
What does it mean to be asemiotic?*

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Abstract: Although some researchers consider semiotics as a universal epistemological approach (Gaines, 2015), calling something 'asemiotic' may be challenging. However, one can find such characteristics in semioticians' work. For example, Tartu semiotic school cofounders Juri M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky argue that asemiotic is a way how proper name functions within mythological consciousness (Lotman; Uspensky, 1973). Despite the fact that this characteristics may be found in other scholars' works, research of 'asemiotic' continues to be a marginal field in semiotic studies. Since the 'semiotic' (related to semiotics) is determined in theoretical frameworks in different ways, the 'asemiotic' similarly does not stick to one meaning. In other words, asemiotic postulates the absence of the semiotic in the sense in which the scholar understands the semiotics. Otherwise, incompatibility of the theoretical sequence may lead to methodological inaccuracy. This may happen when one perceives semiotics as a unified theory. Thus, while it is not an accepted term, 'asemiotic' may have different meanings depending on the perspective. This research will delve into, the use of 'asemiotic' in the works of Guattari and Deleuze (1987), Nöth (1995, 2000) and Lotman and Uspensky as well as try to identify the case when scholars resort to using 'asemiotic' in their works. One may find different approaches of use, from the auxiliary instrument through the method of interpretation to the core concept.

Keywords: asemiotic; semiology; natural encodings; music; myth.

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Introduction

Despite the fact that certain scholars regard semiotics as a universal epistemological approach (Gaines, 2015), labeling something as ‘asemiotic’ may pose a certain degree of challenge. However, such characteristics can be easily found in the works of prominent semioticians, namely, Tartu-Moscow semiotic (TMS) school cofounders Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky argue that asemiotic is a way how proper name functions within mythological consciousness (Lotman; Uspensky, 1973). Apart from these, although such characteristics may be found in other scholars’ works, researching “asemiotic” still remains to be a marginal field in semiotic studies.

First, it should be noted that there are no specific works devoted to asemiotic. Moreover, the very existence of semiotic science, as well as perception of its universality,¹ largely determines the non-semiotic or asemiotic (which are probably not the same) as marginal areas. It is problematic to put this otherwise, for instance, it is just as difficult to imagine research on aphiosophical, alinguistic, or amathematical studies while philosophy, linguistic, and mathematics exist.

Nevertheless, we will attempt to define ‘asemiotic’ by analysis of works dealing with this characteristic. It has to be emphasized that we will focus precisely on understanding ‘asemiotic’, rather something that may seem as synonymous. For the purpose of this paper, it seems important to use unified vocabulary. In the light of the study framework, we will not count such potential forms, as nonsemiotic, antisemiotic, and other. It is possible that one of them can be used as an equivalent for asemiotic, however, it was decided to work with one category. Following this, it will be clear that even such a low-frequency word as ‘asemiotic’ may have different meanings depending on authors.

Working with terminology begins with dictionaries. However, the word ‘asemiotic’ can be called rare in use.² Unlike other words that begin with the prefix *a-* and have a definition in English dictionaries (e.g. ‘asexual’), the term ‘asemiotic’ is not found there.³ There is no specific article on ‘asemiotic’ in semiotician handbooks either (Nöth, 1995; Trifonas, 2015; Sebeok, 2001). Lacking dictionary definition, the meaning of the word can be understood in different ways – with grammar, the author’s explanation, or it can be found out of context.

In the grammatical sense, as an adjective, ‘asemiotic’ means a specific quality of something else. It consists of two parts, the prefix ‘*a-*’ and the word ‘semiotic’. The prefix *a-* bears the meaning of negation or absence (without, not,

¹ See critic of ‘pansemiotism’, ‘semiotic imperialism’ (Lagopoulos; Lagopoulou, 2020, p. 321–336). Available in: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110618808-009>.

² According to Google Ngram Viewer search engine that displays a graph showing how phrases have occurred in a corpus of books over the selected years: <https://bit.ly/3ZF4iiG>.

