can speak of authenticity of time, place, and subject (or "actor"). Centrifugal and centripetal forces operate these three dimensions. Greimas calls the centrifugal force, which makes a text move in the inner or outer sense, *débrayage* (disengagement), and the centripetal force *embrayage* (engagement). (Tarasti 2000, 118)

In an essay devoted to the linguist and former president of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Émile Benveniste, Kristeva applauds his version of the same dualism, which he calls the *semiotic* and the *semantic* – the semiotic corresponding (imperfectly) to the formalism and substrate-independence of signification, and the semantic to context-specific channels of communication. Kristeva’s essay, collected in *Passions of our Time*, deals mostly with Benveniste’s *Problems of General Linguistics* (1966), where he gives his most systematic treatment of this dualism. As Kristeva writes,

In discussion with Saussure and his conception of signs, the distinctive elements of the linguistic system, Benveniste introduced *two types in the signifyingness* of language: “the” *semiotic* and “the” *semantic*. The *semiotic* [...] is a closed, generic, binary, intralinguistic, systematizing, and institutional meaning, which is defined by a “paradigmatic” and “substitution” relation. The “*semantic*” is [...] defined by a relation of “connection” or “syntagm,” where the “sign” (the *semiotic*) becomes “word” by the “activity of the speaker.” (Kristeva 2019, 39; emphasis in original).

Kristeva does not mention that what Benveniste calls the semantic is (imperfectly) what she calls the semiotic, or that what he calls the semiotic is what she calls the symbolic (Kristeva 1984, 25). His characterization of an elemental dualism adheres closely to the traditional structural-semiological notion of signification, whereas Kristeva’s characterization of the same dualism is, interestingly, more reminiscent of the Peircean biosemiotic way of describing things, where “the semiotic” rather corresponds to that which exceeds the established formal structure of signification. “Her concern is with the aporia of sensation, irreducible to any representation, yet dependent upon it; and with the psyche as a stratified significance that the linguistic and cognitive imperialisms conceal and redistribute along the sole dimension of language” (Nikolchina 2004, 13). For Kristeva, the semiotic is not just a node in a pre-established network of correlations between expression and content; it is rather the forging of new correlations and the interpretive plenitude upon which this draws, and that is indeed very close to its description in much Peircean biosemiotics, with the emphasis upon the interpretant, as well as in

Umberto Eco (1976), whose early position is, again, far more nuanced than his detractors suggest.

Her major difference from the tradition of Peircean bio- and cognitive semiotics is that Kristeva, like her contemporaries in second-generation semiology, refuses to name “semiosis” directly. As with Derrida’s *différance*, the closest we may get to naming semiosis is by tracing the ruptures and discontinuities it produces at the level of the symbolic – by mapping the inadequacy of extant closed structures of signification. This is the Lacanian law: the “real” is never more than a disruption at the level of the symbolic (Lacan 1977), not because there is no reality, but because as soon as one names it concretely it has already been absorbed and foreclosed by the symbolic. Kristeva moves a step closer than her forebears to a positive account of semiosis by defining the semiotic *not* as the formal structure of signification, but rather as the drives, impulses, and sensorimotor affective traces which *intersect* with the symbolic. Though their terminologies do not accord perfectly, Kristeva notes that Benveniste is also mainly interested in this intersection, or *interpenetration* as it may be more accurately named.

Benveniste focused on surpassing the Saussurian notion of the sign and language as a system [...] opening a new dimension of the signifying process [...] “We are just beginning to think about a property that is not yet definable in an integral way”; this orientation that crosses through linguistics “will impose a reorganization of the apparatus of human sciences.” (Kristeva 2019, 39–40)

This unspeakable property (which the Peirceans call semiosis, and which Derrida more cautiously traces as *différance*) is located at the intersection of signification and communication. While Kristeva gets closer than Derrida to semiosis (through her postulate of the *chora* and her strategic redefinition of the semiotic), closer to the “irrepresentable transphallic jouissance of a prelinguistic sensory fusion” (Nikolchina 2004, 6), the fact remains that her description of the “thetic” moment (Kristeva 1984: 44–48) of interpenetration remains mostly differential, “immanent” and non-positivist. Despite *sémiologie* often being opposed to existentialism² and phenomenology in the Heideggerian, Hegelian, as well as the Sartrean senses, Kristevan *sēmeiōtikē* certainly shares

² Sartre and Kristeva are usually situated at opposite ends of the spectrum in the debate about *form and social commitment*.

