

MAJOR NON – VERBAL SEMIOSIC CONSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract

In most gardens and parks, natural and artificial elements are harmoniously combined in such a way as to suit utilitarian and aesthetic functions. Together with vegetation, the decorative elements and arrangements/compositions make us spend a very pleasant and special time in the garden. Taking into account all these aspects, gardens as - “major non-verbal semiotic constructions”- as defined by Thomas A. Sebeok (one of the most important semioticians of the XX century) may be analysed following two main directions: 1) semiosis at the level of plant kingdom and 2) human intentional semiosis within the garden. Semioticians usually consider semiosis to be that instinctive capacity of all living organisms to produce, to perceive and to interpret specific signs, elements coming from the environment, which are necessary and fit them the best in order to survive. When these living organisms are comprised/included in a net of complex semiotic relationships, each new acquired behaviour may be rejected or integrated in various ways. In this case we may speak of the concept of semiotic fitness, which represents the performance of the subject to adapt himself/herself to the environment by means of semiotic processes. Speaking about human intentional semiosis (anthroposemiosis), we should emphasize the fact that the design of the physical milieu of the garden is a continuous process, a non-interrupted semiosis, a permanent search of the best expression, of that function or complex of functions which are best adapted to the natural and artificial elements of the environment. Thus, the space of the garden becomes a sign, which assumes the form of the designed experience. Within a garden, the culture, the internal nature (the biological organism) and the external nature (organic and inorganic environment) are interacting in a complex way. The confluence between signs and interpret, between cultural and natural processes, the perceived beauty and logical knowledge, all these aspects define gardens as places of communication, real major non-verbal semiotic constructions, where the unity between human intentional semiosis and the other semiotic processes present in the environment is extremely obvious.

Key words: garden, semiosis, semiotic fitness, non-verbal communication

Communication systems are formed in the organisms by exposure to appropriate input in social context and are subjected to change or even disappear over time. In all species, other than the humans, systems are formed primarily through the biological channel; human beings acquire their ability to communicate both from biology and from culture. By comprehending human culture as a sphere of sign processes – the semiosphere – and by emphasising the importance of translation processes both on the internal and external borders of the semiosphere, the focus will inevitably move to the semiotic relations between culture and another culture, nature, or whatever lies behind the border. What makes the human system of communication unique among species, and thus unlikely to be transferable to other species, is that it can take place through more than one mode and medium of transmission. Biosemiotically, communication can be defined as bilateral semiosis, the capacity to participate with other organisms in the reception and processing of

specific kinds of signals; unilateral semiosis is the capacity of an organism to receive and process specific kinds of signals in isolation. The systematic pattern of signal-exchanges in which the organisms participate through bilateral semiosis defines the communication system for the species to which they belong. In the case of human communication, bilateral semiosis involves not only signaling behaviour, but all kinds of representational form-exchange.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Gardens from a semiotic perspective can be valuable objects of study with regard to nature – culture relations. Gardens and gardening as an intersection between human culture and nature could have an especially important role in the current debate concerning ecosemiotics., as defined by Winfried Noth (*Okosemiotik*, 1996) and specified further by Kalevi Kull (*Semiotic ecology: Different Natures in the Semiosphere*, 1998). According to Kalevi Kull, ecosemiotics can be

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defined as the semiotics of relationships between culture and nature. It deals with the semiosis going on between a human and its ecosystem. For comprehending gardens as major non-verbal semiotic constructions it is important to mention that they are suitable models for ecosemiotics, having in view that ecosemiotics, being a relatively new field of studies, is situated on the outskirts of the paradigm of semiotics. Ecosemiotics as a border discipline has emerged in the boundary between fields that study culture and those dealing with the natural phenomena. In semiotics, the broadening of scope toward the natural sciences was evident throughout the last century. In the theoretical pansemiotic framework of Chareles Sanders Peirce, the quest for biosemiotics of Thomas Sebeok, Gunter Tembrock, Jesper Hoffmeyer, and many others form the basis that has made it possible to comprehend semiotic systems outside the realm of human language and culture. For general semiotics, the emergence of biosemiotics leads to debates about the semiotic threshold and the borders of cultural semiotic systems. Culture is not a system closed into its semiotic totality but an open and dialogical entity that communicates, influences, and is influenced by the surrounding semiotic and non-semiotic realms. As Kalevi Kull mentions in his work *Semiotic Ecology Different Natures in the Semiosphere* (1998) our knowledge of nature, as its best, is not nature itself and not only in the sense that all the given is just the given in our personal *Umwelt*, but much more – semiotic processes have been and are continuously creating a second nature – through the changing of nature itself. As a result, nature has changed so much that the nature we know is already almost entirely the second (or third) one. It is a fundamental feature of semiotic processes – to change, to manipulate, to take under control, to make a difference, to build the other. Scholastics already made the difference between the first and second nature; by second nature the one built by humans was meant. Nature is not unique, there is not one nature, but several. J.v. Uexkull with the notion of *Umwelt* has emphasised that every organism has its own subjective environment, which is different from any other, and in the case of different species of animals these differences can be very large. As a result of the differences humans can make, the nature in their *Umwelt* is distinguished into first, second, and the third nature; what we think is outside the *Umwelt* can be called zero nature. Zero nature is nature itself (absolute wilderness). Zero nature is seen as changing by itself, the objective nature itself. First nature is the nature we see, identify, describe and interpret it. The first nature is nature as we have it due to or thanks to our language, a language-filtered or sign-filtered nature. It is like a translation of zero nature into our knowledge; this is our image of nature at the same time, either mythical, or social, or scientific. Second nature is the nature