³ Cambridge dictionary and Dictionary by Merriam-Webster were used.

no). For example, the word 'anesthesia' means 'without feeling'. Thus, the grammatical form defines that 'asemiotic' means a quality, which is the absence of semiotic. Since the 'semiotic' (related to semiotics) is determined in theoretical frameworks in different ways, the 'asemiotic' does not keep the same meaning either. In other words, the asemiotic postulates the absence of the semiotic in the sense in which the specific scholar understands the semiotics. Yet, perceiving semiotics as a unified theory mixing different scholar approaches, may lead to methodological inaccuracy.

To illustrate, Sasha Newell (2018) criticizes current anthropological theorists for what she calls "the antisemiotic turn". She claims that for many authors working within the theory of affects framework, "the very idea that signs and affect speak together (and to each other) would seem to contradict the very root of their distinction" (Newell, 2018, p. 2). She points out that affect itself is often described as 'asemiotic'. Seeing the potential of the semiotic approach, she devotes her paper to argue that affect theory scholars may bear rich fruit using the semiotic approach. Nevertheless, the problem of the paper is mixing different approaches, as if the semiotics could be regarded as a solid paradigm.

Regarding the concept of affect, Newell notes that she works within the Deleuzian tradition, "and the work of Massumi has been especially influential in this regard" (Newell, 2018, p. 2). In terms of her understanding of semiosis, Newell notes: "I do not limit signs to words or visual icons but incorporate all sensory modes; all processes in which the perception of a material trace produces effects upon the perceiver are forms of semiosis, even when consciousness is not involved. Therefore, with Eduardo Kohn and Christopher Bracken I employ the Peircean conception of semiosis as entelechy..." (Newell, 2018, p.2).

While indicating the paradigms she works in, she does not have the same approach toward researchers she criticizes; authors for whom "the very idea that signs and affect speak together would seem to contradict the very root of their distinction" are followers of the Gilles Deleuze tradition, while this very contradiction is grounded in deleuzean approach. As a result, Newell criticizes "the antisemiotic turn" of deleuzean followers from the Peircean point of view, with Deleuzean and Peirce's semiotics being just different approaches (Cardoso, 2018; Dawkins, 2020). This example shows the importance of distinguishing traditions when talking about what asemiotic means.

Thus, while not being an accepted term, asemiotic may bear different meanings depending on the perspective. The following parts of the paper, will look at the use of asemiotic in the works of Guattari and Deleuze, Nöth, and Lotman and Uspensky which will enable us to identify the case where scholars resort to using asemiotic in their works. The main objective of the paper is to theoretically investigate the characteristics of asemiotic in order to show the principal importance of methodological consistency, which drives away from

mixing various approaches. In this regard, we do not aim to define the 'asemiotic', but to show how this fits into the theories of different authors.

This analysis has additional epistemological value: it becomes clear that there is a place for asemiotic within semiotic theory itself, which contradicts the perception of semiotics as a universal epistemological approach.

1. 'Asemiomatic' of Guattari and Deleuze

The asemiotic characteristics cannot be called significant in Deleuze's and Guattari's theory. It is found in the book *A Thousand Plateaus* and plays an auxiliary role in their critique of the totality of the signifier. Since the authors do not provide a definition, it might be crucial to turn to the context in which the notion of asemiotic arises.

A Thousand Plateaus is the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which Deleuze and Guattari criticize the foundations of Marxist and psychoanalytic orthodoxy. Although the main target was Sigmund Freud, the theories of Jacques Lacan, Guattari's teacher, "did not emerge unscathed" (Caldwell, 2009, p.19). Jacques Lacan was at the time the main apologist for Freudian psychoanalysis, brought to a new level through structuralist theory. After Lévi-Strauss had shown, through the example of anthropology, how the structuralist approach could be used outside linguistics, structuralism began to spread in different spheres. For Jacques Lacan, it allowed a new perspective on psychology; in the 1960s his "return to Freud" was held under the slogan "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Gasperoni, 1996, p.77).