Tarasti's philosophical temperament and preoccupation with the notion of negation. As already noted, negativity is one of the hallmarks of Kristeva's writing, whose convenient synecdoche is *Kristeva's crucible* – the often-cited gauntlet in *Revolution in Poetic Language*:

Going through the experience of this crucible exposes the subject to impossible dangers: relinquishing his identity in rhythm, dissolving the buffer of reality in a mobile discontinuity, leaving the shelter of the family, the state, or religion. The commotion the practice creates spares nothing: it destroys all constancy to produce another and then destroys that one as well. (Kristeva 1984, 103–104)

The title of Miglena Nikolchina's 2004 *Matricide in Language* captures the forbidding tone of Kristeva's negativity quite well, as it channels “the lethal, depersonalizing tendency of the feminine erotic” (Nikolchina 2004, 7). According to her, prior to negation the subject exists as an unchallenged (and un-self-aware) formal structure. It is outside of time and not conceived in terms of any substrate, unsent by any sender and unreceived by any receiver. This formal closure and perfection is only broken by its actualization in the communication substrate:

the recognition of the epistemological space as split into two irreconcilable types of thought where “the one is articulated only through its ignorance of the other: representation and its production, the ratiocination of objects and the dialectic of their process (of their becoming)” [Kristeva, *Polylogue*] [...] (Nikolchina 2004, 29)

This recognition of the epistemological space as split, always open, and never saturated results from the realization that the production of the sign and of the subject cannot be given within the homogeneous sphere of concepts and ideas.

The emphasis on negation dictates stylistic concerns that differ somewhat between Tarasti and Kristeva-Nikolchina. Both completely reject the possibility of explaining interpenetration in the language of natural science, defending the methods of the humanities, from exegesis to hermeneutics and poetics, to translation, dialectics and autobiography. In Tarasti's case, the existential presence of the subject

is manifested in the text by means of personal asides, anecdotes, and musing in a meandering way from topic to topic, and this lends itself to being read as though dictated by a man seated by the fire in his country residence in the forest. In contrast, Kristeva's method is much closer to that lethal, de-personalizing auto-critique, in which metatheory is piled upon metatheory to the point that any narrating subject or baseline object language crumbles beneath the reader's feet. When it comes to textual method, or *how to write semiotics*, there is no better teacher than Kristeva. This is the topic of the third section of this essay: narrativity, the polylogue, and auto-critique. What Tarasti and Kristeva truly share, beyond their emphasis on negation, is an interest in "[w]hat is behind, before or after, outside or too much inside" the *communicated sign* (Eco 1979, 317). That is, by remaining committed to the elemental distinction between signification and communication, they make it possible to distinguish *sign* from *non-sign*. The next section summarizes the *quasi-sign doctrine*, in which, in addition to differentiating the sign and the non-sign, *two types of non-sign* are invented. The interpretive effects of the various textual methods discussed in the third section will be conceptualized on the basis of how they engage with quasi-signs.

2. The quasi-sign doctrine

Quasi-signs are precisely the signs that Eco excludes from the domain of semiotics proper, those "behind, before or after" actualized signs, entailing consideration of the communication substrate as distinct from the matrix of signification, thus inviting hybridization with the vocabularies of the applied disciplines, against which Eco warned.

