

Introducing an Asian semiotic initiative

[Bir Asya göstergebilim girişimini tanıtmak]

[Introduction d'une initiative sémiotique asiatique]

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of an Asian Semiotic Initiative, exploring its relevance in the contemporary landscape of semiotics. Beginning with a nuanced examination of the dichotomy between Western and Asian semiotics, it argues for the existence of distinct semiotic traditions while cautioning against overly abstract interpretations. The discussion delves into the impact of the graphics revolution on digital writing practices, highlighting the complex interplay between scriptural systems and computer languages. Through examples like kuzushiji recognition and ukiyo-e face datasets, the article illustrates how digital technology facilitates the interpretation of ancient cultural artifacts, paving the way for a deeper understanding of symbolic forms in diverse cultural contexts.

Methodologically, the paper draws upon philosophical insights and empirical observations to navigate the evolving terrain of semiotics in the digital age. It elucidates the return of the symbolic in contemporary semiotics, showcasing how advancements in technology enable a more nuanced analysis of visual grammar and cultural practices. Furthermore, the article discusses the implications of these findings for the field of digital humanities, advocating for a semiotic approach to cultural phenomena.

The findings underscore the necessity of embracing a praxeological and ecological approach to cultural analysis, challenging traditional theoretical frameworks. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the article suggests new avenues for interdisciplinary research and collaboration within the field of semiotics. It calls for a reevaluation of cultural logics and agencies, particularly in non-Western contexts, while emphasizing the role of semioticians in shaping our understanding of contemporary culture.

In conclusion, the article proposes the establishment of an Asian Semiotic Initiative as a platform for scholarly exchange and collaboration among Asian semioticians. It envisions a future where semiotics plays a pivotal role in deciphering the complexities of our interconnected world, fostering a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity and semiotic practices.

Keywords: Asian semiotic initiative, digitalization, cultural semiotic, digital humanities, symbolic forms

Özet

Bu makale, Asya Göstergebilim Girişimi kavramını tanıtarak onun çağdaş göstergebilim alanındaki önemini keşfeder. Batı ve Asya göstergebilimi arasındaki ayrımı inceleyen bir girişle başlayarak fazla soyut yorumlardan kaçınılması gerektiğini savunurken farklı göstergebilim geleneklerinin varlığını destekler. Tartışma, dijitalleşmenin yazı pratikleri üzerindeki etkisini ele alarak yazı sistemleri ile bilgisayar dilleri arasındaki karmaşık etkileşime ışık tutar. Kuzushiji

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tanıma ve ukiyo-e yüz veri setleri gibi örneklerle dijital teknolojinin antik kültürel eserlerin yorumlanmasını nasıl kolaylaştırdığını göstererek çeşitli kültürel bağlamlarda sembolik biçimlerin daha derin bir anlayışının yolunu açar.

Metodolojik olarak makale, dijital çağda göstergebilim alanındaki evrilen manzarayı gezinmek için felsefi iç görüler ve deneysel gözlemlere dayanır. Çağdaş göstergebilimse sembolik dönüşün nasıl gerçekleştiğini aydınlatarak teknolojik ilerlemelerin görsel dilbilgisi ve kültürel uygulamaların daha nüanslı bir analizine olanak tanıdığını gösterir. Ayrıca, bu bulguların dijital insanbilimleri alanı için olan etkilerini tartışarak, kültürel olgulara göstergebilimsel bir yaklaşımın gerekliliğini savunur.

Sonuçlar, kültürel analizde prakseolojik ve ekolojik bir yaklaşım benimsemenin gerekliliğini vurgular, geleneksel teorik çerçeveleri sorgular. Teori ile pratik arasındaki uçurumu kapatarak, göstergebilimsel alanda disiplinler arası araştırma ve iş birliği için yeni yollar önerir. Özellikle batı olmayan bağlamlarda kültürel mantıkların ve ajansların yeniden değerlendirilmesini teşvik ederken göstergebilimcilerin çağdaş kültür anlayışımızı geliştirmedeki rolünü vurgular.

