

Enchantment of the past and semicide. Remembering Ivar Puura

Timo Maran¹

When someone close to you passes away, a world ceases to exist. A semiotician would say it is an *umwelt*, a subjective world with all the richness of sign patterns, personal memories and stories, nuances of expressions and habits that disappears. A countless number of semiotic connections are severed.

Ivar Puura (b. 1961) died unexpectedly on July 20, 2012. Ivar Puura was a supporter and a good dialogue partner of the Tartu semiotic community for more than twenty years (for a more detailed biographical overview, see Kull 2012). A geologist by training and an active proponent of environmental education and protection, Ivar Puura often brought fresh perspectives into semiotic debates. He also acted as a long-time chair of the Theoretical Biology Division of the Estonian Naturalists' Society, was the main organizer of the annual Spring Schools in Theoretical Biology, and an editor of many thematic volumes of the Society. Especially remarkable were his views on temporal processes, development, and evolution, as well as his interest in semiotics of time (including the new field of *paleosemiotics* envisioned by him). Although Ivar Puura published little in the field of semiotics, he gave a number of presentations on various topics related to semiotics, among others “Memory and subjective time: how the story of time is created”, “Domesticating the unknown”, “Time, chronesthesia and memory”, “From mirroring nature to distorting nature: models, myths and manipulations”.²

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² The original titles and occasions of Ivar Puura's semiotics-related presentations are the following: “Mälu ja subjektiivne aeg: kuidas luuakse aja lugu?” [Memory and subjective time: how the story of time is created] presented at the seminar “Isiklikud loodused” [Personal Natures], November 25, 2002; “Tundmatu kodustamine” [Domesticating the unknown] at the conference “Semiootika piirid” [Boundaries of Semiotics], November 24–25, 2006, see also Puura 2006; “Aeg, kronesteesia ja mälu” [Time, chronesthesia and memory] at “VIII semiootika sügiskool: Semiootika metodoloogia” [VIII Autumn School of Semiotics: Methodology of Semiotics], November 3–5, 2006; “Looduse peegeldusest looduse väänamiseni: mudelid, müüdid ja manipulatsioon” [From mirroring nature to distorting nature: models, myths and

In this volume of *Sign Systems Studies* we publish a translation of Ivar Puura's essay "Nature in our memory", which originally appeared in Estonian in *Eesti Loodus* [Estonian nature], a popular journal of biological sciences (Puura 2002). The essay revolves around two intrinsically semiotic principles: first, every living being is connected to its environment by semiotic relations that accumulate in time; and second, to be human is to be aware of our continuity in time which in turn entails a capacity to predict future, to manipulate temporal phenomena and to provide narratives about time. The first principle unites us with other animals since all biological organisms rely on natural sign relations and semiotic affordances³ of the environment. The second property is rather a peculiarity of the human species that opens up a rich world of imagination, but also places upon us an ethical responsibility not to misuse our abilities. By introducing an important concept of *semicide*, Ivar Puura directs our attention to the possibility of misusing our semiotic skills: according to him, semicide is "a situation in which signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else's malevolence or carelessness, thereby stealing a part of the former's identity".

Semicide has the potential to become a useful theoretical concept for describing relationships between cultures as well as between culture and nature, and for distinguishing specific practices applied in these relationships. In its essence, we can describe any such relationship as an encounter between one's own semiotic sphere and another semiotic sphere (to follow the terminology of Juri Lotman 2005), and we can categorize these relationships on the basis of attitude (whether one's own semiotic sphere is aggressive or neutral towards or supportive of the other), level of activity (whether it is passive or active towards the other), and intentionality (whether the relationship is cognized and intentional or not). Semicide can take place in a situation in which one's own semiotic sphere is actively aggressive towards the other semiotic sphere and brings along the destruction of the latter's "signs and stories". The question of intentionality is more ambivalent and by focusing predominantly on the victims of semicide, Puura's definition is broad enough to include both destruction because of someone's "malevolence" that is intentional and directed, and destruction because of someone's "negligence" that is unintentional, undirected and often accidental. I believe, however, that the

manipulations] at the seminar "Ökosemiotika suveseminar" [Summer Seminar in Eco-semiotics], July 31 – August 2, 2009.

