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# Synchronicity and Responsibility in Semiotics

**Abstract:** The synchronic vision is the expression of conscious awareness of the present situation, a totalizing vision capable of gazing at all of life responsibly, at all semiosis over the planet. John Deely's vision of synchrony's inevitable seepage into diachrony is connected with the fact that we are members of the societies of human animals who first engendered a "community of inquirers focused on the action of signs". Deely reconstructs the pathway that from Saussurean semiology leads through Charles Peirce, Charles Morris, and Thomas Sebeok to the new "science of signs" conceived, recovering Locke, as the "doctrine of signs". Insofar as the human animal is a "semiotic animal" he or she is capable of metasemiosis and therefore of knowledge and control. Consequently, the human animal, a semiotic animal, is also susceptible of responsibility: responsibility that concerns not only the human world and the possibility of the future of anthroposemiosis, but rather all of semiosis, all of terrestrial life, "Gaia". Insisting on the interdependency, in semiotics, between synchronicity and responsibility, Deely evidences the specific task of semiotics, which is a task that is reserved to the semiotician as such.

**Keywords:** doctrine of signs; responsibility; semioethics; semiotic animal; synchronicity

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The book *Semiotics Seen Synchronically: The View from 2010* by John Deely is a development of his remarks on the semiotic heritage delivered on 23 September 2009, as Chair of the Round Table "La Tradition Semiòtica/Semiotics Heritage" (which saw the participation of the late Solomon Marcus, with Vilmos Voigt, José Romera Castillo, and Chie Sou Kim), at the 10th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, held 22–26 September in the city

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of A Coruña (Galicia, Spain), Faculty of Sociology and Law. Originally, this text in its present form was published as an article in the journal *Chinese Semiotic Studies* at the request of the then Editor-in-Chief, Jiazu Gu. The topic announced by the title, “Semiotics Seen Synchronically”, begins to be specified in the first chapter, and precisely in paragraph 1.2. where Deely discusses the question of “Synchrony’s Inevitable Seepage into Diachrony”. But for synchrony to obtain, there must be a standpoint. We are all in the present, each one of us. With an expression that has been misused in philosophy after Heidegger and that Deely does not use himself, we could say that the present is our *da-sein* (Deely refers to Heidegger in *Semiotics Seen Synchronically* when he addresses the problem of the “collective unconscious”, of the Heideggerean “House of Being”: 5). And we know that St. Augustine had already discussed this position in terms of the concept of *distentio animae*, which from the present extends into the past and into the future. With reference to Husserlian phenomenology a correspondence can be established with the concepts of *retention* and *protention* of the *intentional conscious*.

But here, according to the “standpoint of the essay”, as Deely says, the synchronic basis upon which stands diachrony is considered *semiotically*: “semiotically” not only because the argument developed in this book is part of the “science”, or “doctrine”, or “theory of signs” that takes the name of “semiotics”; but also and above all because this basis is *semiotics* in the sense that it can be explained in terms of the species-specific capacity that characterizes human animals (as distinct from all other animals).

In fact, here by *semiotics* is understood *metasemiosis* distinct from *semiosis* – that is to say, distinct from the immediate use of signs, considered no less than a condition for life to obtain (semiosis and life coincide). All the same only the human animal (as distinct from other animals) is capable of *metasemiosis*. And by virtue of *metasemiosis* the human animal can be characterized as a “semiotic animal”: *The Semiotic Animal* is the title of a book co-authored by Deely, Augusto Ponzio, and me (2005). The concept of “semiotic animal” explains semiotically that which remains vague in such expressions as *animal rationale* (Aristotle), “rational animal”, or *res cogitans* (Descartes), “thinking thing”: we are not only alluding to the capacity to use signs (semiosis), but also to the exclusively human capacity to use signs to reflect upon signs, which is the condition for conscious awareness, for freedom to decide and deliberate, and therefore also for responsibility. Under this aspect, insofar as the human being is the only semiotic animal existing, humans are also the only animals responsible for semiosis in its entirety, for all of life over the planet. Ponzio and I have introduced the expression “semioethics” (see Ponzio and Petrilli 2003, 2010, 2014) to indicate that special bend that semiotics must take in its studies

on signs in the light of such considerations, and Deely has fully embraced this concept making it his own.

