**THE SEMIOTIC SPHERE AND ITS DEMARCATION**

Eeva-Liisa Myllymäki

Finnish Semiotic Society, Finland

1. **Introduction**

Ten years ago I wrote an article on how the “sphere of Europe” is seen, in an intercultural perspective, mainly from the outside (Myllymäki 2007). The question posed was how we can interact with the rest of the world in the sense of crossing the lines and finding new synergies and spaces for positive interactions. Globalization was providing a new dimension, an opening, a possibility. In today’s world, we need to ask if expanding globalization still means keeping the doors open for people and ideas to come closer or whether there are greater distances and barriers that obstruct the way to better harmony between societies and cultures.

How we define the concept of a semiotic sphere and its limits has become more critical, if the surroundings and milieu are more diverse than they seem. The physical border in Europe and elsewhere is not a symbol as the flows of migrants are increasing. How do we deal with a variable semiotic system and its sphere? Demarcation can be understood as the act of creating a boundary around a place or a thing, setting or marking of boundaries or limits. It also has a connotation of a separation, a distinction. The delineation comes from within and without.

In physical terms, a border forms a division between historically and culturally separate spaces, and its meaning is simultaneously economic and political. An idea of globalization and of a universe does not mean the vanishing of borders and different signs of demarcation. I am focusing on the aspect of the border instead of the interconnections. How do we track these lines of separation in a complex world? How do we interpret the meaning of a “border”? To what extent does the border represent a sign?

The interconnection between cultural spaces and the various means of interaction and encounter has been studied by many authors (Deledalle-Rhodes 1992, 2000; Block de Behar 2003). In the positive interpretation, it is open and seeks multiple channels. Contradictions and opposites add new ways into the interaction process. Juri Lotman’s comprehensive concept of a semiosphere (1990) provides a theory of a synchronic semiotic space where interaction takes place between different sign systems and within a continuum of signs. Recognizing the signs allows an extension towards and interaction with other cultures and the Other. The possibility of infinite semiosis is inherent in the Peircean semiotic theory.

1. **Border as a limit**

For Lotman (1990), the limits of the semiosphere are the critical point for separation and integration. The boundaries of the semiosphere are “the hottest spots for semioticizing processes”. The notion of “boundary” is ambivalent: it both separates and unites. The boundary belongs to both the frontier cultures, to both contiguous semiospheres. It is a mechanism for translating and the place where ‘the external’ is transformed into ‘the internal’. Even more, it is a filtering membrane so that foreign texts become part of the semiosphere’s internal semiotics while retaining their own characteristics (Lotman 1990: 136-137).

In Europe, a “Hotspot approach” has been introduced for the establishment of joint reception centres in frontline EU member states to identify and fingerprint migrants and refugees to facilitate the return of “irregular migrants”. Officially-designated Hotspots would have the task of relocating refugees from war zones and filtering out people who have crossed the Mediterranean in search of better economic situations.

We can observe real-life hotspots in the European neighbourhood and the construction of border fences around Ceuta and Melilla starting in the 1990s is an early example. To prevent the human flows of irregular migrants, high walls with barbed wire were erected. A study of irregular forms of human mobility in Europe and its Mediterranean neighbourhood and security measures at the EU’s external and internal borders in Calais, the Greek-Turkish border and the island of Lampedusa concludes, however, that there is no way to stop the movement of people. (Kynsilehto 2014: 141-142) Physical concrete walls and other less visible ways to monitor entry at crossing sites is a way of responding. A response, a reaction is always necessary to meet and encounter people coming from elsewhere. The border also becomes a threat but there is always a point of contact – whether one stays or goes back.

The concept of the boundary is central throughout Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere. The function of any boundary or filter is “to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal”. At the same time the notion of the boundary separating the internal space of the semiosphere from the external is just a rough primary distinction (Lotman 1990: 140,138).

1. **Border as a divided area**

Gloria Anzaldúa describes life in the border culture (U.S./Mexican) as being in a constant state of transition: “To survive the Borderlands /you must live sin fronteras/ be a crossroads” (1999: 216). Its inhabitants are the prohibited and the forbidden. Borders as dividing lines, “a narrow strip along a steep edge”, are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary: “This is my home /this thin edge of barbwire” (Anzaldúa 1999: 25).

In the frontier areas, semiotic processes are intensified because there are constant invasions from outside. The boundary is ambivalent and one of its sides is always turned to the outside (Lotman 1990: 141-142). We can conclude that there is also a two-way flow and penetration across the border. Even if it is not symmetrical, a special border culture becomes its own semiosis, a crossroads with various subsystems. But it functions mainly as a crossroads making links between discrete, autonomous cultural units.