Sonuç olarak makale, Asyalı göstergebilimciler arasında bilgi alışverişi ve bilimsel iş birliği platformu olarak Asya Göstergebilim Girişimi'nin kurulmasını önerir. Göstergebilimin küreselleşen dünyamızın karmaşıklıklarını çözmeye kilit bir rol oynadığı bir gelecek hayal eder, kültürel çeşitliliğin ve göstergebilim uygulamaların daha derin bir takdirini teşvik eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asya göstergebilim girişimi, dijitalleşme, kültürel göstergebilim, dijital beşerî bilimler, sembolik biçimler

Résumé

Cet article introduit le concept d'une Initiative Sémiotique Asiatique, explorant sa pertinence dans le paysage contemporain de la sémiotique. Commençant par un examen nuancé de la dichotomie entre la sémiotique occidentale et asiatique, il plaide en faveur de l'existence de traditions sémiotiques distinctes tout en mettant en garde contre des interprétations trop abstraites. La discussion plonge dans l'impact de la révolution graphique sur les pratiques d'écriture numérique, mettant en évidence l'interaction complexe entre les systèmes scripturaux et les langages informatiques. À travers des exemples comme la reconnaissance de kuzushiji et les ensembles de données de visages ukiyo-e, l'article illustre comment la technologie numérique facilite l'interprétation des artefacts culturels anciens, ouvrant la voie à une compréhension plus profonde des formes symboliques dans des contextes culturels divers.

Méthodologiquement, l'article s'appuie sur des insights philosophiques et des observations empiriques pour naviguer dans le terrain évolutif de la sémiotique à l'ère numérique. Il élucide le retour du symbolique dans la sémiotique contemporaine, montrant comment les avancées technologiques permettent une analyse plus nuancée de la grammaire visuelle et des pratiques culturelles. De plus, l'article discute des implications de ces résultats pour le domaine des humanités numériques, préconisant une approche sémiotique des phénomènes culturels.

Les résultats soulignent la nécessité d'adopter une approche praxéologique et écologique de l'analyse culturelle, remettant en question les cadres théoriques traditionnels. En comblant le fossé entre la théorie et la pratique, l'article suggère de nouvelles voies pour la recherche interdisciplinaire et la collaboration dans le domaine de la sémiotique. Il appelle à une réévaluation des logiques et des agences culturelles, notamment dans les contextes non occidentaux, tout en soulignant le rôle des sémioticiens dans notre compréhension de la culture contemporaine.

En conclusion, l'article propose l'établissement d'une Initiative Sémiotique Asiatique comme une plateforme d'échange et de collaboration savante entre les sémioticiens asiatiques. Il envisage un avenir où la sémiotique joue un rôle pivot dans le déchiffrement des complexités de notre monde interconnecté, favorisant une appréciation plus profonde de la diversité culturelle et des pratiques sémiotiques.

Mots-clés : Initiative sémiotique asiatique, numérisation, sémiotique culturelle, humanités numériques, formes symboliques

“It is precisely the binary Arithmetic that it seems this great legislator [= Fohi founder of the empire] possessed, and which I found again a few thousand years later.”

(G. W. Leibniz, *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois L'Herne*, 1987, p. 139)

1. Introduction / An Asian semiotic initiative

The title I propose for today's speech is “Introducing an Asian Semiotic Initiative” (this text is the English version of the speech I delivered at the 1st International Conference of Asian Semiotics [Ishida, 2022]). I am concerned that such a title may be too ambitious and lead us into excessive abstraction. Therefore, I will try to state my arguments as concretely as possible.

To clarify my position from the outset, I state the following. On the question of whether there exist two distinct semiotics, Western and Asian, my provisional answer is negative. Indeed, I believe that semiotics has, throughout the twentieth century, been an epistemological factor enabling us to cross civilizational boundaries. However, on the question of whether there exist different semiotic traditions, that is to say, traditions of signs, both in the West and in Asia, my answer would be “yes”, even though it would then be necessary to provide further details about what these traditions are, their history, their currents, etc.

I will present to you some reflections on the state of signs in semiotics today as it appears in my research field. It goes without saying that my competence is limited, and my examples are primarily of East Asian origin, specifically Japanese.

2. The graphics revolution

When considering the opposition, to which I have just alluded, between the West and the East in the life of signs, we cannot ignore the massive central fact of digitalization. This epochal shift to a new graphic era has made it much less easy to discern categories such as “the West” and “the East”. Digital grammatisation (Auroux, 1994) has suspended the opposition between them. We no longer write in the way we used to.

How many graphical systems are involved in the act of writing? Let's take my case. In the Japanese writing system, all scriptural resources must be mobilized in the act of writing with a computer. I type Roman characters (Romaji) at the phonemic level, and the word processing software transforms them into syllabic characters (Kana) at the morphemic level, then combines them into syntactic units with Chinese characters (Kanji) at the sentence level. Meanwhile, at the level of computer processing, the keyboard output is translated into high-level source language, then into assembly language, and finally into machine language. This six-level processing takes place at the speed of a few seconds per sentence. Assisted writing is thus a two-step system, where my writing goes from phonemes to morphemes and elements of phrases, while programming languages give instructions to the machine. It is a complex semiotic operation involving semiotic systems and computer languages. Ultimately, it is the machine language that determines the writing operations by suspending meaning. Through this “*Épochè* of Writing”, there is a universal reduction of meaning, in which all the symbolic systems of our world are suspended, both in the West and in the East. The age of digital writing is the Epoch of Universal Semiotics. It is in this spirit that I have placed Leibniz's sentence as an epigraph, where the two extreme dreams - mythical and metaphysical - converge.