The concept of “semioethics” is closely connected to the concept of “synchrony” as thematized by Deely. The synchronic vision is an expression of the coming to awareness of the present situation, a totalizing vision capable of looking at the whole of life responsibly, at semiosis over the whole planet. Deely explains what he understands by “synchrony” in the following passage:

When I speak, then, of “synchrony” in this essay, I do not mean synchrony in the geometric sense of a timeless abstraction horizontally slicing across human experience for all time, as if with no vertical dimension actual or possible, but rather in the actual or “temporal” sense according to which the present population of living human animals has developed within itself – in contrast to relatively isolated individuals here and there wondering about signs and their role – a veritable “community of inquirers”, species-specifically human, which takes the action of signs as its focus and – expanding at first mainly vertically (synchronically) but (inevitably), with the passage of time, horizontally (diachronically) as well, especially as living members pass away and new individuals enter the discourse. (Deely, 2010: 6)

And to further explain his understanding of the concept of synchrony, Deely does the honor of citing me from the lecture I delivered on 17 October 2008 at the annual Meeting in Houston, occasioned by conferral of the title of 7th Sebeok Fellow:

In these remarks I want to look at semiotics, as it were, more synchronically than diachronically. It is not the whole history of semiotic development as a consciousness of the fundamental role of signs in life and experience that I want to discuss, but rather the contemporary phenomenon that we today who have lived in both the 20th and the 21st century have witnessed and participated in as the development of *semiotics*. For though there is of course a long history behind the semiotics of today, still there is a sense in which semiotics is, as a widespread intellectual movement, a phenomenon more “of our time” than it is of any time past. So it is mainly of figures alive in the 20th century, and a few of them still alive today, that I want to speak. (Petrilli, 2008: 3)

Deely’s idea of how synchrony inevitably seeps into diachrony is connected with awareness of the fact that we are all “members of the societies of human animals who first engendered a ‘community of inquirers’ focused on the action of signs” (Deely, 2010: 6).

Synchrony as a temporal reality is a one-way movement into a limited future, in contrast with diachrony, which not only arises from within synchrony but also invades it from a past before the synchrony in question began in the first place, and extends beyond that synchrony into a future accessible only to those who “come after” into the “land of the living”. As far as concerns the

formation of a “community of inquirers”, then, beyond the central matter of a “shared focus”, the already dead define the past; the not yet living define the future; the not yet dead define *the present*, the “synchronicity” within which we are influenced by others (living or dead) but can influence directly (through dyadic interactions presupposed to Thirdness) only those around us, but beyond them also (through Thirdness alone) can we influence some at least of those to come “after us”, i.e., after we no longer exist subjectively involved in interactions and intersubjectivity, though suprasubjectively, through semiosis, we may indeed continue “objectively” in the indirect influences of pure relativity shaping the future in normally unpredictable ways (ibid.: 7).

Deely reconstructs the line of thought that leads from Saussurean semiology through Peirce and Morris to the new “science of signs” conceived, recovering Locke, as the “doctrine of signs”. Under this aspect a pivotal role is carried out by the seminal volume *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (1976) by Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001), who had been Morris’s student. On his transferal to the United States, the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson also became indebted to Sebeok, acknowledging him with the merit of having introduced him to Peircean semiotics and his consequent contribution to the development of sign studies in this sense, rather than in the direction of Saussurean semiology.

Deely attributes Sebeok with the great merit of having remodeled *anthroposemiosis*, the “human use of signs” (this expression is used in the title of paragraph 2.4), thereby developing the ideal Locke-Peirce line of thought, on one hand taking up the work carried out by the biologist and “cryptosemiotician” Jakob von Uexküll, on the other amplifying in a biosemiotic sense the concept of modeling introduced by the Moscow-Tartu school. *Semiotics Seen Synchronically: the View as of 2010*, includes an appendix significantly titled, “Sebeok’s Synthesis: the Tartu–Bloomington–Copenhagen School” (ibid.: 55–56).

As Deely repeats on several occasions throughout this booklet the “pars pro toto” fallacy is at last superseded with Peirce, via Morris and finally Sebeok (but in his historical reconstruction Deely also connects this particular line of development to Poincaré and his important contribution of the early seventeenth century with his *Tractatus de signis*) (see, e.g. 14, 27). This fallacy can be largely attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure, a centrally important point of reference on the horizon of sign studies. Saussure exchanged that which is only an aspect of the sign world, the part relative to anthroposemiosis, for the whole, the entire world of signs, which means to say the whole of life, until proven otherwise a prerogative of the planet Earth. The name “global semiotics” attributed by

Sebeok to the doctrine of signs conveys in effect the broadened boundaries of semiotic investigation to the point of including the world of signs in its totality.