As we take the border as a division, we find dividing lines, binarities and dualisms. We may take a look from the outside or from the inside vis-à-vis those lines. The variables can be opposites and they can be complementary in relation to the idea of a semiotic sphere to filter and adapt the external into the internal.

We may distinguish ambivalent variables when balancing the outside – inside binarism:

*history – unpredictability, definition – indefinition, open – closed, inclusion – exclusion, peace – conflict, collective – individual, hope – fear, tolerance – control, answer – doubt, crossing – retreat, access – rejection, opportunity – challenge, bridge – wall, fiction – reality, new – old, communication – silence*

When we think of divisions, be they physical or imaginary, we are dealing with opposites that are somehow incompatible in character. Still, we can try to identify a point that makes each a rupture and a link, keeping in mind any opportunity for connection and conversion. Being at the border grants us a chance to look at both sides. Being on either side is a closed position where contradictions seem real unless we find a way out.

1. A**round the border: possibility of dialogue**

Assuming the existence of the borders, we may turn to the realities around the borders circling various subsystems. Again, there are differing perspectives to defining those spaces that facilitate interaction and eventual dialogue. Demenchonok (2014) expands on this: cultures have boundaries or border zones as areas of contact and interaction with other cultures. Leaning on Bakhtin, the life of cultures takes place at the boundaries, an idea that is central to the concept of transculture. Thus, on the transcultural principle, they can transcend their borders. Furthermore, boundaries play a certain constructive role in protecting the uniqueness of each culture and in resisting the homogenizing intrusion of globalization (Demenchonok 2014: 125-127). The idea of transcending borders, however, would need closer scrutiny to be verified or if it is more a utopia in the complex reality in which we live.

Transculture should not be an abstraction. Lois Parkinson Zamora (2006) approaches “transculturation” by referring to the processes by which meanings are produced from the contact of distinct cultural systems over time. Transcultural conceptions of the visual image condition present ways of seeing in Latin America, and these ways of seeing condition contemporary fiction. She studies inordinate relations which “are not co-ordinate relations; inordinate points are not deployed in ordered relation, as are coordinate points, but in irregular, decentered, asymmetrical relation” (Zamora 2006: xxii). She proposes the metaphor of the inordinate eye as an alternative to the “gaze” to recognize a reciprocal relation and exchange to encompass inordinate transcultural processes (Zamora 2006: xv, xxi-xxiii). Facing the other culture involves many angles and choices. Looking, seeing is an inevitable element of intercultural approaches as an entrance to comprehension, before other steps are taken.

1. **Dualistic reconciliation**

Is there a possibility of reconciliation, a chance of mediation instead of conflict? How do we close the diverging gaps that separate, distance and hinder the communication?

*response resistance, proximity remoteness, love violence, stability chaos, humanity hostility, choice no choice*

A contact, an exchange is the first step to meaningful communication. If we manage to create dialogue, we may take a step towards interaction and meaningful understanding.

Lotman (1990: 143-144) finds dialogue mechanisms in which the elementary act of thinking is translation and the elementary mechanism of translating is dialogue. There are still conditions for dialogue as it presupposes asymmetry, to be seen in the differences between the semiotic structures (languages) used by the participants in the dialogue. Asymmetry also assumes a degree of invariancy. Another necessary condition is the concern of both participants for the message and their capacity to overcome the inevitably arising semiotic barriers. The need for dialogue, the dialogic situation, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it; the semiosis situation precedes the instruments of semiosis.

Lotman recognizes that the schematically outlined cycle may not be fully realized in the actual process of cultural contact. It demands favourable historical, social and psychological conditions. The process of ‘infection’ needs certain external conditions to bring it about and it needs to be felt to be necessary and desirable. As with any dialogue, a situation of mutual attraction must precede the actual contact (Lotman 1990: 145). Binarism and asymmetry are the laws binding on any real semiotic system. The boundary is the crucial unifying factor for the unity of the semiotic space of the semiosphere, dividing the internal space of the semiosphere from the external, “its inside from the outside” (Lotman 1990: 124, 130).

Dialogism is present in Bakhtin’s philosophy in relation to human communication and relationships. Dialogic relationships form the very foundation of all human activities, from the personal level to the most general level of dialogue among cultures. To Bakhtin, the life of cultures takes place on the boundaries and contact between cultures should be a dialogic encounter. Edward Demenchonok (2014: 85-88) describes this philosophy of dialogism as personalist: it is inseparable from the human persons between whom dialogue takes place. Dialogism is intimately related to the concept of the other and to I-other relationships, to “otherness”. Dialogical relationships between I and the other constitute the structure of Being, understood as an “event”. Dialogism thus combines diversity and co-existence. The principal borders lie inside the dialogic space. Another key concept in Bakhtin’s dialogism is outsideness. It is only in the eyes of another culture that the foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly.

