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## From Translation to Intersemiosis: A Journey across Expressive Modalities

*Navegar é preciso*

I would like to start my contribution to this volume of *Moving between Modes* with an unfolding metaphor for journeys articulated in the context of translation and intersemiosis. I do so because at the end of this journey, as is the case with every true adventure, we return to the starting point, which is always the unpredictable, the unexpected: the meaningful. And this is precisely an aspect of intersemiosis – the capacity of semantically distant systems to generate *sui generis* forms of meaning – which concerns this study.

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*“Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse”*. “To sail is necessary; to live is not”. It is with this call that Pompey, according to Plutarch, encouraged his sailors as they faced a formidable storm to fulfill their mission of delivering a needed cargo of grain to Rome. By extension, it has become a metaphor to fear not the challenges that lie ahead in order to achieve a higher goal. Pompey voiced his call in Latin; Plutarch recorded it in Greek. The maxim would later be retranslated into Latin and disseminated into Romance languages where it became a phrase used by sailors of old to hearten their souls.

As Helena González Vaquerizo details in her interdiscursive analysis, Pompey’s maxim would outlive its Greco-Roman origins and be used for different purposes: from the political rhetoric of Benito Mussolini or Ulysses Guimarães, to a source of poetic musings in various authors, which, as was the case in Gabrielle D’Annunzio, was also linked to politics (2014: 175). Here, we will start by considering the transposition of the phrase in one of Fernando Pessoa’s most memorable poems, “Navegar é preciso; viver não é preciso”, an unpublished and untitled text found years after the Portuguese poet’s death in 1935.

The use of the Portuguese word “preciso” instead of “necessário” adds the connotation of accuracy to that of necessity. In contrast to life, to sail is an art that requires precision, exactitude. And Pessoa goes on to rewrite the legendary call to action into the urgency for creativity: “Viver não é necessário; o que é necessário é criar” (“To live is not necessary, what is necessary is to create”) (2007: 72). Decades later, in 1969, and shortly before he was exiled by Brazil’s military junta (who perhaps had become aware of coded anti-dictatorship messages in his lyrics), Caetano Veloso used the refrain “Navegar é preciso/ Viver não é preciso” in “Os Argonautas”, a melancholic song set to the rhythm of the Portuguese fado.<sup>1</sup>

Music adds a different kind of semiosis and meaning to the old saying, which soon became associated with the song in the popular imagination. This semiotic complexity was further extended when the refrain and musical theme of the song was used in *Internet: Navegar é Preciso* (2007), a Brazilian animated video intended to educate new users about the benefits and risks of the internet<sup>2</sup> – in Portuguese, as in Spanish, a person sails (“navega”) rather than “surfs” the internet. Thus, following a series of transformations, the age-old nautical maxim gained a new set of meanings in reference to today’s global intermodal medium: the ubiquitous world of ‘screens’.

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The notion of intersemiosis implies the coexistence of different forms of semiosis. For instance, verbal, musical, and visual, are the basic forms of semiosis that intervene in the sequence of transformation of the example I used. As Umberto Eco writes in *Experiences in Translation*, “the variety of semiosis gives rise to phenomena whose difference is of the maximum importance for the semiologist” (2008: 73). What started as a phrase yelled in Latin and translated into the Greek alphabetic code – which is a silent representation of the spoken word, a virtual sound, as Irmengard Rauch reminds us (2012: 5) – ended up as an instructional metaphor to navigate the boons and dangers in a sea of digitally coded messages.

The internet can be an instrument for creativity and valid information; but “screens”, as it has become quite evident, can also serve as an unprecedented tool for disinformation (a source of error as much as truth, as Eco put it). This opens a twofold question. “How are we to distinguish the kind and determine the value of the information we receive?” To answer the first part of this question we must first recognize the basic

<sup>1</sup> The following is a video of that song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sXg-XcP9wM> [accessed Feb. 5, 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Video was produced by Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFI7zAgrDN0> [accessed Feb. 5, 2020].

principles governing the different kinds of semiosis that intervene in intermodal messages. Let us start with verbal and visual signs.