One of the key points of linguistic structuralism is the notion of a sign consisting of a signifier (acoustic image) and a signified (concept). While for Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structuralism, the link between signifier and signified was arbitrary but still necessary, Lacan autonomised the signifier. For Lacan, the main thing in the sign is neither the signifier, nor the signified, but the line between them. "This dividing line is a censor, resisting the access of the signifier to the signified. Only one side of the sheet is visible. Lacan's formula is not a formula for the relation of the two components of the signifier, but for their separation. Only the signifier is accessible". (Mazin, 2004, p. 12). The signifier points not to the signified, but to another signifier - so a chain of signifiers is formed. Being born, the subject is lost beneath the signifiers. The subject is undetectable because it does not coincide with itself when it speaks; it becomes the object of its own speech. In this situation, the only thing the psychoanalyst can work with is speech, the chain of signifiers. Access to the signified is closed. In this situation, "Lacan is not in search of some hidden content, some mysterious signifier. The mystery lies on the surface. The truth is

in the text itself, in the words, between them, in the letter, in the instance of the letter. The truth is between language and speech” (Mazin, 2004, p.12).

In fact, it is precisely against the dictates of the signifier that Deleuze and Guattari speak out. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they explicitly allude to Lacan, saying that “signifier enthusiasts take an oversimplified situation as their implicit model: word and thing”. In this binary model, the thing is related to the signified, and the word to the signifier. And this is not a binary of equal elements, it is a hierarchy binary, since the thing is extracted as a signified “in conformity with the word, and therefore subjugated to the signifier”. Instead of Saussure’s signifier and signified, Guattari and Deleuze apply the Hjelmslev grid of matter, content and expression, form and substance. It seems that content and expression are meant to replace the framework of signifier and signified, but this is not the case. For Guattari and Deleuze, content and expression are present in each of the three strata they distinguish: geological, the biological and the alloplastic (the last Buchanan (2021, p. 28) calls the techno-semiological (i.e. humans). Gareth Abrahams calls them the physical, organic, and the linguistic strata (Abrahams, 2020). However, although the signifier and the signified exist only in the third strata (alloplastic, or techno-semiological or linguistic strata), the signifier attempts to extend its influence to all strata in which it does not exist.

Guattari and Deleuze pose a number of vital questions. When can we talk about signs? Are there signs in all strata? Is it possible to claim that they exist in all strata simply on the basis that every stratum includes territorialities and movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation?

This kind of expansive method is very dangerous, because it lays the groundwork for or reinforces the imperialism of language, if only by relying on its function as universal translator or interpreter (Deleuze; Guattari, 1987, p. 65).

They argue that there is no sign system that is common to all strata. Moreover, “in so-called natural codings, the abstract machine remains enveloped in the strata: It does not write in any way and has no margin of latitude allowing it to recognise something as a sign” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1987, p. 65). Despite this, however, the danger remains - not even imperialism of language, but imperialism of the signifier in language. Dissenting from this state of affairs, Guattari and Deleuze do the following:

- assign the presence of signs only to the third stratum,
- contrary to Lacan, return the signified, claiming that the signified does not exist outside of its relationship with the signifier,

- determine that the signifier and the signified exist only in the language system, and they are not mandatory. On the third stratum, words and things can be understood as signified and signifiers, but this is not necessary too (signs “are not, or not necessarily, signifiers” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1987, p. 68).

It is in this sense that their use of the characteristics asemiotical should be understood – by this, Guattari and Deleuze only emphasise the humble place of the signifier:

Just as there are asemiotical expressions, or expressions without signs, there are asemiological regimes of signs, asignifying signs, both on the strata and on the plane of consistency.⁴ The most that can be said of signifiability is that it characterizes *one* regime, which is not even the most interesting or modern or contemporary one, but is perhaps only more pernicious, cancerous, and despotic than the others, and more steeped in illusion than they (Deleuze; Guattari, 1987, p.68).