³ Semiotic affordances could be understood as "those environmental elements that have a tendency to act as objects of signs. Such elements could be physical areas, for instance, hybrid zones between biological communities, animal trails in the landscape, water currents, but also temporal events, such as seasonal rains, forest fires, and the melting of the snow" (Maran, forthcoming). See also Gibson 1986: 127.

distinction between intentional and unintentional semicide may be relevant for the future discussion of the concept: first, because intentional semicide requires planning and awareness of the other's semioticity, being thus foremost a capacity of the human species⁴; and second, because it is in regard to intentional semicide that we can speak of specific practices used in semicide. Unintentional semicide is often part of our relations with other species: for instance, semicide can appear as the damaging effects of human traffic noise on the vocal communication of wild birds (Forman, Alexander 1998). Unintentional semicide can be avoided by increasing our knowledge.

In analysing actual occurrences of semicide, we can distinguish between cases in which the destruction of semiotic processes is a by-product of the destruction of the material environment and objects, and cases in which the semiotic and communicative processes themselves are the primary target. Material destruction can be part of semicide against biological species and indigenous cultures, in which case the other semiotic sphere relies mostly on natural (i.e. iconic, indexical) sign relations that use semiotic affordances of landscapes and material objects. Also symbolic manifestations of culture such as statues, religious buildings, heraldic symbols, natural monuments etc. are vulnerable to material destruction. In cases when semicide is targeted directly at semiotic or communicative processes, it can be more specifically aimed at any one component of the process. Here we can follow classic descriptions of communication, such as Roman Jakobson's or Thomas A. Sebeok's communication models, and ask what components of communication semicide can affect: thus, senders and receivers can be persecuted or executed, the channel of communication can be prohibited, and the communication code damaged. Ivar Puura's essay provides examples of all of these cases. We can further describe specific strategies of semicide, for instance masking (replacing information and messages with those of dominant culture) and ideological overcoding (Eco 1984: 22–23).

Puura most correctly stresses that nowadays the phenomenon of semicide is very widespread both in human culture and society as well as in relations between culture and nature. Unfortunately, semiotics appears to have overlooked this dark side of semiotic relations, as is evident from the lack of a conceptual framework and studies dedicated to this topic. As we now have a word to denote this phenomenon, there is hope that Ivar Puura's legacy in semiotics will be better perceived and also elaborated. This is a question of the ethical responsibility of semiotics. While chronesthesia and other unique semiotic capabilities have enabled humans to reach the position from which we are able to intentionally carry out semicide,

⁴ Apparently there are destructive strategies that target the means of communications also in other species, for instance in parasites of ants and slave-making ants (Lenoir et al. 2001).

the same capabilities also make us aware that every human being as well as every animal gravitates towards the “reliable world of dearly loved landscapes and smells, familiar signs and relationships”. Since the ability to remember our past and to project our being into the future makes us so eager to preserve our existence over time, semiotics can teach us that we can thrive only in our relations with what is other and different. It is indeed a profound semiotic insight that to have a future, any semiotic sphere needs a realm (objects, partners of dialogue, context) that remains (partially) outside it and that it does not fully perceive, understand or control. We are our memories, but what we predominantly remember, are others – other human beings, animals, places, books. One of these others is you, Ivar. Fostering the richness of the world appears to be an essential principle of semiotic ethics.

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Nature in our memory¹

Ivar Puura

Humans seem to have been set apart from other animals by their ability for mental time travel, into the past as well as into the future. In case this is so – have we tried to appreciate the true wealth that this ability gives us? Are we able to perceive these opportunities and the full responsibility that it brings along?

