FROM TEXT TO INTERACTION (INTRO)

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Before being the title of our new journal, *Digital age in semiotics and communication* was a short definition of the research program of the Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies at the New Bulgarian University. Or rather, it was a project for such a research program, following the publication of some successful articles on new media, the big demand for such topics in our university courses, and the convergence of four PhD candidates in semiotics with topics on digital culture. Furthermore, we have organized two round tables with the same title, one in 2016 at the 3rd ICON conference in Kaunas and one in 2017 at the 13th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS), and finally we have dedicated an entire Early Fall School of Semiotics to it this past September. From the participants in these events come the papers of the first issue of the journal, as well as the consolidated impression that such a research per-

spective could canalize a lot of contributions that were frequent but outside a unified program – until now.

Of course, today speaking of a "unified program" in the humanities is a utopian act, given the nature of our communities, the hyper-productivity of our colleagues, the orientation towards projects, a shortage of funding, and predatory open-access publishing. *Digital age in semiotics and communication* is the first specialized semiotic journal dedicated to the deep cultural transformations after the advent of the internet, and thus provides a platform for a long term collaboration with those fellow semioticians who intend to dedicate their research predominantly to such a topic. It is conceived as a platform for a kind of intellectual crowd sourcing for new semiotic ideas, adequate to new cultural realities, thus opening our discipline to the cultural agenda of the XXI century.

But *what are the new ideas we seek?* This is an important question because it touches not only theoretical issues, but a vision for the future role of our discipline as well. The new ideas we are looking for are obviously related to the application of semiotic theory to the problems of digital culture. Our statistical observation is that the big figures of present day semiotics are not very eager to deal with internet, social media, mobile communication, etc. It is enough to see the topics of the series "Semiotics and its Masters" during the last two world congresses of the IASS (2014 and 2017) where among about 40 titles we see one or two exceptions. Definitely such lecture series represent the highest quality of scholarly research and present many new ideas. The identity of our discipline relies on the work of these scholars and what we invite here for is not in opposition with them. It's just that the new ideas of the "semiotic masters" are about "old" subjects, like the value of past masters, or a theoretic clarification of the ideas of Peirce or Greimas, the language of science and mathematics, the statute of biosemiotics, reflections on the notions of text and sign, etc. Here we invite new ideas on new cultural realities. On the one hand this might be application of the existing semiotic models to the cultural consequence of the advent of the internet. Such are all papers in the present issue, in addition to those that do not apply any semiotic model. This is why we included "and communication" in the title: with the incredible proliferation of the new communicative forms we may even postpone the semiotic synthesis. It is important to involve "internet natives" in semiotic research, scholars with digital habitus who will not be inclined to distort the new cultural reality in order to fit the old schemes, but rather question the old schemes in order to improve them with regard to new cultural realities. And this is the long term strategy of

our project – may we think of *a new semiotic paradigm*, different from the major existing paradigms and more adequate to the digital age?

One possible direction for such an inquiry is to have a closer look at the "semiotic ontologies" which ground the major currents in semiotics. Eco, for instance, attempts this in the first chapter of *Kant and the Platypus* (Eco 2000) called "On being". There he interprets very freely Aristotle, taking two key phrases from his work: "being can be said in many ways" (21) and "Being is everything that can be spoken of" (9). From there Eco constructs a strong pragmatic framework, which puts the speaking and language as the major theoretic "gate" where Being is semiotically captured. After this it is not difficult for him to demonstrate that the major philosophic ideas of the Western tradition are nothing else but part of the infinite endeavors to *put Being into words*, being this the only possible way to approach it.

Another important foundation of semiotic theory comes from A. J. Greimas. If Eco puts the pragmatic dimension of the verbal language at the center of his foundation (as well as Lotman in the center of the Semiosphere), Greimas focuses his entire paradigm on the abstract immanent side of the linguistic phenomena, from where he expands semiotic inquiry towards a universal grammar of signification. Here again a strong theoretic "gate" is constructed, everything relevant for the semiotic interest is captured by the unavoidability of meaning. Greimas often quotes the famous aphorism by Merleau-Ponty that "we are doomed to meaning (condamnés au sens)", which means that whatever phenomena comes to being in the human world necessarily assumes a meaningful form, for which verbal language prepares our cognition.