The place of the asemiotical can be demonstrated more clearly with Lazzarato's synthesis, which groups four main semiotic registers in the Deleuzo-Guattarian system:

- natural asemiotical encodings, such as DNA or crystalline structures;
- symbolic (or pre-signifying) semiologies that include bodily gestures and the rituals of archaic societies;
- the representational, signifying the semiology of Saussure,
- asignifying (or post-signifying) semiologies, which include mathematical formulas, stock quotes, and computer languages, but also the rhythms, durations, and intensities of music, art, and film (Lazzarato, 2010, cited in Hetrick, 2014, p.62).

‘Asemiotical’ for Guattari and Deleuze is the quality of expressions that can be viewed from the perspective of the plane of expression and the plane of content, but not from the perspective of the signifier (as understood by the Guattari and Deleuze) and, in particular, not from the perspective of the signified. Although the asemiotical characteristics do occupy a marginal place in theory, they are used in the primary source. In the next section we will look at asemiotical, which is used in secondary literature.

⁴ In original: “De même qu’il y a des expressions asémiotiques ou sans signes, il y a des régimes de signes asémiologiques, des signes asignifiants, à la fois sur les strates et sur le plan de consistance” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, p. 87).

2. 'Asemiotic' as interpretation

The use of asemiotic in the interpretation of semiotic theories demonstrates its necessity in denoting a part of semiotic theory. As an example, Winfred Nöth attributes this characteristics to two authors who do not in fact use it. The first is linguist Émile Benveniste, who argues about the semioticity of music.

In the 50-60s music semiotics was born, which is based on an attempt to use linguistic methods in musicology (Monelle, 1992). In the article *Music* in the *Handbook of Semiotics*, Nöth shows two different ways of interpreting music semiotically:

The semiotics of music raises the question whether sounds can be studied as signs, compositions as messages, and music as a semiotic system. The answers have been controversial. Although some have rejected the concept of a musical sign (Benveniste 1969: 238), many scholars have accepted music as an object of semiotic study. Nevertheless, some have defined music as asemantic, whereas others have characterized it as asemiotic (Benveniste 1969: 236). But the difference between these evaluations is in part one of terminology (Nöth, 1995, p. 429).

Claiming that “others have characterised it as asemiotic”, Nöth refers to *The semiology of language*, which Benveniste wrote in 1969. It should be noted that Nöth is not referring to the original, but to the text included in the anthology *Semiotics* edited by Robert Innis (1985). On page 236 of this anthology, indicated by Nöth, the word ‘asemiotic’ does not appear. However, there can be found a passage, in which Benveniste argues that music cannot be regarded as a sign system in the same sense in which language is regarded:

Musical sounds can occur in monophony or in polyphony; they function in an isolated state or simultaneously (chords), whatever the intervals separating them into their respective scales. There is no limit to the multiplicity of sounds produced simultaneously by a group of instruments, nor to the order, frequency, or scope of combinations. The composer freely organizes the sounds in a discourse that is never subjected to any 'grammatical' convention but that obeys its own 'syntax'. We see, therefore, in what respect the musical system can or cannot be considered semiotic (Innis, 1985, p. 236).

Benveniste states, among other things, in this essay that if “music is considered as a language, it has syntactic features, but not semiotic features”. In the French original, there is also no word *asémiotique* (*Sémiologie de la langue*). Therefore, it might be concluded that the term is introduced by Nöth himself in

order to interpret Benveniste's thesis that music cannot be regarded as semiotic, and, as a consequence becomes, in Nöth's words, asemiotic.

Five years after the publication of the *Handbook of Semiotics*, Nöth published an article in which he again uses the asemiotic characteristic, this time when interpreting Umberto Eco's theory of the semiotic threshold (Nöth, 2000). The author explores the principles on the basis of which Eco tries to separate the semiotic from the nonsemiotic.