which we have materially interpreted, this is materially translated nature, a changed nature, a produced nature. It can be seen as a back translation of the first into the zero, nature as changed through our participation, a manipulated nature. Gardens may be considered as belonging to the second nature. Third nature is a virtual nature, as it exists in art and science. The third nature is the interpretation of interpretation, the translation of translation, the image of image of nature. Zero nature is changing via ontological semiosis, or via physiosemsiosis if applying J.Deely's term (1990). The first nature is nature as filtered via human semiosis, through the interpretation in our social and personal knowledge. The second nature is changing as a result of „material processes” again, this is a „material translation” in the form of true semiotic translation, since it interconnects the zero and the first (or third), controlling the zero nature on the basis of the imaginary nature. The third nature is entirely theoretical or artistic, non-natural nature-like nature, built on the basis of the first (or third itself) with the help of the second. The building of second nature generally means that people apply certain models, or certain general linguistic patterns upon nature. This is particularly well illustrated in park architecture or garden design. It can be easily demonstrated when considering the notions used to describe gardens. Lawn is smooth and homogeneous, with gramineous forms and almost without forbs. Flowers need to be with coloured flowers seen – either in distinguished monospecies patches, or if with single shoots then with remarkable flowers. Bushes or trees should not have dried branches, and the crowns should not be intertwined. There should be no large herbs growing out of certain traditions of gardening schools. We should mention that regardless of the particular school, the rules always apply idealised forms of nature. Namely, rules like these originate from the linguistic nature, as limited by the general mechanisms of perception and operation, i.e. of functional circle. All four natures participate in the usual discourse of natural science. Zero nature is that which biologists want to describe. The first one is that which they perceive and describe. The second one is the one in their lab. And the third nature is what they get in their papers and models. In all cases the nature is a complex of processes, not a pattern.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It is usually not possible to construct a single cause or motive for the specific appearance of a garden. When speaking about human intentional semiosis (anthroposemsiosis) we should underline that gardens emerge via the blending of different kinds of beliefs, intents, norms, and natural and cultural possibilities, and, as such, are not fixed, but sifting, structures in modern culture. Also,

various social nominators, such as wealth, age, gender structure, etc. can influence garden appearance. At the most general level, Timo Maran (*Gardens and Gardening: An Ecosemiotic View*, 2004) considers that it is reasonable to distinguish large-scale and small-scale cultural factors influencing the appearance of a garden. Large-scale factors include religious, mythological or deep cultural principles such as biblical description about the Garden of Eden, important in Persian gardens, the opposition of yin and yang in the traditional Chinese gardens, brush-painting and Zen meditation in the Japanese rock garden. Nina Corazzo has shown, for instance, how the notions about the Garden of Eden are linked to the symbolic uses of various plants in traditional medicine (*The Garden Enclosed - Hortus Conclusus - and its vegetation as sign*, 1997). Being fundamental to the human knowledge and worldviews, these factors form the basis for the gardens, gardens of 18th century France, English and Mediterranean gardens, as examples of such types, differ greatly in their physical appearance but also in the essential underlying philosophies and principles. Rooted in those deep cultural principles, gardens reflect in part the culture's notion of ideal order or state of affairs, and, as such, are specially marked and valued places in culture. On the other hand, small-scale factors arise rather from social relations and the personal preferences associated with these. If we have in view human intentional semiosis, we should emphasize the fact that design of a physical milieu of the garden is a continuous process, a non-interrupted semiosis, a permanent search of the best expression, of the function or complex of functions which are best adapted to the natural and artificial elements of the environment. Thus, the space of the garden becomes a sign which assumes the form of the designed experience. Functions of garden are assigned to a great extent by culture, and, as such, are also specific to a particular cultural epoch. In social communication, gardens may be evaluated as an extension of one's household and property. Myrdene Anderson (*Yards, gardens, and gender in urban America*, 2003) has described the appearance of gardens in the modern America suburbs as a status symbol, distinguishing the visible front yard with the trimmed lawn as male dominated. Elements of the gardens as major non-verbal semiotic constructions may fulfill the role of a sign-vehicle in human communication, signifying for instance social position and cultural background of the household. The changes in the appearance of home gardens, as for instance the growth of trees, are slow enough to provide important landmarks in

