

váznamne prispel aj G. Oakes. Recenzovaná práca je určená hlavne čitateľom, ktorí sa zaujímajú o metodológiu vied o kultúre, resp. sociálnych vied, o filozofiu vedy a dejiny filozofie.

Oľga Sisáková

THE INEXORABLE SEMIOSIS OF BEING

THOMAS A. SEBEOK: *A Sign Is Just a Sign*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991, 178 p.

Rendered popular among the wide lay public by David Lodge's novels and Umberto Eco's fame, semiotics owes much of its intellectual lure and scholarly repute to the author of this fascinating and erudite volume. Thomas A. Sebeok is Distinguished Professor of Linguistics and Semiotics and Chairman of the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies at Indiana University. His numerous publications include *The Play of Musement*, *How Animals Communicate*, and *Sight, Sound, and Sense*.

The wealth and scope of inquiry and insight in this collection of essays necessarily defies any common denominator; still, one simply cannot miss the idea hovering above T. A. Sebeok's entire semiotic project: the process of message exchanges, or semiosis, is the criterial attribute of life. And this all-pervasive semiotic comportment of living things (or their products and artificial extensions, such as computers, robots, automata, etc.) constitutes the concern of semiotics. "Living things" for the author are not just the organisms of one of the five kingdoms (the Monera, Protocists, Animalia, Plantae, and Fungi), but also their hierarchical component parts, such as a cell (the minimal semiosis unit, corresponding to about fifty genes). This having been said, *A Sign Is Just a Sign* is a weighty challenge to semiotics as it is perceived and practiced in this country: I mean its glottocentrism and focus on verbal messages, whereas the nonverbal ones, Sebeok argues, are much more copious both in nature and human-to-human communication.

Thomas A. Sebeok is, of course, standing on the shoulders of the incomparable polymathic mind Charles Sanders Peirce. The latter, having revived the ancient doctrine of signs, equipped semioticians with the basic tool kit of notions and concepts, e. g. the triadic relation among a sign, its object, and its interpretant. But in his essays from the collection at hand (*The Semiotic Self* and *The Semiotic Self Revisited*), Sebeok does not hesitate to reveal and manifest his more recent intellectual debts.

The first to have vigorously affected and effected his thinking on semiotics was the prodigious Prussian theoretical biologist Jakob von Uexküll. Is reality reflected in semiotic structures, which, therefore, constitute models of reality or, rather, the other way round: i.e. semiotic models are independent variables, the structure of being thus becoming the dependent variable? Neither vision is free from difficulties, yet, Sebeok contends, the second one, proposed by Jakob von Uexküll under the watchword *Umwelt-Forschung* (research in subjective universes), has turned out to be best relevant to modern semiotics (and ethology). "Signs have acquired their effectiveness through evolutionary adaptation to the vagaries of the sign wielder's *Umwelt*. When the *Umwelt* changes, these signs can become obstacles, and the sign, extinct" (p. 12).

Sebeok's second great, still insufficiently appreciated, instigator was the bold Swiss explorer Heini Hediger, who brought to light some of the most obscure mysteries of animal

psychology. Using his results as well as Freud's view of anxiety as a semiotic behaviour, Sebeok arrives at a highly fertile conception of the semiotic Self, which looks like fairly convincing for the clarification of the intricate issues of personal identity as the continuation of the Self and discrimination between Self and non-Self. The issue of coming to terms with otherness began when the earliest living entities "invented" the immunologic system to segregate themselves from the rest of the soup of surrounded organic material. Sebeok projects the thesis to humanity: "...this superb, although not flawless gift of discrimination, is, in fact, doubly expressed in man, by two parallel recognition systems and associated defence mechanisms: the immunologic memory, which consists of an array of cells whose surface receptors allow them to respond to particular types of molecules, supplemented by another, commonly called anxiety, which protects the self in the sense that this is a continuous activity, or way of life, in a word, behaviour. What is maintained by anxiety, another sort of memory, is not biological substance but the pattern of behaviour that it operates" (p. 38). This brings us to the crucial part of memory for the continuity of our semiotic persona: memory organises, rearranges "as a child playing with a tinkertoy", and finally imposes a fitting personal narrative schema upon each of us. Memory itself is constantly reshaped to secure the endurance of positive self-esteem... "The notion "semiotic self" registers and emphasizes the fact that an animate is capable of absorbing information from its environment if, and only if, it possesses the corresponding key, or code. There must exist an internalized system of signposts to provide a map to the actual configuration of events. Therefore, "self" can be adequately grasped only with the concepts and terminology of the doctrine of signs" (p. 43).

Messages in the Marketplace is a retrospective intertextual polylogue with the thinkers who discerned that any object in the universe is, for the interpreter, unavoidably a semiotic entity; who were aware of the manipulation in semiotic relations, of the power of words, and of "the prison-house of language" – in the Bacon's phrase, of the "idols of the market-place". Imposed by signs, these, what with their inherent ambiguity, are not to be trusted. The more so in the environment of a "high-tech, refluxent concept industry", which assigns predominance to the destination of a message over its source: "According to the modern principle which clearly pervades the American political process today, if not yet all corporate management, the individual looks outward to the intended destination – to public opinion – rather than, specularly and speculatively, inward. What would the public like to hear? Whatever it wants to hear is what the observer then attempts to replicate. Then, having replicated what his measurements indicated that the public wants to hear, he or she wraps up that product to be peddled in the marketplace, which, however is already teeming with competitors eager to do the same... There is, in other words, little or no room left for invigorating novelty" (p. 148). There is something ominously Orwellian about this reselling of public opinion, enforced and ascertained by the ever more powerful instruments of measurement; some dull, idiotizing circularity of the message robbed of its source...

A gripping and suggestive scholarly volume.

Emma Nežinská