The distinct properties of verbal and visual (or iconic) signs is seldom discussed. "Iconic signs", as Lotman writes, "are notable for their greater comprehensibility" (1976: 5). It is easier to *show* with images. The silhouette of an airplane is recognized as a sign indicating airport throughout the world. A photograph or a video allows us to capture complex visual phenomena too difficult to describe in words. It is harder, on the other hand, to build narratives with visual signs. Conventional or learned signs offer greater flexibility to construct narrative sequences. It is easier to *tell* with words. As Sol Worth famously put it, "pictures can't say ain't".

The second part of the question, "how are we to determine the value of the information we receive", is inextricably tied to the first. Any attempt to answer a question regarding the value of the information we receive must be linked, to some extent, to our capacity to understand the kinds and properties of the different systems used in messages and the effect of their interaction. In an age of multimodality, understanding the intersemiotic production of meaning is critically more important than passively receiving (ingesting) a series of 'effects', which may be compelling but misleading. Intersemiosis is an increasingly necessary field of study, and yet it is one that remains largely unexplored.

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To discuss the notion of intersemiosis, we must first offer a definition of semiosis. It is usually accepted today that the two leading branches of semiotics stem from the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In a lecture delivered in Milan in 1968, Roman Jakobson, the Russian linguist and precursor of modern semiotic research, offered a definition of semiosis which brings together these two schools. "One of the great historical merits of Jakobson, writes Eco in "The Influence of Roman Jakobson in the Development of Semiotics", has been precisely that semiotics can be considered today an 'adult' discipline because Jakobson has imposed the convergence between linguistic structuralism and Peirce" (1977: 47–8).

In "Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems", Jakobson defined *semiosis* as the "variable relationship between *signans* [signifier] and *signatum* [signified]".<sup>3</sup> "Besides the diverse types of *semiosis*", he adds, "the nature of the *signans* itself is of great importance for the structure of messages and their typology" (1971: 701). Jakobson's

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<sup>3</sup> Jakobson uses the Latinized version of a tripartite division identified by the Stoic philosophers: *signum*, *signans*, *signatum*. This ancient distinction is the source of Saussure's division of the sign, *signe* (*signum*) into *signifiant* (*signans*) and *signifié* (*signatum*).

definition marks a distinction between the learned, conventional relation between *signans* and *signatum* (what Peirce called the “imputed quality” (1991: 30) of the two constituent sides of the symbol) which is typical, but not exclusive, of verbal signs, and the “multifarious relations between *signans* and *signatum*” in other forms of semiosis (1971: 699). In Saussure’s notion of a relation by convention, as in Peirce’s concept of an imputed quality, there may be, to one degree or another of specificity, a referential component.

Pompey’s cry may or may not have reached actual sailors. But due to verbal iconicity, whether Pompey’s call was real or legendary, we can still imagine all kinds of vessels – like the ones we see afloat in the various video interpretations of Veloso’s popular song.<sup>4</sup> Jakobson called this particular kind coding *extroversive semiosis*. The production of meaning in the non-verbal musical melody of Veloso’s song, however, follows different norms to those of denotative language. To describe this difference, Jakobson established the distinction between *extroversive* and *introversive* forms of semiosis.

46 In non-verbal music, meaning is primarily produced by the internal relations of its elements, or, as Eco puts it, where “the signatum of the entities is bare otherness, namely a presumably semantic difference between the meaningful units to which it pertains and those which *ceteris paribus* do not contain the same entity” (Eco 1977: 48). Jakobson found in music the prime example of *introversive* semiosis, concluding that the *dominant*, or “focusing component”, of the language of music was the *artistic* or, what he later called the *aesthetic function*. Following this distinction, Claude Lévi-Strauss likened the structure of myth to the semantics of music (1978: 52). The notion of internal semiosis remains a key to understand the production of meaning in music, as we can see by the work of prominent scholars on the semiology of music (cf. Nattiez 1990: 102–129).