Laas poses a further question as to how the semiosphere, as a model for studying semiosis in complex systems, would function when resting on different kinds of dialogical foundations — comparing Peirce, Lotman and Bakhtin. Dialogue is a fundamental ontological feature of the semiosphere: internal relations between the subsystems and external relations with its environment are dialogic. A semiosphere based on Peircean dialogues would be an open system that exchanges information with its environment and co-evolves with it. This has implications for the semiosphere’s binarism as its opposition with the environment is no longer clear-cut, nor is the nature of its boundaries. Translation mechanisms might be graded, vague and susceptible to temporal change. For Peirce, semiosis is a gradual progression toward a complete understanding (Laas 2016: 488-489). Thus we have an open-ended process to facilitate interaction under varying conditions. The level of understanding and the expectation of reaching understanding varies depending on the comprehensiveness of our own perspective on the process of signification.

1. **Still a continuum: translation and other means**

The border does not exclude the possibility of an indefinite semiosis. We just need to find those tools and means of dialogue that facilitate our interaction. In broad terms, translation is necessary even if it is complicated. To Ludwig Wittgenstein, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (1922), but where are those limits? And what is the language? The contact between different semiospheres, a constant exchange, a search for a common language (Lotman 1990: 142) taking place on the frontiers is of paramount importance.

There is no empty space between cultures. The process of interaction continues even if it takes new forms and channels. Where do we track the points and surfaces of contact of a cultural interface? It is not yet an act of understanding the other but it is a condition and an existential situation in which the experience of understanding “the Other” is possible through crossing a line. It is a concrete communicative situation in space and time. From the semiotic viewpoint, it is the gradual convergence that is in focus in the search for the perception of the real nature of the Other’s representation.

Even if our interest focuses on the process of convergence and continuum, there are also hints about limits in Peirce’s texts. Emerson’s verse “Of thine eye I am eyebeam” (The Sphinx, 1841) is used as a quotation in Peirce’s explanation about symbols that grow. A symbol produces an endless series of interpretants. But every endless series must logically have a limit (Peirce 1998: 10, 323) By this logic of a limit Peirce means “an object which comes after all the objects of that series, but so that every other object which comes after all those objects comes after the limit also” (in Peirce Edition Project 1998: 538-539). “Thus the series of whole numbers is an increasing endless series. Its limit is the denumerable multitude” (in Peirce Edition Project 1998: 539).

1. **Identity and alterity: fundamental for understanding**

The concern for otherness brings us another, more intimate aspect of being related to others and overcoming our own closeness and self-reflection. Arthur Rimbaud’s “Car je est un autre” (Lettre du voyant, 1871) symbolizes the amplitude of choices of how to see and hear the other.

Julia Kristeva deeply analyzes the question of identity and alterity precising more the relationship: “Mon malaise à vivre avec l’autre — mon étrangeté, son étrangeté — repose sur une logique troublée réglant ce faisceau étrange de pulsion et de langage, de nature et de symbole qu’est l’inconscient toujours déjà formé par l’autre” (1988: 269). Her definition “l’étrange est en moi, donc nous sommes tous des étrangers” (Kristeva 1988: 24) constitutes “a semiology of uncanniness”. It originates in the Freudian concept “unheimlich” (Friedrich Schelling) joining to the instant where something that is familiar to us becomes foreign and frightening. Here Kristeva (1988: 269-275) brings forward the idea that the sign is not arbitrary but has real importance. So the moment of recognizing the strangeness is an awakening and an opportunity to know more. It can occur at a personal level but we may interpret it in a more universal way in intercultural situations.

The same question about being elsewhere, feeling strangeness is presented by Lisa Block de Behar:

On ne peut voir de loin ni de près autrement qu’au travers d’écrans, de filtres qui rapprochent l’ailleurs et font du proche quelque chose d’étranger: du déjà-vu, du jamais-vu, indécidable. Où est ailleurs? Où n’est-il pas? Qu’est-ce qui est étranger? Qu’est-ce qui ne l’est pas? (1997: 86).

It is a moment of revelation which is relevant for understanding differences and combining the internal and the external. It is the look that determines but we have different ways of looking. Is there an inordinate eye that sees behind the look — and is it me or the Other who is looking? Finding a synthesis of signification with its intersections can make a continuum possible in a way that would transform seeing into being. Crossing the line(s) is the act of determination that always becomes more important than the division.

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