But the great step in this paradigm shift is achieved when a basic unit of signification is taken not as the word and its semantic implications, nor the statement and its ontological claims of truthfulness, but the *text*. The text is the methodological "gate" of this approach, the occurrence of signification when we have to study it scientifically (see Marrone 2010: 3-80), i.e. as linguists and not as bad philosophers (Greimas 1970: 10). "Outside the text, there is no salvation", says one of Greimas' most famous slogans, but that is exactly where we are going to look for it.

During the golden years of structuralism and semiotics the textualist perspective was so powerful that some philosophers, not bad at all, worked on it in dialog with semiotics, often being critical but still strengthening the semiotic ontology of the text. Among many I would mention Derrida and Ricoeur, both important "gatekeepers" within unique and influential paradigms. Derrida invented the writing/differance "gate" in order to be able to deconstruct any kind of discourse the others made, as well as his

own sometimes. He put in circulation another mythical textualist slogan: "there is no outside the text!"

More important for our review of semiotic ontologies is that of Ricoeur. He was the first to try to systematically define what a text is (Ricoeur 1970), but he was also the first to develop the textually inspired *narrative ontology*. In his initial attempts he exports textualist "knowhow" to the general notion of human action (see Ricoeur 1991 *From text to action*"), where instead of considering the natural interactivity of the way people exist socially within a new paradigm, he relies on the analogy with the textuality and on the linguistically inspired speech act theory. Then he develops his theoretic masterpiece–*Time and narrative* (1983 – 1985), where Being is postulated to occur only in a narrative form. Such a move, in a similar vein to Eco, is taken from a very "passionate" interpretation of some of Aristotle's notions from his theory on drama (in *Poetics*), resulting in the reconceptualized notion of *emplotment*. Thus in Ricoeur, emplotment becomes the theoretical "gate" for the occurrence of Being.

Before I move to the proposal that interactivity should be the ontological principle of the digital semiotics paradigm, I would like to comment on the status of a phenomenologically-oriented semiotics. If we have to put it in the same figurative interpretation, phenomenology puts the theoretical "gate" of its method on *perception* and its backstage, *intentionality*. As a philosophic orientation it gave a huge impetus of the XX century thought and its hybridization with the linguistic turn is the best we had for decades. But a phenomenologically-oriented semiotics does not represent a unified paradigm with well-defined theoretic "gate", perhaps because there are too many competing candidates, or maybe because the overwhelming figure of Peirce monopolizes the scene and in his genius insights there is anything but unity. As Eco notes, "it's well known that you can make Peirce say anything you want, according to how you approach him" (Eco 2000: 399.), so the temptation (to which almost no semiotician resists) is to find a theory of everything you need in his writings. In our case we can look for a theory of interactivity which we can then apply to internet culture, thus proving for the nth time that Peirce was right. However, this is not our intention here, although as a method the digital semiotics approach could have many things in common with cognitive semiotics, inspired by Peircean phenomenology, as postulated by Sonesson in his recent publications (Sonesson 2017).

It is not an exaggeration to say that many of the famous semiotic paradigms are conditioned if not entirely inspired by the great cultural innovations of the XX century like the artistic avant-gardes, mass culture, mass

media, and psychoanalysis. Think of the Moscow and the Prague linguistic circles, Barthes, Eco, Lotman (in part), Kristeva, etc. In this sense, semiotics as a research discipline is in debt to the great cultural innovation of the last decades – the advent of the internet. Obviously when we live in a different time, doing theory has a different meaning, after the managerial turn of the academic system, obsessed with scientific metrics, pushes us to write articles rather than monographs, humanities are more and more marginalized, we are paid to be teachers rather than researchers. Still, here we are, founding the first journal entirely dedicated to a semiotic innovation, adequate to the theoretic challenges of present-day culture.