Jakobson explained music’s *introversive* semiosis in terms of Peirce’s famous division of signs into indexes, icons, and symbols.<sup>5</sup> If the indexical sign is based on factual, or existential contiguity, the iconic on factual similarity, and the symbol on what Peirce calls “imputed” contiguity; the musical sign, Jakobson suggests, is based on a sort of “imputed similarity”. What Jakobson does, in effect, is to propose a new category to Peirce’s scheme in order to fill a logical and theoretical gap. “The interplay of the

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the following example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Jpl2BWDctI> [accessed Feb. 5, 2020].

<sup>5</sup> A distinction that Peirce privately called “the gift I make to the world. That is my child. In it I shall live when oblivion has me – my body” (1991: 23).

two dichotomies – contiguity/similarity and factual/imputed” – he writes, “admits a fourth variety, namely, imputed similarity” (Jakobson 1971: 704). When applied to music (as well as abstract art), the notion of imputed similarity evokes a nonrepresentational, that is, a non-factual “image”.<sup>6</sup>

Jakobson linked musical semiosis to his earlier description of the poetic function. In “Linguistics and Poetics”, a seminal paper delivered 1958 and revised in 1960, Jakobson offered what is today the only scientific definition of poetry: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalences from the axis of selection to the axis of combination” (2009b: 71). The alliterations in Plutarch’s “*Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse*” and in Pessoa’s “*Navegar é preciso/ Vivernão é preciso*”, are examples of Jakobson’s *poetic function*. Thus, an interplay of introversive and extroversive semiosis precedes Veloso’s melodic addition to Pessoa’s line. In order to refer to this function in different artistic modalities, such as poetry and music, Jakobson used the more comprehensive notion of *aesthetic function*.

The distinction between extroversive semiosis, where meaning is produced with reference to something external (such as words and images of sailing), and introversive semiosis, where meaning is generated internally within a system (as in nonverbal music), is a good place to begin to understand the relation between translation and intersemiosis. We have seen that these two kinds of semiosis intervene in some of the translations, interpretations, rewritings, and intersemiotic transpositions of a phrase that purportedly originated from a Roman general’s attempt to motivate his sailors.

The concept of the relative symmetry and asymmetry of semiotic systems helps to further understand the relation between these various processes. In *Universe of the Mind* (1990), the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman proposes a model capable of describing the functioning of all cultures and languages. By analogy with *biosphere*, a notion introduced by the biochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, Lotman defined the *semiosphere* “as the space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages” (Lotman 1990: 123). We must keep in mind that the idea of language in Lotman’s semiotics of culture can range from Estonian to graffiti, from cryptography to dress or cuisine. It encompasses all cultural manifestations and expressive modalities.

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<sup>6</sup> We must add that various kinds of referentiality, more or less analogous to the linguistic concept of denotation, have been identified in music. Some common examples include onomatopoeic representations (the denotative quality of acoustic phrases characteristic of program music); the capacity of music to evoke similar emotions in diverse people without recourse to convention; and the rich sphere of synesthetic associations. See, for instance, Nattiez (1990: 118–29) and Nöth (1999: 431–32).

“The languages which fill up the semiotic space are various”, writes Lotman, “and they relate to each other along the spectrum that runs from complete mutual translatability to just as complete untranslatability. [...] And since in many cases the different languages of the semiosphere are semantically asymmetrical, i.e. they do not have mutual semantic correspondences, then the whole semiosphere can be regarded as a generator of information” (1990: 125–27). The higher the asymmetry between systems, the lower their degree of translatability, but not so of information. According to information theory, a signal with a higher number of alternatives has less information than one with few or none. And since in Lotman, information and meaning are often used interchangeably, his model allows us to consider the production of meaning in semiotic exchanges that extend beyond the scope of merely semantic correspondences. On the other hand, the concept of intersemiosis, which Lotman himself does not use, helps understand the meaningful interaction of asymmetric systems.

