

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: SIGNS OF AMBIGUITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Farouk Y. Seif

Background

For nearly three years now, we have been experiencing globally the ramifications of one of the most devastating infectious diseases in centuries. Due to the precarity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Semiotic Society of America Annual Conference in 2020 didn't take place; consequently, the publication of the *Yearbook*, which should have followed the traditional annual event, did not ensue. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that the current volume is titled *Yearbook 2020/2021* in order to avoid discontinuity and to make all volumes easier to account for going forward. The current volume gathers 15 articles—from diverse scholars worldwide—which have been developed (following a blind peer review) and edited through multiple versions. Most articles in this volume were presented virtually at the 45th Semiotic Society of America (SSA) Annual Conference, October 20–23, 2021, responding to the theme of “Addressing Precarity: Semiotics, Semiosis, and Semioethics”.

Why Signs of Ambiguity and Uncertainty?

The title of the current volume, “Signs of Ambiguity and Uncertainty”, did not transpire extemporaneously. Since signs live and flourish by transgressing their own boundaries, signs of ambiguity and uncertainty can intentionally be shifted into signs of cultural sensitivity and environmental sensibility—a deep reflection on our lifeworld. The integration of the resilient role of signs, along with the courage to create or recreate, is a path for overcoming the fear and insecurity associated with precarity.

The notion of precarity, which implies not only the fear and insecurity of the present but also the ambiguity and uncertainty of the future, is an essential characteristic of the human existential condition and our experience of reality. In fact, the very existence of human beings is constantly threatened by their experiences in the lifeworld (Petrilli and Ponzio 2021). Not only are

humans subject to precarity, they also have a keen awareness of this precarity, yet are still capable of responding creatively to such precarity.

Case in point: the COVID-19 pandemic (which may have, in many ways, influenced the theme of precarity for the 45th SSA Annual Conference) paradoxically offers an opportunity to reframe the separation between what “is” and what “could be” and seeks to traverse borders in unprecedented ways as a means towards thriving. Human beings have the capacity to deal with life challenges through *De-sign*, the fusion of signs and design (Seif 2019). Because we, as semiotic animals (Deely 2010), are capable of not only using signs but are also aware of what signs are for, we are endowed with a consciousness that has the capacity for creative thinking and the imaginative semiotic interpretation necessary for changing our perception of precarity. We are *de-signers* capable of making choices and taking responsibility in our responses to signs of ambiguity and uncertainty, by which we can, and should, overcome fear and tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty.

The Basis for Grouping Thematic Sections

Upon initial observation, one might perceive most of the articles in this volume as unrelated or disjointed. Just, however, like the notion of “bisociation” (Koestler 1964)—where unrelated things become creatively integrated—it is difficult now to conceive that they existed as autonomously separate or unrelated articles. Due to the broad scope and wide range spectrum of contributions, it was, indeed, quite a challenge to group the contributions into sections, but ultimately, such choices of grouping and sequence made sense. As can be seen here, it is through bisociation that originality can be achieved. This volume is, therefore, organized thematically into five sections:

Section I: Precarity and Cultural Artifacts

Section II. Precarity and Responses to Social Challenges

Section III: Ambiguity of Communication and Representations of Reality

Section IV: Abductive Inquiry, Philosophy, and Semiosis

Section V: Transcending Beyond Precarity Through Dialogical Relations

Section I: “Precarity and Cultural Artifacts” consists of four chapters. The first chapter in Section I is a contribution from the Brazilian musicologist Ricardo Nogueira de Castro Monteiro, which focuses on the precarity of cultural manifestations that—while such a tradition has been transmitted across generations—have not been fully integrated into the Brazilian mass

culture. Nogueira de Castro semiotically analyzes the traditional Epiphany Feast performances in Brazil, highlighting the paradoxical relationship between resource scarcity and human virtuosity. He concludes that what is being perceived as a poverty of musical resources is, in fact, what makes such a scarcity of resources a precisely communicable and effective mnemonic system with which to create a rich and aesthetic meaning. Such is the power of the creative reframing of limitations.