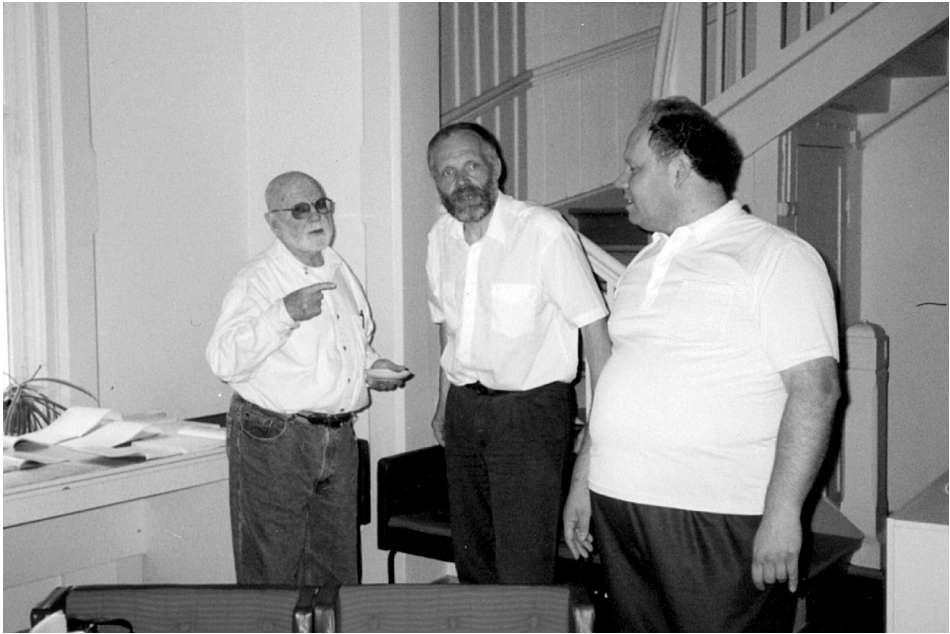
“If we kept all our wonderful abilities except for the sense of time, we would still remain uniquely different from all other animals, but we would hardly be humans in the sense we understand it now,”² believes Endel Tulving (2002). Tulving writes that the unique human sense of time – chronesthesia – is related to the development of specific brain regions (prefrontal cortex and frontal lobes). By chronesthesia Tulving understands “a form of cognition that allows human beings to think about subjective time and enables travel through subjective time”. Furthermore, he concludes that “for the development and continuance of civilisation and culture it is indispensable for a human being to be aware of her own and her offspring’s continued existence in time that includes not only the past and the present but also future” (Tulving 2002).

Each moment of communication with our surroundings involves recognition of signs, establishment of their interrelations, attribution of meaning – in other words, there occurs semiosis. Chronesthesia can be seen as a type of semiosis in which personal memories are arranged on a subjective timeline. It is only on the basis of remembering the personal that trust can appear or disappear. Wisdom as well as stupidity, sincerity as well as deceit are all recorded in the mind. On the basis of experience all of us shape our own landscape of memory, space of values, attitudes and (pre)conceptions.

Personal time travels intertwine memories and acquired knowledge. Among these there are general signs of culture that “[...] actualize behavioural, ideological, temporal and spatial codes in the mind of the receiver” (Torop 1999). Kalevi Kull and Mihhail Lotman (1995) have suggested: “A sign requires to be recognized. What an interpreter does not recognize is not a sign for her. This, seemingly a rather self-evident and primitive statement brings along rather important implications, such as semiosis being inseparably connected to memory.”

¹ Originally published as “Puura, Ivar 2002. Loodus meie mälus. Eesti Loodus 11: 24–25”

² All quotations from Estonian are translated by Elin Sütiste and Timo Maran.



Thomas A. Sebeok (from left), Kalevi Kull and Ivar Puura at the seminar “Uexküll and the Living Environment” at the Estonian Naturalists’ Society, Tartu, June 8, 1999 (Photo: T. Maran).

