

Toward the signs of Gaia and beyond: Thomas A. Sebeok's semiotic research¹

AUGUSTO PONZIO

'Given its signifying nature the entire universe would seem to enter Sebeok's sphere of interests' (Rossi-Landi 1985b). The broad horizon alluded to in this quotation finds its point of observation and unification in semiotics: the place of confluence of the 'life sciences' and of the 'sign sciences', and of the inseparable moment of the human being's self-awareness, insofar as s/he is a sign.

We shall now attempt to list and, at the same time, distinguish between the various aspects and parts of the 'semiotic universe', as it emerges today from Sebeok's semiotic research. Sebeok began his studies in the second half of the 1930s with his reading of Ogden and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), and boasts the benefit of the direct teaching of two great masters of the sign: Charles Morris and Roman Jakobson (see Sebeok 1986: Chapter 5, and the parts dedicated by Sebeok to these figures in *The Sign & Its Masters* [1979], as well as in his recent [1991] book, *Semiotics in the United States*).

Sebeok's semiotic universe comprises:

— The life of signs and the signs of life as they appear today in the biological sciences: the signs of animal life and of specifically human life, of adult life, and of the full realization of the organism in its relations with the environment, or in the normal or pathological forms of dissolution and deterioration of communicative capabilities.

— Human verbal and nonverbal signs: the latter includes signs which depend on natural languages as well as those which, on the contrary, have nothing to do with natural languages and are obstinately refractory to the categories of linguistics. This group includes the signs of 'parasitic' languages, such as artificial languages, as well as the signs of 'gestural languages', such as the sign language of Amerindian and Australian aborigines as well as of deaf-mutes; the signs of infants, and of the human body both in its more culturally dependent manifestations and its natural-biological manifestations.

— Human intentional signs controlled by the will and unintentional,