3. The return of the symbolic

During the second half of the 19th century, the development of analog technologies gave birth to Peirce's semiotics and Saussure's semiology. Peirce formulated pragmatic semiotics, which, by exploring streams of consciousness, reveals processes of logical inference that apply to all categories of signs. On the other hand, Saussure, by exploiting the phonological discoveries made possible by analog technology, proposed a science that characterizes the life of signs underlying the psychic and social life of modern civilization. It is generally accepted that the work of these two founders of modern semiotics gave rise to the structural and cognitive revolutions of the 20th century.

Today, one century later, machine language reduces all signs in the world to indefinite chains of 0s and 1s. This universal reduction of signs to computability raises semiotic questions, just as at the turn of the 20th century, Peirce's semiotics and Saussure's semiology were formulated in response to issues raised by the revolution in logic and the development of analog technologies.

We are witnessing in our time the formation of immense databases and archives. The ever-growing capacity to make data correlations has caused old layers of culture to resurface. We can see the logic of the palimpsest at work and are witnessing phenomena of computationally assisted cultural anamnesis.

I will present you with a few illustrations, but keep in mind that I am not an unconditional advocate of technology; my objective is simply to shed light on the cognitive moment of digital grammatisation by presenting these examples.

3.1. Example 1: Kuzushiji recognition

Among the current Japanese population, only a few thousand people, or 0.01% of the population, possess the skill to read very ancient handwritten texts. However, thanks to digitally mediated data correlations, the ancient brush-written cursive script (kuzushiji) has become easily readable (Kuzushiji Dataset, 2021). The significance of this lies not only in the automated decipherment of typographic characters displayed on a screen, thus

bypassing the activity of letter reading, but also in the software-assisted recovery and reintroduction of the gesture of writing. The gestures of writing can be revived, with all their meaning – semiosis, embodied.

3.2. Example 2: Ukiyo-e face datasets

Facial recognition technology is also used in iconological studies, not for surveillance purposes, of course, but to examine facial features, their physiognomy, with the aim of both identifying authors and establishing a grammar of faces (Yoshimura & Saito, 2017). The “life of signs in social life” (Saussure) can thus be studied more precisely and with greater documentary completeness to build a semiotics of faces.

3.3. Example 3: Perspective as a symbolic form

Another example of the extension of visual semiotics is the use of digital technology to describe the visual grammar of a period or society implicit in oriental art. This involves broadening the understanding of perspective as a ‘symbolic form’ according to the semio-iconological school of Cassirer and Panofsky.

A further important source of knowledge about perspective can be found in new media art, including digital art. The artist Masaki Fujihata explores the question of lines by reducing perspective to moving lines (Ishida, 2020). Such experiments and explorations could be extended through a semiotic approach to lines, inspired by Tim Ingold’s anthropology of lines (Ingold, 2007).

I have just mentioned the example of the revival of writing gestures made possible by the use of software for reading handwritten texts, or the recognition of non-linear perspectives in Yamato-e paintings. We could also add studies of dance gestures and algorithms of steps, which are carried out with the assistance of bipedal robots that record human movements (The Robotics Society of Japan, 2005).

All of this can reveal what is happening at the level of sense-making actions that were difficult to grasp in the book-based research environment. This transformation challenges theory by demanding a more praxeological and ecological approach to cultural phenomena.

Bearing in mind the great influence of Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology on semiotic studies of culture, the current ontological turn in anthropology (with its four cultural paradigms: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism, according to Philippe Descola) particularly encourages us, as non-Western researchers, to focus on other cultural logics, or cultural agencies, that are more observable from angles of analysis other than those long privileged by modern Western naturalism (Descola, 2015).

All these technical and theoretical resources can be, and already are, used in the study of contemporary culture, including, indeed especially, aspects of pop culture, such as manga and animated films. It is in these areas that the ontological turn becomes particularly evident, especially when turning to the animist universe of Hayao Miyazaki, for example. It is well known that the semiotics of popular culture is enjoying considerable growth throughout the world.