Lotman’s model allows us to frame the many long discussions about the nature of linguistic and literary translation in a context that includes the interaction of other semiotic systems that may be mutually untranslatable. Jakobson used the notion of *semantic equivalence* to refer to one of the goals of translation, but he stressed that there can be no absolute equivalence between words (Jakobson 2009a: 114). In his *Experiences*, Eco (2008: 9) observes that “there are no complete synonyms in language”. And thinking about “The Task of the Translator”, Walter Benjamin observed that “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original (1996: 256). These observations show that there is a degree of asymmetry even at the most fundamental levels of verbal translation.

A certain degree of asymmetry is evident in the notion of interpretation. As Eco notes in *Experiences in Translation*, there is an important distinction to be made between translation and the broader concept of interpretation, in the Peircean sense in which “the meaning of a sign is expressed by its interpretation through another sign” (2008: 690). Starting from Peirce’s definition of the linguistic sign as a “translation into some further, alternative sign”, in his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), Jakobson uses the concept of interpretation in each of his three definitions of translation:

- (1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language;
- (2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- (3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems (2009a: 429).

Plutarch's translation of Pompey's "Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse" from Latin into Greek, and its retranslation back into Latin (possibly by Turdetino Pacino around 1478, as González Vaquerizo suggests) posits problems in what Jakobson calls *translation proper*.<sup>7</sup> More complex problems of this kind of translation, tending towards looser forms of interpretation, can be found in the ways Pessoa and Veloso reimagine, verbally, Pompey's demand for courage and action. Pessoa turns it into the need to create ("o que é necessário é criar").<sup>8</sup> And as if following Pessoa's cue, Veloso transforms it into a text open to multiple interpretations, a melodic poem which mixes melancholy and passion with signs which could indicate a loved one's nonarrival or anticipate his own exile: "O porto, não! [...] O porto, silêncio!" ("The port, nothing! [...]. The port, silence").<sup>9</sup>

And yet, we can't forget that translating involves an effort, as Eco put it in reference to interlinguistic translation, to "say the same thing using different sign systems" (2008: 70). This is also true for intersemiotic translation or *transmutation*. In our example, we saw that the idea of sailing remains constant across semiotic modalities. It is present in Pompey's call to his sailors, in the images of boats in the various videos interpreting Veloso's song, and in the cartoonish *caravelas* that "navigate" the internet in *Internet: Navegar é Preciso*. And since the latter is a didactic video, there are clear semantic correspondences between the verbal message and the images that illustrate it (illustration here serves as translation).

We also find instances of marked asymmetry in our example. We have seen that aspects of the original message are transformed by processes of translation, interpretation, and rewriting. Moreover, a message that was intended to encourage sailors in the faces of danger is used by Veloso as a refrain in a love song with poetic images that would be too difficult to accurately illustrate using visual signs: "o barulho / Do meu dente Em tua veia" ("the noise / Of my tooth in your vein"). The need to resort to abstractions in the act of intersemiotic translation shows a high degree of asymmetry between expressions of verbal and visual semiosis.

<sup>7</sup> She observes, for instance, that in 1903 Meurer considered that the whole Latin translation of the phrase was mistaken because the original Greek meaning of  $\pi\lambda\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$  (*navigare*, to sail) was  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\pi\lambda\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$  (to solve) (González Vaquerizo 2014: 167).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Zenith cites (and interprets) various other reformulations of the ancient phrase in Pessoa's work (2017: n83).

<sup>9</sup> A link to a page with the official lyrics of "Os Argonautas" is listed in the References. Translations of the lyrics are mine.

Different kinds of semiosis intervene in both Pessoa's and Veloso's verbal interpretations of Pompey's maxim. They both make use of what ancient rhetoricians called *naked* (denotative) and *adorned* (introversive) modes of meaning. But they both also belong to the same type of semiosis, namely that of verbal or linguistic signs. Something similar can be said of the many musical interpretations of Veloso's melody: they all, at a fundamental level, respond to the same semiosis, namely that of music. At these levels of asymmetry, significant interpretative processes are still possible.