It was also Eco who coined the notion of semiotic threshold. While the lower threshold has classically served to theorize the debate around non-linguistic (and non-human) meaning, the upper threshold has received less attention. Or rather, the upper threshold has rarely been theorized as such, whereas the idea for which it stands – a post-semiotic automatization of meaning facilitated by various technologies of communication – has actually always been of great interest, particularly for structural semiology. Of course, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra (1994) is emblematic of the various terms to label post-semiotic quasi-signs. In fact, one could say that the preoccupation with either the upper or lower threshold, and their limit cases, tends

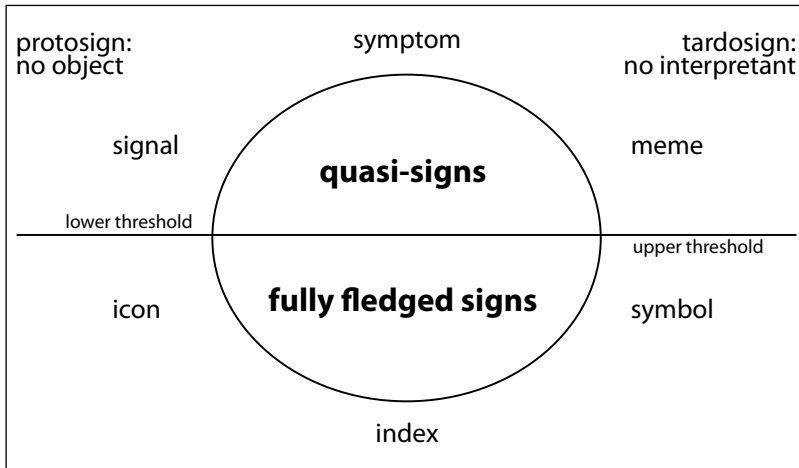


Figure 2: The quasi-sign doctrine (adapted from Bennett 2021, 193)

to align pretty consistently with the differences in philosophical temperament in semiotics today (those interested in simple non-human signs tend to be more optimistic, and those interested in post-symbolic technological signs more pessimistic). In other words, Kristeva's negative temperament tends to focus more on the dangers of post-semiotic quasi-signs, showing much less interest in the lower threshold, particularly as it relates to questions of non-human signs. This is not to say that she is uninterested in sensorimotor affects and drives – on the contrary, this is what the *chora* (Kristeva 1984, 25) is all about – but simply that her main concern remains above the upper threshold, where the (Lacanian) symbolic interpellates the subject into the structure of another order. This is why there are two types of quasi-sign. One of them specifies the major interest of the group of pessimistic semiologists committed to negation as a starting point. This interest is usually called *ideology* and its critique, and has to do with the crystallization and ossification of the dynamic, vital, and plural into what Eco calls sclerotic signs. In these sign complexes one could include fundamentalism, mob mentality, the loss of the referent, and, later, higher symbolic technologies of data processing and primitive artificial intelligence (see Figure 3). In all these cases there is an automatization in the sense of a decrease in deliberation³ on the object, or a decrease in the production of an interpretant, to the extent that the formerly fully fledged sign appears to regress to a pre-semiotic

³ Borrowing from the paradigm of biosemiotics, this could also be characterized as a decrease in choice (Kull 2018), or a diminishment of *agency* (Sharov and Tønnessen 2022) on the part of the organism.

sign, like a virus or bacterium – but there are important differences between the post-semiotic *tardo-sign* and what Giorgio Prodi called the *proto-sign* (Prodi 1988). This is why there must be two types of quasi-sign. Tarasti is hip to quasi-signs, but names them differently. He divides them into *pre-signs* and *post-signs* (Tarasti 2000, 7).

