

## SPATIAL SEMIOLOGICAL STRUCTURES (I)

### STRUCTURI SEMIOLOGICE SPAȚIALE (I)

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**Abstract.** *As it is known, the man has created his own way of communication –the articulated language. This fact did not prevent the human beings from using as well, and even on a large scale, non-verbal means of communication, such as body language, space and others. The organization of a space –considered as a phenomenon of communication – implies an informational message, that is the existence of a wide range of sign systems..To a great extent, these signs are nothing else but the codified elements of configuration, expression and structure of a space. In the present work the author aims to analyse some aspects illustrating the correlation between the spatial and communicational components of the garden – an organised space, bearing a true semiological structure.*

**Rezumat.** *Faptul că și-a creat un mod de comunicare ce îi aparține în exclusivitate-limbajul articulat-, nu l-a împiedicat pe om să utilizeze, în continuare, și încă pe scară foarte largă, mijloacele non-verbale, oamenii comunicând deseori și prin intermediul spațiului. Mesajul informațional pe care îl implică organizarea spațiului-considerat ca fenomen de comunicare-presupune existența unui repertoriu de semne; în mare măsură, aceste semne nu sunt altceva decât elemente codificate ale configurației, ale expresiei și ale alcătuirii spațiului organizat. În prezenta lucrare, autoarea își propune să analizeze unele aspecte ce ilustrează corelația dintre componenta spațială și cea comunicațională a grădinii-purtătoare a unei adevărate structuri semiologice.*

**Key words:** *semiotics, ecosemiotics, sociosemiotics, cultural semiotics, semiotic space, spatial structure, artifactual structure*

The immanently meaningful nature of space is closely connected with the semiotic essence of human being, beginning, on the one hand, from the dependence of the physical well-being of an individual on her/his ability to handle the surrounding space and, on the other hand, from philosophical discussion on the true nature and aim of human existence so as connected with the movement of semiotic structures in spatial configurations.

The study of culture is always intrinsically semiotic, since it is always about communication. Communication, be it inter-or intrasubjective, is always social and is executed through sign systems and artefacts that are frequently also the outcome of interaction. Therefore it would be natural to consider all disciplines studying cultural phenomena or human interaction as semiotic.

Gardens - as cultural phenomena – in which various natural and cultural sign processes appear, are semiotically active places in human habitat and need much more profound semiotic research. In the field of contemporary semiotics, the founding fathers of which (C.S. Peirce and F. de Saussure) have made no special statement on „culture” as such, we are faced with a trend that apparently seems to be dedicated specifically to the study of culture. Semiotics of culture, so as developed by the Tartu Moscow school, has its roots, through structural anthropology and linguistics, in the original context of semiology. Semiology, in turn shares certain common features with other disciplines of its epoch that studied cultural phenomena, sign systems and society.

F. de Saussure first indicated the resemblance of the majority of human sign systems to that of the organisation of language, and beginning from his doctrinal understanding, especially as combined with the formalist view on the structure of texts (and other cultural phenomena), the textualist description of culture has been in a favoured position in the paradigm associated with the semiotics of culture.

Structural anthropology, as represented by C. Levi-Strauss, in a way established an a priori natural metalevel treatment of culture and cultural phenomena that have—as if—been created according to a prior scheme. In spite of the fact that Levi-Strauss’s findings in the structural resemblances between different cultural institutions can principally be explained by neither the organicists nor the textualist approach in terms of considering intentionality on the object level, his approach that focused on structural coherence between different sociocultural institutions became favoured also in the originally linguistic and literary trend later known as cultural semiotics.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

All sign systems operate in physical and/or semiotic space, at the same time all space, be it physical or conceptual, is semiotised via sign systems at several levels of modelling, beginning from the creation of Umwelt. Culture is located in a certain physical environment, and artefacts are embedded in environment, shaping the latter in unique ways that have given reasons for the description of the planet in terms of culture areas.

Taking into account that all artefacts (including gardens) encompass a dimension of meaning, culture areas gain a purely semiotic aspect that has given rise to the description of them as semiotic spaces. (Lotman J.1992). Spatial configurations

can and have been used for the explanation of the structure of the human semiotic reality in general.

Space and place as certain categories with definite characteristics have often been turned into devices of describing different phenomena. We are regularly talking about the spatiality of certain artefacts, concepts, semantic fields, just like these phenomena gain their semiotic value through placement into an overall system. Thus space serves as substrate for culture also through descriptive techniques. Space has practically always been the subject of analysis, but it is the 20th century during which there have been discovered new aspects of space in the physical dimensions and also articulated the value of space as a very special and precious subject of anthropology (e.g. research of C. Levi-Strauss 1968). It was precisely the anthropological perspective that declared space to be the mirror of culture (while culture being, in C. Kluckhohn's popular formulation from 1961, Mirror for Man).

Ideological, social, cultural and other structures crystallised in environmental units by human activity can be of diverse character.

First space can be used for the synchronic description of the social structure and system of a socium. In C. Levi-Strauss's studies (Levi-Strauss 1968) we can witness spatial structures as settlements representing understanding of a socium of its various social divisions like gender, age, labour, marital status, physiological state. The spatial structure is the mirror of man's semiotic universe. In semiotically even stronger expression, Levi-Strauss claimed that spatial structure is the crystallisation of a society's sociocultural reality; in spatial structures there have been articulated the social, cultural, cosmological, cosmogonic and other purely semiotic structures.