This is not the case in the intersemiosis of language and music. The relation between the words and the music in Veloso's song is not an act of interpretation. The song's melody does not automatically translate the lyrics of "Os Argonautas", or vice versa. Even if we say that the rhythm somehow carries the meaning of the words, there are no necessary semantic correspondences between the two; no more than there are between the music of Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* and cooking spaghetti – despite the fact that the latter may become established in the minds of some readers of Haruki Murakami's story "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women", in which the narrator describes Rossini's opera as "perfect spaghetti-cooking music" (1994: 4).

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For many, the music of Veloso's song has become associated with the refrain "Navegar é preciso/ Viver não é preciso". By means of what Jakobson calls an "imputed contiguity", and Peirce, at times, simply a "habit",<sup>10</sup> a relation of what at best could be affinity between the lyrics and music turns into a conventional, necessary one. The desire to ride on the appeal of Veloso's famous song explains the use of the line *Navegar é Preciso* in the title of Brazil's internet educational video. It is interesting to note that the video makes no mention of the second part of Pessoa's line: "Viver não é preciso" ("To live is not essential"). Given what we know today about the addictive quality of screens, to tell young users that to surf the net is essential but that to live is not would certainly not be responsible.

We could say that all the visual transformations that are in some manner semantically linked with the maxim "to sail is necessary; to live is not" are examples of what Jakobson calls *transmutation*. To define the interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems, Jakobson switches the notion of *translation* to the more flexible *transmutation*, which implies some kind of transformation in the form of expression. To account for the next logical kind of translation we should consider the inverse operation, that is, *an interpretation of nonverbal signs*

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the letter to Lady Welby dated 12 October 1904 (Peirce 1977: 31).



by means of verbal sign systems. Scrupulous as he was, Jakobson was certainly aware of this possible form of interpretation involving linguistic signs. We can understand his reticence, however, because here the notion of interpretation becomes problematic.

We use the term description, rather than translation or interpretation, when referring to a verbal depiction of a representational painting or a photograph. *Ekphrasis*, a practice dating back to antiquity, is commonly defined as a verbal *description* of visual art, probably due to the prevalence of extroversive forms of semiosis in premodernist art. The “interpretation” of abstract art, on the other hand, involves metasemiotic abstractions that are different from the translation task of saying the same thing. And for talking or writing about music, let’s just say a piano sonata, we think in terms of commentary, certainly not of translation or even interpretation.

Maybe because first two definitions in Jakobson’s typology, that of intralingual and interlingual translation, seem implicitly reversible, some critics have assumed that this reversibility is also part of Jakobson’s definition of *transmutation*.<sup>11</sup> But as Eco notes in *Experiences*, Jakobson does not deal with cases of verbal versions of visual systems (2008: 67). Neither does Eco elaborate to any great extent about these cases in his own reclassification of the forms of interpretation (2008: 99–130). Keeping in mind these observations, I use the term *transposition*, in the broad sense of *changing relative places*, to designate this category:

(4) Intersemiotic *transposition* is an interpretation of nonverbal signs by means of verbal sign systems.

Perhaps there is another reason why Jakobson did not venture in this direction. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is a theoretically more interesting phenomenon than verbal descriptions of nonverbal systems. In the series of paintings titled *Mensagem para Fernando Pessoa* [*Message to Fernando Pessoa*]<sup>12</sup>, for instance, Brazilian artist Newton Scheufler merges calligraphic expressions of passages from Pessoa’s work with abstract arrangements of shapes and colors. In one of the paintings we glimpse a partial reading of the phrase “Viver não é necessário”. We are also able, with increasing difficulty, to read other messages from Veloso’s oeuvre, but the semantic correspondences are soon lost in the intersemiosis of words

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Clüver’s “On Intersemiotic Transposition” and Torop’s “Translation as Translating as Culture”.

<sup>12</sup> Here is a link to the series: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/25021275/Message-to-Fernando-Pessoa> [accessed Dec. 17, 2020].

and images. All attempts at interpretation are lost in the coexistence and diffusion of interplaying modalities.

Fernando Pessoa was a complex writer who had a multifaceted approach to truth and beauty. He saw himself, for instance, as a kind of “medium”, or “a meeting place”, for over seventy “authors”, all of whom were part of himself.<sup>13</sup> Each of these heteronyms, as he called them, had a particular name and vision of the world. It is not surprising, then, to see that visual responses to his work are often themselves complex and multidimensional. I say responses rather than interpretations because these forms of intersemiosis respond to artistic affinities that are largely free of semantic correspondences.