Figure 2 shows the first distinction, between fully fledged signs and quasi-signs. Charles Sanders Peirce's icon-index-symbol maps on to contextually grounded and "triadic" signs; and the symptom-signal-meme triad maps on to decontextualized, dyadic quasi-signs.⁴ We introduce a new distinction between the *proto-sign* (a term already widely used in biosemiotics) and the *tardo-sign* (a wholly new invention), the two types of quasi-sign. The proto-sign corresponds to what Tarasti calls the pre-sign. In the biosemiotic understanding derived from Giorgio Prodi and developed by Alexi Sharov and Morten Tønnessen (2022), proto-signs are the simple biological precursors of proper signs, such as those found in bacteria. For Tarasti, proto-/pre-signs are not found exclusively in simple biology, but may be found in any substrate, being defined rather formally by their potentiality and indeterminacy (and not according to communication context or species), yet lacking (virtual) symbolic codification. The tardo-sign corresponds to Tarasti's post-sign, overlapping with similar theories in the critique of ideology, simulacra, and the homogenizing and decontextualizing effects of information and communication technologies. Early-stage tardo-signs like ideology and fundamentalism exist on a continuum with late-stage tardo-signs like memes, viral videos, and artificial intelligence: they comprise varying degrees of the automatization of the biological agent's interpretive activity. Figure 3 shows how tardo-signs map on to different kinds of decontextualized, post-symbolic artifacts.

The quasi-sign doctrine is necessary today when we are still "in the process of perishing as the being of language continues to shine ever brighter upon our horizon" (Foucault 1970, 386), and whose menacing light is only growing brighter. The panopticon (Foucault 1977) started out as a hypothetical physical prison of total surveillance, but today is a very *real* if still *virtual* prison. Whereas Jacques Derrida foretold the replacement of speech by *writing* (Derrida 1969), we now see that speech, as the primary form of human communication, has been replaced not by writing per se, but by texting, chatting, and sharing.

⁴ The six terms of the quasi-sign doctrine are derived in a modified form from Thomas A. Sebeok (1975). For a full explanation of this derivation, see Bennett 2021, 191–204.

When, in the 1970s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari asserted in *Anti-Oedipus* that the interpreting subject should be treated as nothing more than a *recording surface* (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 4, 11, 16, 71), it was not completely clear what they meant; but now we see: subjectivity is mediated by a series of screens where every input and output is recorded. The dramatic intrusion of communication technology into every dimension of public and private life is today so pervasive as almost not even to merit mentioning – the point is that *second-generation semiology anticipated the paradigm shift to life online*;⁵ and that the Lacanian notion of the symbolic – its dangers and promises – looms behind all of these theorists. They have been indirectly developing the quasi-sign doctrine all this time.

When it comes to Peirce and ideology critique, the work of Terrence Deacon affords a unique descriptive insight into the cognitive reality and specific nature of ideology. His *cognitive penumbra* (Deacon 2006, 26–27), *golems* (Deacon 2012, 89), and the so-called *inertia of mental content* (Deacon 2012, 518) also work in this direction. Following this biosemiotic line of thinking, the neurolinguist John Schumann, another professor at the University of California, speaks of *the autonomy of the symbolic*; and he, for one, *does* emphasize its dark side (like Lacan). Existing applications of Peirce to notions of the psychoanalytic unconscious exist (see Bennett 2021, 154–63). In the Peircean camp, it is probably Søren Brier, in *Cybersemiotics* (2008), who most helps us in the effort to define quasi-signs (Brier 2008; 370).

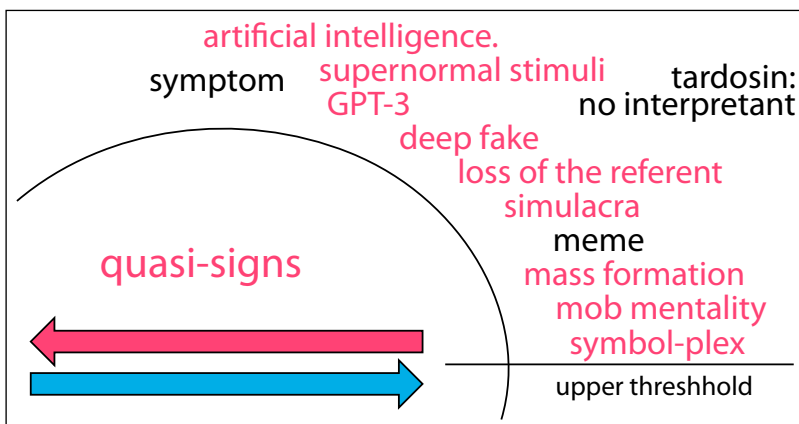


Figure 3: The continuum of tardo-signs

⁵ For a full-length treatment of this topic, follow this link to a lecture given on the topic at Palacký University Olomouc 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgMvbN20Afc>