Chapter Two, by Aurora M. Pinto, focuses on the work of the Argentinian essayist Jorge Luis Borges to discuss not only the uncertainty but also the meaning evoked by semiotic labyrinths. Pinto explores Borges's metaphorical usage of labyrinths in his mesmerizing short stories, envisaging the impact of technology and digital media upon human beings, particularly as regards the internet. Drawing from Borges's short stories "Total Library" and "The Library of Babel", Pinto expresses the irony of the internet where truth and wisdom are to be found alongside of falsehood and frivolity. She concludes by stating that labyrinths, as depicted in Borges's work, are indeed metaphors—not only for wisdom and knowledge but also for chaos and uncertainty—and ends by expressing her belief that Borges's infinite library is an apt expression of the irony of the internet.

In Chapter Three, Jose Sanjines recognizes the significance of tropes—metaphor and metonymy—as the dual principles for the construction of making films. He argues that while such tropes have received considerable emphasis in linguistic expression (spoken or written), they have received inadequate attention in the enterprise of films' production. Citing moving pictures, such as the Italian movie "Il Postino" and the Indian movie "Aparajito", Sanjines gives examples of interplay between metaphor and metonymy, which can semiotically exchange their places through metamorphosis. Sanjines concludes that metaphor and metonymy are inherent principles in the production of high-quality films.

Gilmar Adolfo Hermes and Jeremiah Dyehouse expand upon journalistic writing about Brazilian cinema in their semiotic analysis in Chapter Four. The authors focus on the identification of Brazilian identity—with a particular emphasis on Brazilian films and how the journalistic articles about them portray them—with a sense of awareness that there are no fixed, permanent identities. Supported by their survey of the literature, along with interviews of Brazilian filmmakers, the authors recognize that Brazilian cinema cannot only be grasped as a pure expression of national identity but also as a regional manifestation of worldwide mass media.

Section II: "Precarity and Responses to Social Challenges" consists of chapters five, six, and seven. All three chapters explore the consequences and responses to illness, hard times, and times of crisis in various societies. In Chapter Five, Dora Ivonne Alvarez Tamayo focuses on visual resources

as a response to the precarity correlated by the lack of physical contact due to the Coronavirus pandemic in Mexico, which is a highly kinetic country. Alvarez relies on design intelligence and pragmatic implications to offer alternative responses to the precarity induced by the loss of physical contact between families, loved ones, and neighbors during the pandemics. She does so, seeking to overcome the social exclusion and isolation felt by the Mexican countrymen and women. The author draws on the notion of “De-sign” (Seif 2019) and substantiates her findings with a case study that called for generating the perception of proximity where societies face challenges during crises.

Rosina Martucci approaches the challenges of illness and precarity through the arts and literature (Chapter Six). She discusses the plague that struck medieval Europe during the Middle Ages, which caused great precarity of life in general, as well as in human relationships, for many centuries. Referring to the literary work *Decameron*, composed by Giovanni Boccaccio, as well as Umberto Eco’s semiotic theory, Martucci muses over the significant ways in which human beings coexisted within situations caused by the pathological and endemic gravity of diseases, all the while embodying a keen interest in the desire to endure, to be well, and to express a genuine compassion for the ill. Martucci concludes that through literature and works of art we can overcome the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with precarity via faith and hope.

Lauren Matz (Chapter Seven) draws on her interest in Charles Dickens’s metonymic use of tea, in his realist novel *Hard Times*, in order to cast doubt on temperance advocates offering hot tea as the new beverage of working-class conviviality in place of alcoholic drinks. Examining the foundations underlying teetotalism, Matz opts to side with Dickens’s challenge to the premise of temperance reform and his dismissal of the agenda-driven tea parties that claimed to solve society’s problems. Metz expresses agreement with Dickens who has metonymically positioned tea-drinking above its nutritional usefulness and beyond the substitution value claimed by the temperance movement activists.