Nöth shows how Eco separates the semiotic world and culture from the presemiotic world and nature. The former presupposes a social convention, whereas physical and biological processes are “by definition excluded from semiotics”. To illustrate, it thus excludes mere stimuli from the category of signs because “since everything can be understood as a sign if and only if there exists a convention which allows it to stand for something else, and since some behavioral responses are not elicited by convention, stimuli cannot be regarded as signs” (Eco, 1976 cited in Nöth, 2000). Nöth concludes that, essentially, Eco here follows the structuralist tradition, which proclaims the conventionality of signs as the main criterion of semiosis. While acknowledging that this approach does take place, Nöth is still critical of Eco's argumentation base.

Nöth suggests that Eco draws on Peirce's theory in his distinction of what is semiotic and what is not, yet does so insufficiently correctly. Nöth demonstrates that Eco's interpretation of Peirce is incomplete, in particular when it comes to Peirce's triad of sign, object, and interpreter “can also be applied to phenomena that do not have a human emitter, provided that they do have a human receiver, such being the case with meteorological symptoms or any other sort of index” (Eco, 1976, p. 16). In other words, while Eco highlights the necessity of the participation of a human being who perceives conventional signs, Nöth shows that the mind in Peirce's terms goes beyond the mere human mind: “the occurrence of signs and semiosis, according to Peirce, is not restricted to human receivers but presupposes a much more general category which he calls mind” (Eco, 1976, p.55).

This ‘mind’ turns out to be the capacity of phenomena to undergo development, which is set by what Peirce calls the final causation, essentially, the doctrine of teleology. Short (1981) shows that, unlike Aristotelian teleology, where things become what they become out of a 'desire' to imitate the activity of god as best they can, in Peirce's doctrine final causation is a general type, a potential that allows things to happen with more or less plausibility. Thus, everything that happens in the world is all about the transformation of phenomena/signs. These transformations occur in the form of final causes which, in turn, are determined by final causation. “Peirce believes, that final causes tend to create or find the efficient causes that are necessary for their realization” (Eco, 1976, p. 370).

In the same way Copley (2010) resolves the contradiction that may arise for the observer: how did the semiotic nature of living systems emerge from a seemingly “asemiotic non-biological domain” or in other words, “how could semiosis ever have evolved in an asemiotic universe” (Copley, 2010, p. 33)? The author explains it in a semiotic way, drawing on John Deeley's notion of physiosemissis, “an activity... replete with the objective causality whereby the physical interaction of existing things is channeled toward a future different from what is obtained at the time affected interaction” (Copley, 2010, p. 33). Here, virtually the same approach as Peirce is being used. Copley goes on to write:

As Deely observes, this would be a process 'where first stars and then planetary systems develop out of more primitive atomic or molecular 'dust', but these systems in turn give rise to conditions under which further complexifications of atomic structure become possible'.

This may be taken as a modern way of expressing the Peircean 'law of mind', i.e., nature's general tendency to acquire 'habits' or as we would say today regularities.

Through the early evolution on our planet such regularities would have gradually served to produce more and more predictability, and finally, as this process had advanced far enough, systems arose that could proliferate by taking advantage of this increased predictability (Copley, 2010, p. 33-34).

One can say that it is precisely Peirce's narrow interpretation of mind that enabled Eco to argue that the stimulus-response process cannot be semiotic, being an example of a dyadic process, whereas Eco's triadic process of semiosis must involve a person who interprets the relation. It is this interpretation of stimulus-response sequences that Nöth describes as 'asemiotic', whereas in Eco's own works, to which Nöth refers in his article, this word does not appear.⁵

This part has looked into the two cases of using the characteristics of asemiotic in metasemiotic works, even though these sources do not explicitly contain these terms. In both cases, Nöth uses asemiotic when describing cases where authors refuse to include something in the semiotic system. In doing so, Nöth implements two different approaches. If Benveniste does not include music in the semiotic system on the grounds that it does not meet the rules according to which language is included in this system, then Eco has everything outside the boundaries of semiotics that is not included in the sphere of culture, which is not conventional. What both have in common is that both are regarded as a part of the structuralist approach. Nöth points out what influence Peirce had on Eco's reasoning, yet explains how Eco misleadingly interprets Peirce's semiotics. In doing so, Nöth translates Eco's ideas from a semiotic context into a semiological context.