Second, as a logical continuation of the above, space can function diachronically as a container of sociocultural memory. The anthropomorphic code thus became into a principle that created coherence between several loci and unified them at a wider scale into „cultural space“. Cultural space can be viewed as a semiotically and also physically more-or-less coherently structured domain which is subjected to a centralised maintenance. Anthropomorphism so as described as an underlying code for the shaping of environment and erection of settlements thus allows to view large cultural phenomena as texts intentionally created for the transmission of cultural memory, ideological or other messages.

One of the most valuable clarifications of standpoints in cultural anthropology, was presented in C. Kluckhohn's book „Mirror for Man“ (1961). Kluckhohn presented the idea of culture as a mentally constructed, behaviourally and cognitively organised structure that has about a dozen aspects to be paid attention to: culture is the total way of life of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group, a way of thinking, feeling and believing, an abstraction from behaviour, a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave, storehouse of pooled learning, a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems, learned behaviour, a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour, a set of techniques for adjusting both to external environment and to other men, a precipitate of history, a behavioral map, sieve, or matrix.

These aspects may probably be brought together in a statement that defines culture as an institution: culture is an organisation that contains several sub-institutions (e.g. sign systems) that are used by institutions (society, social groups) that, by active use, shape culture. Kluckhohn's views make also explicit that culture research has to concentrate on certain fundamental levels and areas of semiotisation: connections between culture and external environment, man as a biological being and a cultural entity, the semiotic reality of man and sign systems that allow to construct and express it.

These topics hook up with the major issues of semiotics, all the more –they indicate that culture research has to include combined approach to cultural phenomena in terms of unifying the Saussurean and Peircean semiotic paradigms. On the one hand we have to analyse relations between sign systems and environment, using the triadic sign conception, and on the other hand culture research must concentrate on relations inside and between sign systems themselves, basing itself on semiological ideas. In an interesting manner the methodological standpoints of semiotics and semiology bring sign theories and cultural anthropology together in a roundabout way.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Space's and place's becoming into the focus of cultural attention has usually been in very evident and strong connection with the abilities, development and possibilities of man's capacity to use space. Such usage can also be split into two, and thus we can make a distinction between the different epochs, keeping in mind which aspects of space have gained importance at the relevant era.

The roughly two uses of space are of course physical, material on the one hand, and spiritual on the other. Similarly a distinction can be made between cultural epochs that focus on either spiritual or physical space. For example physical space, or the physical dimension of space, has been important during the era of formation of the cities, during the Age of Discoveries –in a word: during practically all periods of relatively rapid and overall social or sociocultural change.

The spiritual or conceptual dimension of space was of particular importance during the Middle Ages, and in a curious way it has regained its value in contemporary culture; it has always been important in the so-called primitive societies. In the Middle Ages, space was turned into a mechanism and dimension to integrate different cultural systems according to a given cultural dominant (religion). Spatial representations presumed high knowledge of diverse cultural areas. The cultural mechanisms of coding and maintaining both the spatial order

of cultural environment and the meaningful structures of space are directly connected with general principles and factors determining cultural development.

For general semiotics, the emergence of biosemiotics leads to debates about the semiotic threshold and the borders of cultural semiotic systems. For cultural semiotics, the views of the founder of the Tartu school, J. Lotman, seems to be significant here. By comprehending human culture as a sphere of sign processes – the semiosphere -- and by emphasizing the importance of translation processes both on the internal and external borders of that semiosphere, the focus will inevitably move to the semiotic relations between culture and other culture, nature, or whatever lies behind the border.(Lotman J.2000).

Thus, 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 nonsemiotic realms. Gardens and gardening as an intersection between human culture and nature have an especially important role in the current debate concerning ecosemiotics, as defined by Winifried Noth (1996) and specified further by Kalevi Kull (1998). According to Kalevi Kull ecosemiotics can be defined as the semiotics of relationships between nature and culture. This includes research on the semiotic aspects of the place and role of nature for humans, i.e. what is and what has been the meaning of nature for us, humans, how and in what extent we communicate with nature. Ecosemiotics has emerged in the boundary between fields that study culture and those dealing with natural phenomena.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the material presented above we may conclude the following:

1. The ability to handle spatial structures is vital for cultural survival.
2. Examination of a culture's use of space allows us to view those specific semiotic structures that are linked to the identity discourse of a given socium.
3. Analysis of space as the substrate of all cultural semiotic systems is in direct connection with the predictability of the development of different cultures. Besides space as the substrate of culture, spatial structures are those within the limits of which all cultural production takes place.
4. Since culture is always both a cause and effect of particular political, economic, and technological circumstances, as well as of cosmological and philosophical attitudes, each age and country leaves its own legacy, signifying in large measure its type of governance, degree of wealth, and level of construction skills, as well as its political character and religious beliefs. These things affect

the organization of space and the design of forms within it, which in turn rationalize and institutionalize patterns of cultural behaviour.

5. Gardens -- as semiotically active places-- contain and participate in different levels of semiotic processes, from biological communication up to cultural symbolicity, from personal cognition to social identities. They function as mediators between these different levels of communication, and, as such, may fulfill the role of a sign-vehicle in human communication.

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