Section III: “Ambiguity of Communication and Representations of Reality” offers insightful arguments regarding the incongruity of reality, and its interpretations and representations. In Chapter Eight, Anand Raja scrutinizes Narendra Damodardas Modi (India’s Prime Minister)’s conduct. He emerged as a “Sign-Maker” and has excelled at making precarity the crux of his political propaganda and persuasive rhetoric by taking up the slogan “Good Days” from the vernacular of the Indian people. Raja perceives that such a slogan turns the lifeworld into a hyperreal world—a form of collective hypnosis creating a make-believe reality where open debates and public discussions have become partially marginalized or ignored. Oddly, Modi never revealed what “Good Days” precisely meant; consequently, the sign of “Good Days” conveyed to the public a sense of a bright future on the horizon as a way to deflect feelings of

precarity. Indian people became unsure of its interpretation and of whether such days were real or hyperreal.

Kyle Davidson's article, "Travels in Hypervirtuality" (Chapter Nine), expounds on the issue of representations of reality taking an interesting turn toward hyperreality. The author relies primarily on the work of Umberto Eco (1967) and Jean Baudrillard (1981) to discuss the notion of "hypervirtuality"—the integration of physical reality and virtual reality. Considering our contemporary habitus where there is no reality or unreality besides hyperreality, Davidson maintains that there is not just a solo sphere of reality that pervades all but also a ubiquitous virtuality. Hypervirtuality integrates the two realms of hyperreality and physical reality. The author hints at hypervirtuality as being what will form our new lifeworld and become the zeitgeist of our time, doing so by means of its transmediality allowing us to reinterpret and re-envisage signs of precariousness.

Following the previous chapter on representations of reality, Jonathan Extract, in Chapter Ten, critiques the conception of spatial representation as a basically Cartesian construct and Western epistemology. Jonathan argues for what he calls "wayfinders" as triadic processes of interpreting and representing space and experiencing the navigational logic by which human beings move throughout the world. The author relies on Peirce's pragmatism and abductive reasoning, as well as Heidegger's concept of "world picture", to explore how this navigational logic creates models to circumnavigate a world in constant motion. Wayfinding is a dialogical navigation that encompasses logical reasoning and the cartographic ability of travelers to interpretate space and symbolic signs.

Ammara Farhan (Chapter Eleven) analyzes the social-ideologies embedded in the promotional content of the social networking Apps—such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter—available on the AppStore. Farhan speculates that most of the compositional advertisements and their graphic images portray these Apps as virtual dreams of wide connectivity, easy access to trends, and playful activities. However, such visual images are not to be perceived as scrupulous reflections of reality. While the medium focuses marginally on information, it largely pulls viewers toward trending topics. Generally, all the mediums' marketing ambiguities entice viewers into a make-believe world that focuses on ephemeral gratification. Such a marketing ideology is a conscious choice by the producers of these Apps, who use it deliberately in their promotions.

Section IV: "Abductive Inquiry, Philosophy, and Semiosis" is composed of two chapters devoted to the process of semiosis and theology. Chapter Twelve, by Michael R. Kearney, makes interesting connections between the notions of revelation and the philosophy of communication by placing Charles Sanders Peirce's abductive reasoning in an imagined discourse with Herman

Bavinck's book *Philosophy of Revelation*, via Friedrich Schleiermacher's insights from it. Kearney suggests that the Christian doctrine of *sola Scriptura* generates an understanding within which reason and revelation support one another through abductive inquiry that ultimately, yet unexpectedly, leads to our knowledge of and interrelationship with God. Kearney identifies with Bavinck's philosophy of the external world (nature) as an appearance of divine self-revelation that teleologically brings human beings into communion with God; thus, he concludes that Bavinck's philosophy views existence as a communicative endeavor.

In Chapter Thirteen, Jamila Farajova ambitiously examines a broad range of literature devoted to semiotic theory, focusing especially on the unifying concept of the "vehicle of the process of semiosis" that originates in Charles Sanders Peirce's work and is different from the common usage of the term "sign vehicle". Drawing on insights from Peirce, Johansen, Barbieri, Sebeok, Eco, Deely, and others, Farajova raises questions not only about the relationship between information and communication but also about the role of intentionality in creating different types and domains of semiosis. The author affirms that "communicational semiosis" is always based on "informational semiosis"; this is precisely why "the semiotics of communication always depends on the semiotics of signification."