one's own biography. As personal and even intimate places, gardens often carry and evoke memories of one's past and are therefore especially valued. In these different communicative processes, gardens may express various types of signs. Svend Larsen (*Der Prospect Park in Brooklyn: Natur in der Stadt*, 1997) has envisioned gardens as spatial sign complexes that produce (1) indexical signs, indicating natural processes, (2) iconic signs, indicating non-urban landscapes, and (3) conventional, symbolic signs, by which all arbitrary essential structures of the urban sphere are constituted. In a similar manner, elements in the garden may be perceived as different types of signs according to Peirce's classification. For instance, Dagmar Schmauks (*Pflanzen als Zeichen*, 1997) has shown how plants may act as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs in cultural but also in biological communication (semiosis at the level of plant kingdom); symbolic signs for humans and indexes and icons for other living creatures intermix in such a way that one and the same sign vehicles correspond to different types of signs in the receiver's *Umwelten* as defined by Jakob von Uexküll (*The Theory of Meaning*, 1982). The relations of culture and nature in gardens take shape via the blending of the above-mentioned factors and principles, that is human intentional semiosis (anthroposemiosis) and vegetal semiosis. It is visually apparent that, in some gardens, cultural patterns prevail, whereas in some gardens, plants are allowed to grow more according to their own rules. Kalevi Kull (*Proxemics of ecosystem, and three types of intentions towards the community of other species: Attempt of an ecosemiotic analysis*, 2000) has distinguished three types of valued landscapes and human-nature relationships according to the dominant communicational aspect by using Uexküll's functional cycle: 1) landscapes where the perceptual side of communication dominates, as in wilderness; 2) landscapes where the usage of nature in a well-ordered way means the dominance of motoric behaviour, as in countryside or garden; 3) landscapes where neither perception nor operation dominate, as it is in semi-natural communities. Thus gardening is dominated by the operational world, i.e. belonging to the second type. Although perception and operation are both present in every continuous human activity, it seems that there are gardens more under the control of human subjects, where operation is dominating, as well as those where perception is primary. In general terms, in natural gardens or English-type gardens, activities are more based on the perceived particularities of the garden, and gardening is more about adjusting existent natural

structures. In modern garden design or in the French baroque gardens, operational activity is, on the contrary, based on abstract ideas, and perception is kept for the execution of the plan or for the enjoyment of the ready-made garden. In the garden the mutual conditionality of the subject and its surrounding environment characterizes both the living organisms and sign systems of human origin. If we proceed from the semiotic paradigm when examining the relations between a living organism and its environment, the placement of the living organism in a certain environment becomes essential – the characteristics of such an environment become the source of the subject's interpretative activity, *i.e.* semiosis. The relation between the subject and its environment also defines all secondary phenomena originating from semiosis: experience (accumulating from past semiosis), memories (which allow previous experiences to be recognised) and cumulating on the level of species, also the characteristics partially developing in the course of evolution. Each feed-back based communication model between the subject and its environment can be examined as a mechanism allowing the development of correspondence between the subject and its environment, or adaptation. It is important to stress here the difference between the notions of adaptability and semiotic fitness. Based on Hoffmeyer's specification (*The Unfolding Semiosphere Evolutionary Systems. Biological and Epistemological Perspectives on Selection and Self-Organization*, 1998) the semiotic fitness in its broader sense can be defined as the success of the subject in adapting to its environment, its skill in bringing together reflexive information and information originating from environment with the help of semiotic processes. Different from adaptability, which is the characteristic of the subject, demonstrating its potential to adapt to different environments, semiotic fitness is the indicator characterising the relation between the subject and its environment. Having been bound to a certain environment, the semiotic fitness of the relation between the subject and its environment increases, but the further adaptability of the subject decreases while adapting to the environment, the subject localises itself in the environment, thus, semiotic fitness indicates the intensity of localisation. On the one hand, semiotic fitness indicates how successfully the subject has correlated self - related and environment - related information; on the other hand, it quite inevitably shows how much the structure of the subject

changes when it has been separated from its environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Gardens contain and participate in different levels of semiotic processes, from biological communication up to cultural symbolicity, from personal cognition to social identities. They function also as mediators between these different levels of communication. When looking semiotically and considering ecological knowledge together with what we know about the deep processes of culture, one can conclude that, despite any ecological consciousness or wish and attempt to build an ecological society, when living with nature we cannot avoid the building of a second nature and the replacing of the first. We can, in the best case, make the changes slower and maybe less harmful for biodiversity, but what we get is nevertheless nature with a human face. The garden becomes an important part of the gardener's Umwelt and any changes there also influence the person's perceptual and operational relations and sense of self. Gardens and gardening may offer the possibility for the person to become semiotically rooted into the surrounding environment and semiosphere.

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