Take, for instance, Mozambican artist Marco Ayres’s *Sequência Fernando Pessoa*, a sequence of paintings which is part of his “Genome Art Project”.<sup>14</sup> Ayres’s “sequences” are made up of sets of interconnectable “screens”, abstract paintings open to the aleatorily correspondences and surprises of the large number of possible combinations and permutations among them. These rotating signs, as Octavio Paz may have called them, offer a kaleidoscopic way of ‘representing’ that shifting “meeting place” of creativity and thought that we find in Pessoa. Some of Pessoa’s heteronyms translate and interpret each other’s works; similarly, we could say that each “screen” in a series redefines others as they interplay in different arrangements.

There is a thematic and compositional distinctiveness in each of Ayres’s sequences; they are *meant* to interact with each other. But it is not hard to see how the juxtaposition of pieces (“screens”) from different sequences, could yield new, unexpected forms of meaning. Here we approach the asymmetric end of the interaction of introversive visual systems. But Ayres’s *Sequencia Fernando Pessoa* is not totally abstract; the depiction of Pessoa is an example of extroversive semiosis. Some of his sequences, however, are almost total abstractions.<sup>15</sup> We can see how the interplay among “screens” of different sequences could generate unexpected forms of meaning. And were we to mix these shifting arrangements with absolute music,<sup>16</sup> we would have an intermodal work with additional and more complex forms of meaning. This is not only a theoretical exercise involving highly asymmetric systems; this kind of intersemiosis is often

<sup>13</sup> “Another Version of the Genesis of the Heteronyms” (Pessoa 2001: 262).

<sup>14</sup> Here is an example of an arrangement in Ayres’s sequence: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/cb/58/c1/cb58c106f468eb7ee576d9f28ed082cb.jpg> [accessed Dec. 17, 2020].

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.saatchiart.com/account/artworks/48000> [accessed Dec. 17, 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Music devoid of extratextual *denotata*.

used in cinema as metaphor to illustrate something indelible, such as death or a mystical experience.<sup>17</sup>

“On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”, as the title indicates, Jakobson did not venture beyond the interpretation of verbal signs. He stopped short of considering the interpretative processes between nonverbal forms of semiosis. But he had already delineated a theoretical path which ended at a gateway open to a vast domain of intersemiosis where translation and interpretation become gradually more problematic. The progression of his typology leads towards increasingly asymmetric combinations. We will define the next category as follows:

- (5) Nonverbal transposition is an interpretation of nonverbal signs by means of nonverbal signs.

A classic example is *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Mussorgsky’s ostensible “remembrance” of an exhibition of Viktor Hartmann’s paintings and drawings (the titles of some of the suite’s movements refer to Hartmann’s paintings). We may assume that certain artistic affinity led Mussorgsky to offer a musical version of the pictures he remembered seeing, but we cannot reproduce Hartmann’s art by simply listening to Mussorgsky’s suite. If we allow them to interact even if it is in our memory, however, the semantic fields that surround the musical and visual texts become enriched with supplementary meanings, and consequently, expanded. As Jørgen Johansen suggests, these kind of *in absentia* forms of intersemiosis can take place in memory where seemingly instantaneous associations and contrasts are established.<sup>18</sup>

By intersemiosis we have been referring broadly to the semantic encounter, interplay, and varying levels of integration between systems with different kinds of semiosis. It concerns the particular properties of the intervening systems, their modes of interaction, and the supplementary meanings generated by these encounters. These largely untranslatable new forms of meaning elude the strictures of interpretation. We may venture a succinct definition of intersemiosis in the context of Jakobson’s extended categories:

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<sup>17</sup> We find a related example in the film *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* (2014), where Kumiko’s death is signified by the juxtaposition of abstract shapes of nature with an ephemeral string piece by The Octopus Project.