⁵ In this work Eco uses the word 'asemiosic' when discussing whether the reflection in the mirror is a sign (Eco, 1984). In this work asemiosic is related to semiosic, which is respectively derived from semiosis. Thus it cannot be argued that asemiosic and asemiotic have the same meaning.

3. The asemiotic myth

Another case of using the asemiotic characteristics can be found in a joint article by J. Lotman and B. Uspensky on *Myth - Name - Culture*,⁶ which deals with the differences between nonmythological and mythological types of thinking.

Non-mythological thinking is characterised by descriptiveness, whereas mythological thinking is marked by identification. These can be exemplified by two following expressions. The expression “The world is matter” (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 211) is a non-mythological expression in which

words can only capture one detail of a complex reality, leaving other possibilities open for discovery. Describing something means finding the most appropriate sets of synonyms, yet keeping in mind that none of them can be exactly equivalent to each other or provide an exhaustive representation of reality (Gussago, 2013, p. 75).

The second statement “The world is a horse” (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 211) is extracted from the Hindu teachings The Upanishads and is mythological. There is no translation of one concept through another, as in the first example, there is identification. The authors show that even the same copula ‘is’ has different functions. In the instance “The world is matter”, ‘is’ indicates correlation; in the second “The world is a horse”, ‘is’ indicates identification and recognition. In a mythological text, translation is impossible because all objects belong to the same language, thus both meta-language and metaphor are impossible in myth.

According to Uspensky and Lotman, the words ‘world’ and ‘horse’ are “isomorphic” (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 214). It is important to stress that the world and the horse are not only isomorphic to each other, belong to the same language, but are also singular. Mythological thinking cannot contain a synonymic series because “synonymy assumes the presence for one and the same object of several interchangeable appellations and, consequently, a relative freedom in their usage” (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 224). This kind of singularity of objects and their isomorphism allows the authors to conclude that they all function as names and that the language of myth is a “language of proper names” (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 234).

This identification of name and what is named in turn determines the notion of the unconventional nature of proper names, of their ontological essence. Hence mythological consciousness can be

⁶ The original version of this article appeared in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam [Studies on Sign Systems]*, 6 (Tartu, 1973). In this publication the quotation is from the 1978 translation.

interpreted from the standpoint of the development of semiosis as asemiotic (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, 215).

In order to determine what the authors mean when they claim that mythological consciousness can be seen as asemiotic, it is necessary to outline the theoretical framework within which they operate.

To begin with, it should be noted that neither Lotman nor Uspensky were consistent theorists of semiotics as a science, and the absence of a systematic presentation of their views on semiotics complicates the task. Mikhail Lotman writes (2002, p. 5-20) about his father: “J.L. refused in principle to create any systematic review of the basics of semiotic knowledge, as his main task was to develop the new, not to present what was already known... J.L. focused on theoretical problems concerning semiotics foundations or semiotic analysis methodology only as far as the specific research tasks demanded”. Uspensky characterized the entire TMS as follows: “Paradoxically, the Moscow-Tartu semiotic school was less interested in semiotics per se, semiotics as an independent and autonomous scientific discipline. Semiotics... was not so much a field of knowledge with its own axiomatics and methodology, but rather, a key” (Uspensky, 2016, p. 697). Semiotics for the representatives of the TMS was rather a meta-discipline; the researchers themselves were primarily linguists, historians, art historians, etc., rather than semioticians. “Semiotics was seen, in essence, as an applied, that is, an auxiliary discipline whose very existence was justified precisely by its application to concrete material” (Uspensky, 2016, p. 698).