Jaan Kaplinski (1996) has written: “In a simple case, the free part of mind is filled with a simple reflection of the surroundings. But our mind is hardly ever a mere mirror: filaments of memory connect each of our perceptions to something past. There is no such thing as a pure present. Memories bring into it the past, wishes and expectations the future; imagination and thinking combine all this into new pictures and thoughts.”

A notion of temporal relations accompanies us everywhere. The pillars of our world picture – ideas about the emergence and development of phenomena, about causality and repeatability of experiments – all entail temporal relationships. Written and unwritten rules of communal life, morality, ethics, (behavioural) norms, laws and responsibility for our past – all these are based on our own and others’ personal (life)stories unfolding in time.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (2001), who studied the “savage mind” of indigenous people, described tribes who responded to the researchers’ wish to learn their language with spreading out a pile of plants. The names of the hundreds of plants make up a considerable part of a tribe’s common vocabulary and signscape. Some understanding of the depth of such “savage thinking” can develop in a person whose knowledge of nature approaches that of indigenous peoples.

As a contrast to the world in which there still exist shreds of the “savage mind”, Jean Baudrillard describes a world of simulacra, in which groves and meadows are replaced by artificial environments, such as Disneyland or McDonald’s. While in earlier times natural landscapes were transferred onto maps, at the present time programmes to change nature are devised in the paper reality of landscape planning. A modelled artificial environment as a simulacrum starts to prevail over the primeval and the natural, both in the physical world as well as in the human mind.

The diversity of nature is overwhelming. Every living creature, being part of a greater whole, carries in itself memories of billions of years of evolution and embodies its own long and largely still unknown story of origin. By wholesale replacement of primeval nature with artificial environments, it is not only nature in the biological sense that is lost. At the hands of humans, millions of stories with billions of relations and variations perish. The rich signscape of nature is replaced by something much poorer. It is not an exaggeration to call this process semiocide.

I understand semiocide to be a situation in which signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else’s malevolence or carelessness, thereby stealing a part of the former’s identity. In everyday life this often takes place in the form of material or mental violence among children as well as grownups: things that are significant and have become dear to somebody are threatened to be or are actually destroyed. In the cultural sphere, semiocide can be looting of tombs or destruction of heritage objects. Classic nature protection looks out for individual natural objects also in the sense of their physical as well as semiotic existence.

When semiocide is targeted at some nation or group of people, it can manifest itself as ideological pressure or as sacrilege that often goes together with physical violence or occupation. A form of semiocide – linguacide, i.e. suppression of national languages – is something we remember from our own recent past and can see everywhere in the world today. Semiocide has also been the destruction of totems of indigenous people and the banishing of people from their home signscape – from the native land of their forefathers, taking away from them everything which all together means home.

What is homesickness if not a wish to return to our reliable world of dearly loved landscapes and smells, familiar signs and relationships? What keeps families in their homes until the last moment when burning lava or rising water is already threateningly near? Why do families refuse to accept financially tempting offers to move away when their homes get in the way of new mines or roads?

If we took time to get to know ourselves better, we would discover nature in ourselves. Deep in our memory our sensations are related to the signs of nature that we see, smell and hear even when we have not yet become aware of this. Nature that is intimately familiar to us embodies the signscape that carries

traditions going back through centuries, helps culture to persist and helps human beings to stay human.

How can we find this nature in ourselves? We can always listen to nature's music that lightens our mind. Some people experience an elevated mood, others perceive the nuances of the melody, yet others are able to write the music down as a score, and finally there are some who are able to create music. The richness of melodies and signs hidden in nature is not elitist, it cannot be fenced in or marketed. Nature just is. When need be, it comforts the traveller of the (memory) landscape. And sometimes nature gives us a jolly wink and is willing to tell its stories, unfolding multilayered meanings and offering joy of discovery to last one's entire lifetime.

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