Brier reminds us that all these technologies – artificial intelligence and information and communication technologies – fail to exhibit the semiotic capacities of living beings. At most, they succeed in producing quasi-signs, but in what cases are quasi-signs used by organic beings? And what is the difference between a digitally automated quasi-sign and a simple, pre-semiotic proto-sign? Brier does not ask these questions as quasi-signs are only a secondary consideration for him and his approach is avowedly Peircean, completely disinterested in structural semiology and deconstruction, and predictably does not share their pessimistic philosophical temperament.

The diagrams above depict a cycle of movements between the kinds of signs. Signs both generate and *degenerate*: there are two directions of movement. The differing temperaments encountered in semiotics today are related to the preoccupation with one or the other direction by different intellectual factions. Part of the doctrine developed here is that any adequate understanding of the current array of tardo-signs must consider both directions and will thus exhibit a dual temperament: both seriously pessimistic (about the likelihood of overcoming convergent global crises by means of incremental social change), and profoundly optimistic (about the real possibility of transcendence, and the dual nature of the symbolic as potentially facilitating this transcendence). Narrativization, the polylogue, and auto-critique may be understood as textual tools for regulating the production of quasi-signs.

3. Narrativizing theory – the polylogue

The commitment to certain provisional dualisms affords a further number of possible commitments and distinctions, as detailed above. The Hjelmslevian dualism of form and substance stratifies the planes of content and expression into a fourfold system charged with special descriptive power. Although the inner machinations of the Peirce-Hjelmslev hybrid (Bennett 2021, 14) will not be discussed further here, the style of writing under consideration in this section can only be precisely defined by means of this hybrid, as the retroactive action of the substance of the signifier upon the form of the signified. The most obvious examples of this creative critical writing come from the surrealist tradition, but in principle it may be enacted in unlimited ways,

when the otherwise inessential features of the channel are repurposed to reorganize the contents of the message. This crypto-Hjelmslevian signature writing was first proposed by Roland Barthes, when he called attention to the difference between the secondary *metalinguistic* and *connotative* semiotic systems (Barthes 1969, 17). Only a few years later, Jacques Derrida proposed the same Hjelmslevian (1976, 57–58) basis for understanding his own version of this writing, which he called *archi-écriture* (arche-writing) (see Derrida 1976; 110, 128, 140, 228). In all these cases, there is a special *genre* of theoretical writing connected to ideology critique, which has always implicated structural semiology. Kristeva first named it *auto-critique* in the oft-cited passage that always bears quoting in full:

Semiotics is therefore a mode of thought where science sees itself as (is conscious of itself as) a theory. At every instant of its production, semiotics thinks of its object, its instruments and the relation between them, and in so doing thinks (of) itself: as a result of this reflection, it becomes the theory of the very science it constitutes. This means that semiotics is at once a re-evaluation of its object and/or of its models, a critique both of these models (and therefore of the sciences from which they are borrowed) and of itself (as a system of stable truths). As the meeting-point of the sciences and an endless theoretical process, semiotics cannot harden into *a* science let alone into *the* science, for it is an open form of research, a constant critique that turns back on itself and offers its own auto-critique. As it is its own theory, semiotics is the kind of thought which, without raising itself to the level of a system, is still capable of modelling (thinking) itself. (Kristeva 1986, 77; emphasis in original)

Two or more non-equivalent descriptive systems are superimposed; terms between those systems are transposed; contradictions between the systems are foregrounded and preserved. We could say that *all* rational inquiry proceeds in this manner – but in this specific kind of writing, at a certain pitch of metalinguistic hyperdensity, the object-language/metalanguage distinction breaks down as metalanguage is piled on metalanguage. For this early period of second-generation semiology, the style of writing (of auto-critique) is characterized precisely by this pitch of hyperdensity and breakdown.