Section V: "Transcending Beyond Precarity Through Dialogical Relations" is an interesting finale for the present volume, which represents a compelling argument that goes beyond precarity. Chapter Fourteen, contributed by Barbara Young and Myrdene Anderson, advocates for the notion of "metalogue" as a genre of open-ended inquiry that engages a designer-anthropologist relationship that goes beyond the traditional designer-client and researcher-subject settings. Such a metalogical setting offers an appropriate context for unpredictable questions to arise, which can then lead into the art of conversation with a "curiosity-unto-desire" to learn something new; consequently, it offers the possibility of unanticipated knowledge to emerge. In dialogical settings, not only do we think together but we also imagine together, moving from monologue into dialogue and thenceforth transcending into metalogue (Seif 2019)—an experience that signifies the interweaving of meanings and breakthroughs.

Baranna Baker's contribution "Being Before Breakfast" (Chapter Fifteen) is an in memoriam of John Deely (1942–2017) intended to be read as a story, a fabulation that transcends an ambiguous and uncertain stance into emotional and spiritual solace. In the nostalgic spirit of Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Times*, Baker reflects on her experience of copyediting John Deely's manuscript, *Medieval Philosophy Redefined as the Latin Age* (Deely 2010a). Reminiscing about her experience of being a student in Deely's class—negotiating to edit his manuscript instead of taking the final exam—marks the

beginning of a friendship and ultimately a surrogate father/daughter relationship. In a true sense, interactions cease, but relations live on. Relations are indifferent to distance in space or time (Deely 2013; Seif 2019).

Overall, Section V (chapters fourteen and fifteen) represents an appropriate closure to this volume by highlighting the significance of dialoguing as the vital relation with others for sharing understanding and experience. This is precisely why dialogical relation is our hope for correcting our myopic perceptions and the untidiness of our thoughts—for we must speak *with* others and not *to* others. Such dialogical relation is not only “the safety-valve against madness and dogmatism, the pathology of playing endlessly the same broken record” (Deely and Nogar 1973: 403) but also it reduces our apprehensions about and insecurities due to life’s challenges. Although our lifeworld is ambiguous and uncertain, it is not absolute (Seif 2019). Dialogical relation can overcome limitations, and, more significantly, it can provide the perfect condition within which we can tolerate ambiguity and be comfortable with uncertainty.

As a final point, I must admit that the production of this volume occurred during a very hectic time characterized indeed by signs of ambiguity and uncertainty. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that the *Yearbook 2020/2021* would not have come into fruition without the collaboration, patience, and care of several colleagues. Many thanks to members of the editorial board for their timely assistance in evaluating the initial manuscripts and offering helpful feedback. I wish to express my gratitude to Baranna Baker for her diligent efforts in editing, proofreading, and formatting the manuscripts. My thanks go also to André De Tienne for his indefatigable commitment to support the *SSA Yearbook* and the production of the Index of Proper Names. Last but not least, I wish to express my gratitude to Lorena Perez (Philosophy Documentation Center) for the careful pagination and professional typesetting.

References

BAUDRILLARD, Jean.

1981. *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

DEELY, John.

2010. *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of “Human Being” Transcending Patriarchy and Feminism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press).
- 2010a. *Medieval Philosophy Redefined as the Latin Age: The Development of Cenoscopic Science, AD354 to 1644 (From the Birth of Augustine to the Death of Poincot)* (1st ed., Scranton, PENN: University of Scranton Press).
2013. “Objective Reality and the Physical World: Relation as Key to Understanding Semiosis”, *Semiotics* 2013, 317–379.

DEELY, John N. and Raymond J. NOGAR.

1973. *The Problem of Evolution: A Study of the Philosophical Repercussions of Evolutionary Science* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts).

ECO, Umberto.

1967. *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986).

KOESTLER, Arthur.

1964. *The Act of Creation* (London: Penguin Books).

PETRILLI, Susan and Augusto PONZIO.

2021. "Precarity and *Insecuritas*, between Fear of the Other and Apprehension for the Other: From Semiotics to Semioethics", *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 37.3–4: 193–227. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs202231478>

SEIF, Farouk Y.

2019. "*De-Sign*" in the Transmodern World: Envisioning Reality Beyond Absoluteness (Bern: Peter Lang).
2020. "*De-Sign* as a Destiny of Negation: The Paradox of Sustaining Boundaries While Traversing Borders", *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 36.3–4, 179–215. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs202112066>