Nevertheless, this provides a possibility to establish a general theoretical framework. The general idea of the Tartu-Moscow school is that its representatives developed structuralist ideas in a variety of fields – linguistics, art history, and cultural studies. Velmezova says that “Juri Lotman considered himself clearly to belong to the holistic tradition of semiotics, founded by Saussure” (Velmezova, 2022, p.33). Linguist Boris A. Uspensky found Saussure's ideas, as well as those of structuralism, resonated with his views: around the time they wrote their joint article, he defined the sign as “the totality of expression and content” (Uspensky, 1971, p. 188), in which he refers to the image as ‘text’, speaking of the relationship between ‘sign’ and ‘content’ (Uspensky, 1962a, p. 125-128), ‘sign’ and ‘meaning’ (Uspensky, 1962b, p. 149-152), indicating the relationship of signifier and signified.

The *Myth-Name-Culture* article itself also takes a semiological approach to the sign, although it has terms that could be read as Pierce's. In these cases, Lotman and Uspensky make a special reservation:

In a number of cases a mythological text transferred into the category of non-mythological consciousness is perceived as

symbolic. A symbol of this kind may be interpreted as the result of reading the myth from the position of a later semiotic consciousness - that is, reinterpreted as an iconic or quasi-iconic sign (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 219).

In a note to the word 'symbol', the authors mention: "Here we are not thinking of the special meaning which is ascribed to this term in Peirce's classification" (Lotman; Uspensky, 1978, p. 230).

Regarding the term 'iconic sign', which is also associated with Peirce's theory, it should be noted that it bears a different meaning. Lotman defines the iconic sign in his book *Semiotics of Cinema and Film Aesthetics*, published in the same year as the article *Myth – Name – Culture*, where he divides signs into two parts, conditional and representational. A conditional sign is a word; it is a sign whose relation to the signified is arbitrary and "internally unmotivated". "A pictorial or iconic sign presupposes that the meaning has one unique, naturally inherent expression" (Lotman, 1973 as cited in Lotman, 1998, p. 291). Most likely, Lotman adopts this notion of the iconic sign not from Peirce but from Roman Jakobson.

It is important to note that Lotman takes not only on Jakobson's interpretation of the iconic sign, but also "Jakobson's critique of Saussure's principle of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" (Pilshchikov; Sutiste, 2022, p. 71). Jakobson disagrees with Saussure's claim that the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is fundamental and irrefutable. In *Quest for Essence of Language* (Jakobson, 1965), he shows that Saussure himself initially allowed for the possibility of nonarbitrariness between the signifier and the signified. Jakobson proves that there is an intrinsic relationship between signifier and signified at the level of sentence syntax, morphology, and word phonology. The strictness of the Saussurian approach to the sign turned out to be limiting for Jakobson because it was unable to explain the connections he was pointing to. However, Peirce's categories, as interpreted by Jakobson, proved much more useful in explaining the relationship between the linguistic sign and what it signifies. In particular, his interpretation of the iconic sign allowed him to free the sign from obligatory arbitrariness.⁷

Taking into account the influence that Jakobson had on Lotman, it becomes clear why authors who work in the semiological paradigm deny the arbitrariness of the sign. The proper name for mythological consciousness is not just arbitrary; the relation of signifier and signified is not even called motivated, and their indistinguishability, identity, isomorphism, and thus asemiotic are postulated. In other words, because of the identity of name and signified, one

⁷ "For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and its signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot." (Saussure, 2011, p. 68).

cannot speak of the relation of signifier and signified (since there is neither the former nor the latter). Thus, one cannot speak of the conventionality of the proper name either. To give a trivial example, the Greek Helios could not be called anything other than Helios. From the point of view of the development of semiosis, myth is a stage when, due to the asemiotic nature of mythological consciousness, there was no sign yet. Perhaps it would be appropriate to speak of the mythological name as a pre-sign. Summarizing the ideas of the authors, Winfred Nöth (1995, p. 376) in a dictionary article on mythological consciousness writes: "The mythological consciousness is interpreted as asemiotic. In this perspective, the mythological consciousness in the history of culture "began to be perceived as an alternative to semiotic thinking, sometimes even as a negation of sign systems".