Kristeva's early writing is full of heterogeneous terms, often drawn from the most unlikely sources. It sometimes leaves the impression of an elaborate cipher. In one essay only ("The Bounded Text"), she borrows terms from such a variegated assembly of authors as Bakhtin (*ideologeme*), Greimas (*sememe*), Quine (his *reification of universals*), Shklovksy (*loop*), von Wright (*alethic, deontic*), Tesniere (*junctive, translative*), etc. Her later works grow more restrained, and yet drastically transplanted words continue to appear, introducing the flavor of different metalanguages, or foreign tongues, and exotic alphabets. (Nicolchina 2004, 53)

Over and above her social and existential commitments, it is the inscrutable, hermetic result of these procedures that is the most, or perhaps the second-most, inconvertible feature of Kristeva's work. She

enacts the sliding of the theoretical signifier, a technique that sets off the nonuniversality of theoretical discourses. This technique is most clearly exemplified in the method of *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, which consecutively proceeds through general theories of meaning, theories of language, and theories of the subject in order to demonstrate their indispensability and inadequacy for describing the object of Kristeva's inquiry. The method has been described as montage, but is more precisely described as a stratification of the theoretical discourse in a manner that resists one-dimensional filiations and loyalties, and that approaches its object via a number of distinct routes. (Nicolchina 2004, 27)

Nicolchina's own text proceeds consecutively in this way. The catachresis of the multiverse as a multimedia trope extends the horror of the postmodern as a state of affairs that can no longer be described as something that comes to pass, and passes away. Besides auto-critique, the author of this style could be characterized as the *polylogue* (Kristeva 1977). Far from actually rejecting the notion of metalanguage, as Lacan ostensibly proposed, the polylogue stacks metalanguage upon metalanguage. It would be more appropriate to say that, in practice, there is only metalanguage and no object language. However, object languages continue to exist, even as they fail to provide the discursive support that their name implies. This is how to wield dualisms like signification and communication, or fully

fledged sign and quasi-sign: not as rigid oppositions, but as oscillating poles that reverse positions at their moment of consummation. As a result, “Kristeva’s works have to be entered as one enters a hall of mirrors; the doubling and mirroring, the play of masks and reflections is the medium of her polylogue, which as a genre is, too, a multiple splitting of discourse” (Nikolchina 2004, 57). The polylogue is the genre of intertextuality (Kristeva 1984, 59–60) as well as the subject-in-process (Nikolchina 2004, 75), the weaver of incompatible codes, perpetually exiled from any one of them. “Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, the transformation of one sign-system into another or, rather, the overlapping interference and mutual transformation of different sign-systems, provides a fit designation for this procedure that bypasses unified space and linear chronology” (Nikolchina 2004, 11). But intertextuality has always been the buzzword in Kristeva studies. Nikolchina’s emphasis on the notion of polylogue reformulates ideas that later crystallized into “intertextuality” (and “subject-in-process”); in performing this intertextual translation between different periods of Kristeva’s corpus, Nikolchina acts as a polylogue herself, repurposing the enigmas of the original texts. She “performatively enacts Kristeva’s theory of maternity on a number of levels, from the theoretical via the fictional to the poetic” (Nikolchina 2004, 10).