<sup>18</sup> In *Literary Discourse*, Johansen extends intersemiosis to the connections we establish in memory: “In memory you have a kind of dormant semiotic network allowing you to recognize a very large number of [...] signs and to endow them with signification in given contexts” (2002: 72).

(6) Intersemiosis is the interplay of asymmetric systems that yields *sui generis* forms of meaning.

I changed the notion of interpretation for interplay because intersemiosis extends beyond both translation and interpretation. It is not, however, necessarily separate from the other categories of interpretation, but often coexists with them. Various kinds of intersemiosis are present throughout the translatability spectrum and become increasingly evident towards its asymmetrical end. Information theory shows that the interaction of systems that are semantically similar (symmetrical) generates less information and has a higher level of entropy than exchanges between those that are dissimilar (asymmetrical). Instances of intersemiosis resulting from markedly asymmetrical systems often produce the most unexpected, and thus richest, forms of meaning. It is at the boundaries between asymmetrical systems where we can find, as Lotman writes, “the hottest spots for semiotizing processes” (1990: 136).

As described by Lotman, the production of meaning in the semiosphere extends beyond the scope of what is translatable. It is interesting to consider this wide notion of semiosis in the context of Pierce’s famous definition of meaning as “the translation of a sign into another system of signs” (CP 4.127). In “Thirty Years Later: A New (and More Modest) Recognition of Semiotics” (2010), and responding to Emilio Garroni’s *Ricognizione della semiotica* (1977), Eco reinstates this definition: “One has semiosis”, he writes, “when something not only stands for something else but can be translated into another expression that provides the same meaning” (2010: 13). It is precisely this process, which corresponds to Jakobson’s “*rélation de renvoi*” (“a sending-back”), that, according to Eco, Garroni calls “reformulation”.

As Eco notes, Garroni stressed “the fact that reformulation is never adequate and therefore that it is never complete and in any case never completely symmetrical (a traffic sign can be translated into words but a verbal discourse cannot always be adequately summarized by a visual signal), and that therefore every reformulation necessarily leaves what he called a residue, this appeared to him a limitation of semiotic science” (2010: 13). Lotman also used the notion of untranslatable residue, but in a different context. He wrote that, due to its polysemic and synchronic quality, the artistic text leaves a residue of information untranslatable by the languages of description. As we have seen, however, the interplay of asymmetric systems often yields, not mere residues, but rather some of the most interesting forms of meaning.

Eco's response to Garroni's observation of untranslatability as a limitation to semiotic science leaves us at the shore of intersemiosis:

All of the semiotic inquiry into the modes of so-called inter-semiotic translation (from linguistic text to film, from music to ballet, from sculpture to ekphrasis) is precisely what semiotic inquiry can say about the problems of reformulation that is new, interesting, unheard-of, not said by previous disciplines. What I mean is that, unless we assume an ambitious and excessively formalizing and formalized notion of semiotics, semiotics doesn't become interesting when the process of reformulation leaves no residue, but rather at the very moment in which one reflects on these residues (Eco 2010: 14).

Eco offers an example in *Experiences in Translation*. He quotes a passage from *La svolta semiotica* where Paolo Fabbri reflects on a transition in Fellini's *Orchestral Rehearsal*. In it, the slow, continuous movement of the camera seamlessly takes the viewer from a subjective to an objective point of view. "Although language allows us to say what the camera *did*", adds Eco, "the effect produced by its movement cannot be fully translated into words" (2008: 96).

Eco's example focuses on a verbally untranslatable lapse in point of view. He does not mention the many meaningful juxtapositions of image and music in this film (and in film in general), which generate striking forms of meaning impossible to translate into words. To simply call these kinds of interactions "effects" does little to help understand their function as signifying processes. In fact, an array of different kinds of intersemiosis is evident in film, where the simultaneous interplay of multiple registers (images, spoken language, written texts, sound design, and music) offers the opportunity to generate powerful new forms of meaning. This capability is an aspect of the language of new media, today's major intermodal channel for artistic and cultural expressions. If (natural) language is our primary modeling system, as Lotman famously put it, cinema is the primary modeling system of "screens".