Conclusions

The use of 'asemiotic' as characteristics shows that in sign studies there is paradoxically space for reflection on something that is devoid of signification. In the cited cases, the authors work in the signifier/signified paradigm. We can assume that something can be asemiotic just within this binary nominalistic opposition, since the Peircian understanding of the signifier does not allow for this. If one takes into account the final causation argument, neither natural encodings like DNA (Guattari and Deleuze), nor the musical sign (Nöth about Benveniste), nor stimulus-response sequences in the natural world (Nöth about Eco), nor the proper name in the era of myth (Lotman and Uspensky) can be asemiotic. Thus, characterising something as 'asemiotic' is only possible in the semiological paradigm of sign as an arbitrary relation of signifier and signified. It can be assumed that the common element in different contexts of using the term "asemiotic" is the absence of some feature inherent in the semiological sign (arbitrary relation of signifier and signified): on the one hand, in the absence of a signifier (Guattari and Deleuze), on the other hand, in the absence of a distinction between signifier and signified (Lotman and Uspensky), or in the absence of cultural conventionality (Nöth about Eco), or even in the absence of a semiotic situation as such (Nöth about Benveniste). However, the very theoretical possibility of something being 'asemiotic' shows that semiotics does not seem to qualify as a universal epistemological approach.

Having said that the analysis has shown the importance of exploring the characteristics in the context of the theory of the authors who use it. Resorting from mixing approaches will give a possibility to avoid the methodological problems encountered by Newell, whose case study we cited at the beginning. In our case we can clearly see the difference in approaches to the asemiotic by Guattari and Deleuze and Nöth, on the one hand, and by Lotman and Uspensky, on the other. In the first two cases, the characteristics of the asemiotic was

applied to the world outside human culture, whereas in the third example, the authors attribute asemioticism to a huge layer of human culture of myth not only in the past, but also in the present; the authors argue that proper names are a special layer of language that stretches from the era of myth and occupies part of natural language, without losing its asemiotic characteristics at the same time. Despite its paradoxical nature, the asemiotic approach to culture can be productive in the search for new explanations of its phenomena. The authors' appeal to this characteristics indicates that, at the very least, there is a theoretical need to perceive the world not only through a system of signs. ●

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Cosa significa essere asemiotici?

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Abstract: Sebbene alcuni ricercatori considerino la semiotica un approccio epistemologico universale (Gaines, 2015), definire qualcosa “asemiotico” può essere difficile. Tuttavia, è possibile trovare una tale caratterizzazione nelle opere dei semiologi. Ad esempio, i cofondatori della scuola semiotica di Tartu, Yuri M. Lotman e Boris A. Uspensky, sostengono che l'asemiotico è il modo in cui il nome proprio funziona nella coscienza mitologica (Lotman; Uspensky, 1973). Questa caratterizzazione si ritrova anche nei lavori di altri studiosi, ma lo studio dell'“asemiotico” continua a essere un'area marginale negli studi semiotici. Poiché la “semiotica” (legata alla semiotica) è definita in modo diverso nei quadri teorici, anche l'“asemiotica” non mantiene lo stesso significato. In altre parole, l'asemiotico postula l'assenza del semiotico nel senso in cui lo studioso intende la semiotica. Altrimenti, una coerenza teorica incompatibile può portare a un'imprecisione metodologica. Questo può accadere se la semiotica viene percepita come una teoria unificata. Pertanto, sebbene non sia un termine comunemente accettato, “asemiotico” può avere significati diversi a seconda della prospettiva. In questo articolo esamineremo l'uso di “asemiotico” nelle opere di Guattari e Deleuze (1987), Nöth (1995, 2000), Lotman e Uspensky e cercheremo di individuare dove gli studiosi ricorrono all'uso di “asemiotico” nel loro lavoro. Si possono trovare diversi approcci di utilizzo, da strumento ausiliario a metodo di interpretazione, fino a concetto centrale.

Parole chiave: asemiotica, semiologia, codifiche naturali, musica, mito.

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