The proposal for reflection here came after a discussion with Simone Arcagni in Sozopol, where interactivity was placed in the center of what he called "the post cinema galaxy" (together with immersion, technology, web and software; Arcagni 2016: 36 ff). Contemporary analysts provide various models for the culture of the digital age, all of them considering interactivity as its central distinctive feature. Thus for example Manovich compares one time's notion of document or a text with what goes on today:

> In software culture, we no longer have "documents," "works," "messages" or "recordings" in twentieth-century terms. Instead of fixed documents that could be analyzed by examining their structure and content (a typical move of the twentieth-century cultural analysis and theory, from Russian Formalism to Literary Darwinism), we now interact with dynamic "software performances." (2013: 33)

The penetration of such a "software mediation" into our experience of the world has deep cultural consequences: *the cultural content "behaves" in an interactive manner*, our cognitive habits are changing, and those of the internet native generations are incompatible with traditional notions of education, knowledge and society. Both de Kerckhove and Carr examine the psychosocial consequences of the age of interactivity, seen as an outsourcing of the mind's effort of thinking into external processing devices. De Kerckhove's (2011) strong statement in opposition to Carr, is that today "interactivity is a condition, not an option", that the connective mind is better than the previous ones. Carr sees in this cultural interactive condition a degradation in attention and depth of thought. Interactivity requires a permanent taking of decisions, which are interruptions of attention compared to the inferential walks of the mind of the linear text's interpreter (2010: 115 ff).

Further examples proliferate. Our proposal is to place interactivity as the ontological principle of a paradigm for digital semiotics, not because of the psychological consequences, but because of the deep shift in the logic of meaning it brings. In digital culture, language is no longer the lord of semiotic phenomena, but *the communicative disposition of the culture holders*. The language is there, together with an incredible variety of visual, audio, kinetic and other expressive forms. But it is a different kind of temporality that determines the syntagmatic chain of meaning making. In the textualist perspective, the theoretic gate is based on the immanent relations inside fixed texts, which are later exported to grasp a cultural reality that is supposed to have a sedimented pattern of occurrence. In digital culture there are no cultural sediments, there is no time for the habits to take place before the new ones are necessary. The cultural logic is that of the participation in a mediated flow, where the battle for meaning and recognition of our digital existence meets the scarcity of time and attention of those we are addressing. At the time of Shakespeare and, later, of the textualists, the whole world was a scene where what was taking place was previously written as text; today the whole world is a videogame where each player's participation depends on the availability of resources like lives, time, power etc. *The cultural logic of the digital age is economic and not linguistic as it was before*, in the same way one story may work as a linear narrative and be experienced (rather than interpreted) as a videogame in a completely different way. One thing is to produce sense, playing with the dead body of the text; another is to be inside the narrative and qualification, performance and sanction to depend on your decisions, skills and management of scarce resources.

Interactivity transforms information into experience, and this is our last consideration. Jeremy Rifkin's point that the new economy transforms markets from the logic of the exchange to that of the access to a paid-for experience (2000) is quite similar to Manovich's observation on the XX century documents and the XXI century software performances. *Digital culture is deeply commercial in its foundation*, as far as the new economy is much more efficient at absorbing every aspect of our lives into the logic of economic value. Big data mining is the process that transforms our daily online activity into a precious good, purchased by companies and corporations. We receive amazing services for free such as Google, Facebook and many others, in order to spend the most precious and scarce resource there – our time. And this process is not "innocent" at all. Our lives take the shape of those services, anonymous software algorithms select the content which forms our worldviews, determine the range of our online social

life, and suggest us what to do in future in order to be more predictable as consumers.