Music videos often offer remarkable examples of intermodal communication. Some of them highlight the distance (asymmetry) between music and the other intervening semiotic systems – image, spoken and written texts, etc. Others strive to achieve a sort of complementary tension between the translatable and untranslatable aspects of the various systems. This is the case of *I'm Alive*, a 2014 collaboration between Caetano Veloso and a group of Brazilian musician-writers and filmmakers.<sup>19</sup> Filmed in Rio de Janeiro's Floresta da Tijuca, the largest urban forest in the world, the music begins by denotatively blending in with the sounds of nature.

<sup>19</sup> Caetano Veloso, *I'm Alive*. Brasil: The Floresta da Tijuca Sessions. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvIyRzm8JMo> [accessed Dec. 17, 2020].

The various intermodal and stylistic expressions of the collaborating artists, which are at times contrasting, ultimately blend with each other around the shared message of the conservation of the rainforest and protection of the indigenous people who inhabit it.<sup>20</sup>

These are vital issues. I would like to conclude with an approach that calls attention to them by marking, rather than blending, asymmetric systems. Ciro Guerra's 2015 film, *El abrazo de la serpiente* [*Embrace of the Serpent*], tells the imbricated story of two western scientists, Theo and Evan, and an Amazonian shaman, Karamakate, the last survivor of the Cohivano tribe. Both scientists (who at one level are the same person) are looking, thirty years apart, for the sacred yakruna plant (believed to be an additive of the ayahuasca brew). This quest is framed in the historical context of the criminal plunder and commercialization of rubber in the Amazon leading up to World War II.

In a pivotal passage, the old Karamakate shaman asks Evan to get rid of all his belongings if he wants to continue the quest. Evan dumps most of his luggage from the canoe into the river, even his wristwatch, but refuses to get rid of one last suitcase. It contains a gramophone. When Karamakate asks what it is, Evan plays a record for him. What they and we listen to is the music of Haydn's "The Creation", which means one thing for Evan and quite another for Karamakate. For Evan, Haydn's music is a metonymy that takes him back to his father's house in Boston, to his ancestors. For the old Cohivano, the music is a metaphor for the warrior's way of solitude and silence, expressed in the film by a transition from his gaze to a shot of the forest's starry-night.

For Karamakate, the "music" we should follow is not a music at all – not in the sense of a learned, conventional language, not even the language of the heart, or of war: "Where are the songs of the mothers comforting their babies? Where are the stories of the elders, the whispers of love, the battle cries?" Karamakate asks himself, Evan, and us. Moved by the experience sparked by Haydn's music, the shaman walks towards his canoe, which is a metonymy for the river, and a metaphor for the mystical journey of the "wonderer in dreams", of the warrior who has abandoned everything and is guided only by his dreams. To embark and follow this path is more important than life itself.

We have come full circle. The assertion that to sail is necessary but to live is not is memorable because it seems to invert the species and the

<sup>20</sup> These values that are not shared by the current president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right supporter of the military dictatorship that arrested and sent Veloso into exile in 1969. Bolsonaro has praised the genocide of indigenous people. One of his first acts after assuming the presidency was to launch an attack on protections of the Amazon rainforest.

genus, and thus, too, their value. It opens an unexpected, unpredictable chasm. In the realm of intersemiosis, as is the case with certain types of metaphor, the interaction of dissimilar elements generates more remarkable and memorable forms of meaning than the confluence of those alike. As Salvador Dalí put it: “The first man to compare the cheeks of a young woman to a rose was obviously a poet; the first to repeat it was possibly an idiot” (1987: 13). Or, as information theorists put it, an expected occurrence (what in Dalí’s example is a trivialized metaphor) loses information and increases the entropy of the system.

Something similar happens when semiotic systems come into play. The encounter of familiar systems often generates expected forms of meaning that have little impact and often go unnoticed. The clash of dissimilar systems, on the other hand, may bring about happy surprises. Which reminds us of the first line of Nabokov’s *Ada* (which is an inversion of the famous first sentence in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*): “All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike”.

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