Particularly important, I dare say central, certainly from the point of view of my own personal interest in this “little book”, as Deely himself calls it in his “Preface” (3), is paragraph 2.11. “After Sebeok and Beyond: Completing the Compass of Semiotic Understanding”. Here Deely returns to his reflections (introduced at the beginning of his book) on the human animal as the only “semiotic animal” existing, uniquely capable of “metasemiosis”, therefore of knowledge, control, and consequently susceptible to *responsibility* – responsibility that concerns not only the human world and the possibility of a future for anthroposemiosis, but rather all of semiosis, all of terrestrial life, “Gaia” in its entirety, according to the new understanding of this ancient expression as introduced by James Ephraim Lovelock (*GAIA – A New Look at Life on Earth*, 1979).

Among those who have contributed to the orientation of semiotics in this sense, Deely does not fail to remember the important work carried out by British scholar Victoria Lady Welby – apart from anything else a correspondent of Peirce’s – with her insistence – through her “significs”, the name she chose for the orientation of her own research – on the inseparable relation between signs and values (an ample note, number 63, on page 26 is entirely dedicated by Deely to Welby and to the volume that collects her texts, *Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement*, see Petrilli, 2009, and to considerations made by Paul Cobley in the “Foreword” to that volume, see Deely, 2013).

Deely opens this part of his book (“After Sebeok and Beyond...”) recalling the following comment made by Zhao Cheng, Tian Fan, and Wei Dongze at the “United Nations Climate Change Conference”, held in Copenhagen, Denmark, 9–18 December 2009: “History has shown once again that the biggest challenge of mankind [in the full sense of “humankind”?] is mankind itself”:

Once it had been discovered that not only earth but the whole of the universe is subject to generation and corruption, that not only individuals but also the very species into which individuals are born “come and go” and develop over time, it could only be a matter of time till it would be understood that human responsibility is not simply a matter of individual, family, and state, but a matter of life on earth as a whole and, perhaps eventually, even beyond our earth. When that realization combines with the discovery that it is semiosis – the Way of Signs – that leads “everywhere in nature, including [into] those domains where humans have never set foot”, a whole new era of ethical understanding dawns. (Deely, 2010: 24)

The sense of the title of the present text, “Synchronicity and Responsibility in Semiotics”, should now be quite clear. Deely insists on the responsibility of the *present*, of our own time, as of each present, insofar as the present is the *future anterior of the future of life on the planet*, of the future of the quality of human life. Deely speaks of “bearing responsibility through consciousness of what the ‘good of the whole’ requires over and above yet *also as including* the self-interest of human animals” (ibid.: 26).

And this concerns not only any human individual insofar as she or he is a “semiotic animal”, but also and above all the “semiotician”, in the sense that the semiotician is a specialist in the science of signs, the “doctrine of signs”. With his insistence on the relation of interdependency in semiotics between synchronicity and responsibility, Deely is clearly interested in evidencing the specific task of the semiotics, a task reserved to the semiotician as such.

An enormous responsibility: certainly for Deely himself insofar as he is a semiotician, certainly for all those who practice this profession, but above all, and ineluctably, for those whom he indicates as the first to have recognized this responsibility, a form of responsibility without alibis, that is, without the possibility of escape. Who are they?

The first book to announce this “tipping point” in the development of semiotic consciousness was Eero Tarasti’s *Existential Semiotics*, published in 2000, the penultimate year of Sebeok’s life and, fittingly enough, as a volume in the book series *Advances in Semiotics* that Sebeok edited for Indiana University Press. The development, long in gestation, was inevitable, needing only a clear and proper name. That name effectively arrived with the publication in 2003 of the book, *Semioetica*, by Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli. Even as Sebeok established semiotics as a global phenomenon with the intellectual culture of the twentieth century, so Ponzio and Petrilli properly identified the ethical dimension within global semiotics as *semioethics* – to wit, the attempt stringently to derive ethics within our understanding of semiosis as the “practical extension” of semiotic consciousness, an inevitable “sequel” thereto, as I have put it.

We, Augusto Ponzio and I, are proud of such acknowledgement from John Deely. But it would be a disappointment, no doubt for Deely, if we were to limit ourselves to simply thanking him for this. The appropriate response consists in taking this task upon ourselves as our own, as a mandatory commitment. This is what Deely wants from us and from those who reading his booklet understand – a responsive understanding – the sense of the connection he has established between synchronicity and responsibility.

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## Bionote

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