This is more or less what the paper of **Vuzharov** "Personalization Algorithms – Limiting the Scope of Discovery? How algorithms force out serendipity" is about. The text is very informative and rich with explanations for the major backstage processes behind the seductive services of *Google* and *Facebook*. The author keeps a strong ethical stance concerning the necessity for more awareness in this regard, and to make the point more clear uses the textual pragmatic model of Eco from *The Limits of Interpretation* (1992).

The next two papers analyze new *identity mechanisms* emerged in digital culture. **Andacht's** paper "The Imagined Community Revisited through a Mock-Nationalistic *YouTube* Web Series" is dedicated to a new and original form of video narrative, addressing the Uruguayan national identity in a totally different way compared to the nation formation described by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983). The main theoretical concept of the British scholar is semiotically revised with the help of some Peircean terms.

The paper of **Lankauskaitė** and **Liubinienė** "A Shift from 'Me' to 'We' in Social Media" examines the impact of the Web 3.0. on the mentality of internet users. The shift from 'me' to 'we' is seen as a consequence of technological innovations which allow crowdsourcing, participatory culture, collective intelligence, etc. The thesis is illustrated with three case studies of an online TV, an offline social action, initiated in social media and an online project for artistic collaboration.

The next five papers are dedicated to various *aesthetic and interactive practices* in digital culture. In his paper "Postcard from Istanbul: Digital Reconstruction of the City as Memory in Tasos Boulmetis's *Polítiki Kouzína / A Touch of Spice / Baharatin Tadi*", **Dimitriadis** explicates the narrative mechanisms for representing the past with the help of digital effects. Contrary to the mainstream use of the digital special FX, in this case a strong poetic effect is achieved in visualizing the space of memory.

Cassone dedicates his paper "'It's over 9000.' Apeiron Narrative Configurations in Contemporary Mediascape" to an interesting videogame phenomenon, started as a pen and paper role-playing game in Japan prior to the digital age. The particular narrative device of individual growth of power in the fictional discourse, after the transfer of the plot as a videogame, is analyzed with the tools of generative semiotics and is spread as a meme and viral phenomenon.

Another paper is about "Constructing the Corporate *Instagram* Discourse – a critical visual discourse approach". There **Poulsen** takes a critical stance towards an important incoherence in the way Instagram represents its mission, and at the same time how the app is trying to regulate the use of the platform and its visual tools.

In his text "Formalism and Digital Research of Literature," **Debnar** examines another phenomenon typical of the digital age–the mass digitalization of literary texts and the challenges for the reader in front of huge archives available for everybody. The key notion of his text, borrowed from Moretti, is *distant reading,* and the author's contribution is to demonstrate the validity of the formalist approach to that theory.

In "Enchanted Object: Indian Sari, Negotiating the Online and the Offline Space", **Khanwalkar** makes a sociosemiotic analysis of a garment with huge symbolic value – the *Sari.* The main object of the research is how online discourse on the Sari upgrades and transforms its significance, how local and global interact in the identity formation process.

In the next section there are two papers on the digital age in *corporate communication*. In "Engaging Brand Communication in Facebook – a Typology of the Brand Page Users", **Kartunova** identifies four types of Facebook users of corporate pages using the classical approach of Jean-Marie Floch. The study is supported by empirical data, collected among the target groups and puts the main emphasis on brand culture adoption and brand narrative engagement.

Asimova has chosen a semiotic content analysis approach in order to investigate "Digital Culture of the Regulated Industries. Focus: Tobacco Sector". The conclusions state that although the efficacy of the legal regulations in such industries, social media, blogs and forums open possibilities for marketers in innovative ways of promotion.

Contrary to all other papers the last text in the journal, written by **Yankova** and entitled "The Effeteness of Social Media" holds a conservative stance and argues that similarities to past social relations are more relevant than the differences. The author shows how an abstract metaphysical vision of Peirce about the universe can be extended to the cultural reality of social media.

The second issue of the journal will invite contributions on the world of digital eroticism. The title is "Love and Sex in the Digital Age: a Semiotic Perspective". Please visit: DigitASC@nbu.bg.

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