Nikolchina cites the founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, Juri Lotman in her book, but does not clearly link the concept of the polylogue to Lotman’s own principle of cultural and linguistic polyglotism. In the latter theory, the sign exists at the intersection of at least two incompatible codes (Kull 2018). Given their common inheritance of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism, as well as other commonalities, it is surprising that more syntheses of Kristeva and Lotman have not been undertaken; however, this can partly be explained by the problem of inconvertibility. Because Lotman’s work is rightly perceived as a part of a broader intellectual resistance to Soviet totalitarianism, it is easily converted into an emblem of Estonian Westernization and post-Soviet sovereignty, whereas Kristeva’s name has always been tied (sometimes unfairly) to her on-and-off relationships with various communist organizations. The Tartu school has clearly shifted to the semiotics of biology and the environment, producing advances already noted in this article (for a more comprehensive discussion, see Bennett 2021, 164–212), and the concept of polylogue finds a place equally well there. That

is, the concept of polylogue is suitable for general semiotics because the multiplicity and coexistence of incompatible codes – and the act of choosing between these codes – has also been adopted as a definition of the sign by biosemiotics (Hoffmeyer 1996; Kull 2015; Lacková 2020). A Kristevan approach to biosemiotics would well suit its increasingly critical orientation, demonstrated by a recent paper in *Sign Systems Studies* about “the second turn in biosemiotics” (Barreto et. al 2022).

As Nikolchina portrays it, the polylogue is first *read into* certain works of literature. Kristeva reads it into Stéphane Mallarmé and Gérard de Nerval; Bakhtin reads it into Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Nikolchina reads it into late Virginia Woolf, via Kristeva. This *via* is important for the next step, because the polylogue is then redeployed within the analysis itself. “The polylogue can be seen as a transposition of Bakhtin’s polyphony into the problematic heterogeneity of theoretical writing” (Nikolchina 2004, 45). Here one sees clearly how theory and practice interpenetrate in Kristeva’s work, as the techniques belonging to the novel and the poem are utilized in a theoretical text. “Her theoretical discourse undergoes a deliberate fictionalization, which becomes more explicit and evident with each new book” (Nikolchina 2004, 45). It is actually more useful to point to the moments of fictionalization in the work of *Nikolchina* rather than Kristeva, because the former already takes another step in the chain of this “consecutive” process. She asks, “Is this the beginning of the process that will finally take the chips of our motherless souls out among the stars? At the dawn of an irreversible transformation of the maternal function, a transformation that technology is already bringing about[?]” (Nikolchina 2004, 13).

Conclusion

The fight against the transformation of European universities into Yankee-style private industry provides a nice rallying point for general semiotics. The notion of the sign helps us to define the objects and tools of the humanities that are not quantifiable or describable in the language of natural science. Semiotics cannot be upscaled or automated; it cannot be meanly instrumentalized; it will probably not give you the edge you’ve been looking for in marketing research analytics. Old-fashioned notions like “cultivating the sensibility” or better yet “disinterested interest” come from German idealism so it

should be no surprise that they crop up in Charles S. Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jakob von Uexküll, and Ernst Cassirer, but the works of Hegel and Kant certainly give us more food for thought here than do those of Peirce. The most distinctive commonality between Tarasti and Kristeva is that in semiotics today, where the vast majority place Peirce, they place Hegel. It may be that the vogue for Peirce in semiotics since the 1990s has something to do with the fetishization of STEM (science, engineering, technology, and mathematics); after all, unlike Kant and Hegel, Peirce was an accomplished natural scientist and mathematician and his texts reflect this; nor do they at all resemble the kind of writing under discussion in this essay. A further incidental point which I think is important is that the private business model afflicting European universities today, and the resulting marginalization of the humanities, is partly the outcome of longstanding counterintelligence operations conducted to eradicate communism from European intellectual life. Despite all this, and for a number of other reasons, Peirce remains a good choice as a philosophical foundation for general semiotics; yet there are certain tasks for which Peirce does not provide the necessary tools. For these we must look elsewhere. If we can find these tools and use them, then we may begin “to think about a property that is not yet definable in an integral way,” as Benveniste put it (qtd. in Kristeva 2018, 40); we may start to talk about something like semiosis (as Peirce openly named it), while maintaining our commitment. We may remain inconvertible.

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