4. Semiotics and the humanities

Today, we are witnessing the rise of the humanities in a new form, known as digital humanities. In my own academic career, I have been involved in the creation of a university curriculum in the digital humanities.

I am convinced that semiotics has a crucial role to play in this overall shift in the state of research and teaching in the humanities. No other general science is as well positioned to cultivate a new discipline of meaning at the interface between cultural semiosis and information processing technology.

As I just explained, digital humanities are bringing to the surface ancient layers of culture that have been difficult for the layperson to access, yet fundamental to civilizations. It is not by chance that the initial impetus for digital humanities came from specialists in ancient religious texts.

Indeed, it was Roberto Busa, the founding father of digital humanities, who, with his *Index Thomisticus*, laid the groundwork for what would, 50 years later, become digital humanities.

If I may share a few words about my personal experience, seven years ago, thanks to the kind invitation of our colleague and friend Kim Sung Do, I had the opportunity to visit the renowned Haeinsa Temple and its repository of Tripitaka Koreana wooden printing blocks, which testify to the existence of an extensive network of diffusion and circulation of Buddhist culture around Asia.

In my case, in developing the University’s digital humanities program, I was assisted by Professor Masahiro Shimoda, a leading expert in Indian philosophy and the Buddhist scriptures of the Mahayana tradition, who curated the vast SAT Daizokyo database (2018).

These new humanities encourage an archaeology of cultures that promises to become universal, transcending the modern borders of nation-state cultures. Sacred texts, of course, constitute the foundational strata of this cultural diffusion, but semiotic approaches can be further ramified into other levels of the life of signs and other domains of cultural practice. I am aware that a considerable amount of research has already been accumulated in these fields. A new humanities will take shape in the digital age, just as the printing press gave birth to humanism in the history of the European Renaissance.

5. Conclusion / Towards a universal “Universe □ △ ○ ” of signs

The opening line of Borges’ “The Library of Babel” reads as follows: “The universe, which others call the Library”. We find ourselves in this universal library that is the World Wide Web. Let us recall that the WWW was designed by Tim Berners-Lee for the CERN library, that the Google search engine with its PageRank was designed for the digital library of Stanford University, and that Amazon originally started as an online bookstore.

In this universal library of Babel, metaphors of print media, such as books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias, are pervasive. Lastly, let us remember that Leibniz had been appointed as librarian by the Duke of Hanover, who conceived the idea of the encyclopedia that would later be taken up by Diderot and d’Alembert.

I believe that no one has better explained the semiotic principles of the dictionary and encyclopedia than Umberto Eco. We find ourselves in the East corridors and the Asia sections of this universal library.

I dream that in these corridors we would regularly meet to exchange information on the state of research, to communicate new discoveries, and to lend each other useful tools, both theoretical and practical. We, the semioticians of Asia - I use the expression here in a dual sense, referring to both Asian semioticians and semioticians studying Asia - have much to discuss in this universe of signs.

When our dear colleague Kim Sung Do shared with me the extraordinary idea of creating an Asian initiative in the field of semiotic studies, I immediately became enthusiastic and supportive of this endeavor.

Peirce defined pragmatism as “a kind of instinctive attraction to living facts” (Peirce, CP 5.64). Indeed, it is this attraction to the “living facts” of Asia that motivates our meeting. Asia is vast, and we Asian semioticians, in the absence of any fixed identity, instinctively resemble each other, and are therefore drawn together. In this way, we can play the family resemblance game in Wittgenstein’s sense (Wittgenstein, §67). Even if there is no unitary defining trait common to all our members, these games of resemblance provide a sufficient basis for the formation of semiotic families. In the great commentary on the Book of Changes Yi Jing, we read: “events come together according to their resemblances, things come together according to their categories. 方以類聚, 物以群分” (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1977; Takada & Goto, 2012).

In preparing this text, I was reminded of the work of the groupe μ , who adopted for the cover of their *Traité du signe visuel* an ink painting by the Zen priest Sengai Gibon (Edeline et al., 1992). This most famous painting depicts a rectangle, a triangle and a circle. Sengai left the work untitled and uncaptioned (except for his signature), but it is often referred to as “The Universe”. Here’s my very personal interpretation: the rectangle represents the condition, the triangle the question and the circle the spirit.

Let me conclude my comments today as follows. Writing was the condition of possibility that allowed people to question signs and prompted them to build the foundations of semiotics. The new digital era of signs has raised a new set of problems, which are now being questioned, giving rise to a new study of signs. We are now in a truly universal “Universe” of signs, in which we are brought together in the spirit and wisdom of an Asian semiotics.

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