Editorial

Göran Sonesson*, Sara Lenninger and Anna Cabak Rédei Introduction: The Making of Them and Us – Cultural encounters conveyed also through pictorial means

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“The Making of Them and Us” (MaTUs) was the name of a research project at Lund University which took place between the years 2014 and 2016, involving scholars from the Departments of Cognitive Semiotics and the History of Ideas, as well as the School of Architecture.¹ It was also the title given to a symposium organized by that same project on December 7 and 8, 2016. The aim of the MaTUs project, as well as of the associated symposium, was to study the encounter between different cultures, as conveyed by different semiotic means, privileging pictures, which have customarily been neglected.

Human encounters constitute a central issue of the human sciences. From a European point of view, knowledge of other cultures expanded considerably in the sixteenth century, being as much conveyed by pictorial narratives as by verbal ones. This is still true today, when the meeting of cultures has become an iterative occurrence of everyday life. Yet there has been very little systematic research so far into such pictorially transmitted cultural encounters.

In this project such perspectives were problematized in terms of cultural semiotics, which means that the notion of the “other” or the “foreign” in cultural encounters was studied with regard to an “Ego-culture” (the Homeworld), which, while building a model of its own culture, often itself starts out making a distinction within the field of foreign elements (the Alienworld) between an “Alter-culture” of relative high value and/or good communicational standing, and an “Alius-culture” with less (or no) value and/or outside the range of what

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can be mutually communicated. These formulations are based on the Lund school model of cultural semiotics, which, to a greater or lesser extent, forms the backdrop of the papers written by the original project members and also by most of the others authors.

Within the project, case studies were focused, on the one hand, on the discovery of the new continent named America, and on the other hand, on the contemporary period of great displacements of populations. For the occasion of the symposium, we added a third time span, represented by the papers of several of our invited lecturers: the encounter with prehistory.

The first strand puts the emphasis on the confrontation with other worlds initiated in the sixteenth century by the discovery of the “new” continent of the Americas, the detailed exploration of other parts of the world, as well as the continuing documentation of Europeans lands. We treat this historical period as a prelude to the European Enlightenment, which is a unique historical phase, and which could be seen as resulting from the final account taken of the “discovery” of other worlds. Some of the papers (most fully those by Dunér and Cabak Rédei) address stories which also play out during the historical Enlightenment.

The second strand highlights the last century, and its continuity into the present, with the complex and contested image-production tied to cultural identity, covering for instance the ideals of National Socialist conceptions of cultural-racial identities, Americanization as manifested in the design of theme-parks, and supposedly ethical food packaging.

The third strand, contributed here by some of the invited participants of the symposium, involves the confrontation with prehistory, and how it has been conceived in the contemporary world. In a way, then, it has to do with meeting ourselves, rather than the other, once again, but in a foreign disguise – ourselves as *Alter* or *Alius* – which is the story of our (our species’) life.

Göran Sonesson’s paper is concerned with the impact on European culture of the so-called “discovery” of America, and more precisely of Mexico, as it can be studied in the pictures and texts making up the works of the friar Bernardino de Sahagún and, in particular, as it can be grasped from the complex process behind the creation of these works, involving numerous acts of translation between languages as well as transpositions of different semiotic resources. Since this paper contains many of the elements of the model of cultural semiotics, to which most of the following papers refer, it has been judged convenient to place it first.

In her contribution, Anna Cabak Rédei discusses the extent to which two well-known women in eighteenth century French history, Queen Marie-Antoinette and the *salonnière* Mme de Staël, may share the position of being

instances of *Alius* in the cultural model of their contemporaries. On the one hand, this commonality between them may seem strange, in view of their different social circumstances, but once you know that Mme de Staël wrote a defense of Marie-Antoinette, it becomes interesting to try to discover what they share.

Building upon his earlier study of Third Reich's iconography, Michael Ranta focuses in the present paper on the attempt to create cultural and political cohesion by means of pictorial propaganda in post-war China from the early 1950s onwards, as promoted by the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership by Mao Zedong. Analyzing several Chinese posters in terms of the narratives they convey, Ranta demonstrates that they are predicated on an opposition between the Homeworld (Ego-culture) and the Alienworld (Alter/*Alius*-culture).

Pooling the inspiration derived from cultural semiotics and that of post-colonial studies, Gunnar Sandin discusses the proposal (never realized) made by an American consultant firm for the design of a Scandinavian theme park on the outskirts of the Swedish city of Malmö. The case in point is, of course, an instance of cultural colonization, also known as Americanization, but, going beyond this trivial observation, Sandin illuminates the quite intricate dialectics of cultural stereotypes involved in the proposal, adding dynamics to the cultural model.

In the paper which follows, David Dunér makes use of the model of cultural semiotics to study the encounter between European travelers in Africa in the eighteenth century, notably that of the Linnaean disciple Anders Sparrman, and African ethnic groups, such as the Khoikhoi. In so doing, he offers an important contribution to the theory of cultural semiotics, both by showing once again, but by means of a new historical material, that the model must be applied in a subtle way, to account for historical reality, and by introducing the idea of there being processes by means of which Ego or Alter becomes *Alius*, *Alius* becomes Alter, and Alter becomes *Alius*, which all contribute to give a new sense to the term alienation.

Discussing the nationalist ethnic categorization schemes in China and Vietnam, respectively, over the course of the past 75 years, in terms of their parallactical relation to each other, Jamin Pelkey does not only furnish statistical underpinnings for the cultural model, but also imputes a more dynamically shifting relationship to the instances of Ego, *Alius*, and Alter than has so far been done (in quite a different way from Sandin). Like Dunér, he thus demonstrates the heuristic validity of the model, at the same time as his case study leads to suggestions for the development of the model.

Although taking his principal inspiration from the archaeological theory of Lambris Malafouris, Antonis Iliopoulos moves the cultural model to the domain

of pre-history, suggesting that artefacts may have originated in the need to separate the Homeworld (Ego-culture) from what is outside of it, thus leading to the creation of ornaments, in order to distinguish members of the Homeworld from those of the Alienworld. As in the papers authored by Sandin and Pelkey, apocryphal diagrams of the Lund brand of cultural semiotics are proposed, which would need further elucidation and discussion to be integrated into the model.

In this latter respect, the contribution of Itamar Even-Zohar is easier to situate, since he shares the inspiration from the Tartu school of cultural semiotics with the Lund approach, while taking it in a somewhat different direction. Like Iliopoulos, Evan-Zohar is involved with the earliest time of the human species, suggesting that (pre-)history has consisted in inter-group struggle, in which, over the long run, weapons have been beaten to signs (“symbols” in his terminology). More ominously, he goes on to suggest that, in the contemporary world, signs may not anymore have the power to substitute for arms.

On the other hand, the final contribution to this thematic issue, authored by David Machin and Paul Cobley, suggests that the war still goes on at the level of signs, in particular in the case of the devious way in which so-called Fair-Trade products are marketed, with the packaging offering misleading and often pseudo-exotic representations of the process by which the product is created.

If any conclusion can be drawn from the project and the symposium on which this thematic issue is based, it is that the Lund model of cultural semiotics, unlike the original Tartu school model, as it has been employed since the time of its first formulation, cannot only be applied to different cases, when suitably re-conceived, but is also susceptible to be modified according to the experiences derived from these application, as any scientific model should be.