

Introduction: An International Community of Inquirers

From July 6–10 of 1992 a group of scholars from around the world convened in a seminar of the same title as Thomas A. Sebeok's then recently published book, *Semiotics in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). The seminar was sponsored by the Università degli Studi di Urbino Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica, under the direction of Pino Paioni.

Semiotics in the United States is a strange book, and the seminar opened with a lengthy exposition by Sebeok, in effect, of the reasons for its strangeness. This address laid bare the principal difficulties its author had to face in writing the book, beginning with the problem of a conceivable rationale for speaking of an international intellectual movement under what could be construed as a chauvinistic title. Thus Sebeok presented to a fascinated audience a virtual Prolegomenon which cast his book in a rich new light, constituting what will probably come to be regarded as an indispensable preamble to future readings of the book itself. In any event, by the time the opening remarks were completed, it was abundantly clear that the United States was a kind of metaphor for a permeable membrane facilitating, like Sebeok himself, semiotic ideas from around the world.

These opening remarks created a great deal of interest and enthusiasm, and concluded with the exhortation that any of those present who wished to make a formal presentation over the ensuing week should come forward and arrange a title and time with John Deely, who was acting as secretary for the meeting, pending the arrival of Susan Petrilli, who, along with Augusto Ponzio, had been delayed by a local Italian transportation strike.

It would not be too much to say that in the ensuing twenty-minute break the week-long seminar virtually organized itself, as participants from no less than nine different countries were assigned presentation times. The unfolding series of presentations generated intense discussions, which extended informally into the afternoons and evenings of the rapidly