Five questions about Peirce

Interview with Winfried Nöth[1]

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Interview by Francesco Bellucci; Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen; Frederik Stjernfelt**:**

Question: Why were you initially drawn to Peirce?

Winfried Nöth: Peirce is among the authors. I quoted in my earliest book publications of 1972, 1975 and 1976. At the time, I was more deeply influenced by structuralist semiotics in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev. Against this background, Peirce's icon-index-symbol trichotomy seemed to offer a promising semiotic tool in the attempt the semiotic horizon and overcome the limitations imposed by the Saussurean dogma of arbitrariness. Peirce's distinction between iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs became an indispensable tool in my studies in applied semiotics of these years. I applied it to the analysis of illustrated ads as well as to studies in the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of signs.

The next step was to make use of further Peircean tools of semiotic analisys and to apply all three trichotomies of Peirce's typology of signs. I did so in a series of studies on signs and semiotic reflections in Lewis Carrol's Alice books (1980, 1994), The privilege of focusing on the Peircean sing typology in studies of applied semiotics had an end when I saw myself confronted with the necessity of presenting a more complete panorama of Peirce's semiotics and phenomenology in the three versions of my "Handbook of Semiotics" (2000). Its chapter on Peirce's semiotics also became a part of my introductory "Panorama da semiótica de Platão a Peirce" of 1995 and appeared as well in a Russian translation in 2001 (NÖTH, 2001a).

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Nevertheless, my research only took a decisively Peircean turn form the mind-1990s on, when I became a permanent visiting professor of semiotics in São Paulo and a member of the São Paulo Centro Internacional Center of Peirce Studies directed by Lucia Santaella. The enthusiastic students and renowned scholars working there as well as the opportunity of meeting prominent Peirce scholars from all over the world at the occasion of the biannual "Advanced Seminars on Peirce's Philosophy and Semiotics" inspired me to intensify my research in Peirce.

Question: What do you consider your contribution to the field?

Winfried Nöth: My Peirce studies cover a broad range of subjects. Among the principal topic areas in my focus are Peircean Visual Semiotics, media semiotics, iconicity in language and Peircean linguistics in general, Peircean semiotics of maps, the semiotics of tools, instruments, and machines, ecosemiotics and the semiotics of nature, evolutionary semiotics, and the development of Peircean semiotics and his key concepts (such as representation, information, thirdness, symbol, habit etc.; NÖTH, 2010a, 2012, 2014a). I need to restrict myself to three of these areas.

My writings with a focus on Peircean Visual Semiotics, besides the various chapters of my Handbook dealing with this topic, began with a paper written together with Lucia Santaella on the semiotics of images, paintings, and photography (NÖTH; SANTAELLA, 2012), which also constitutes the centerpiece of a book on the semiotics of the image (SANTAELLA; NÖTH, 2000). Fundamental positions of a Peircean Visual Semiotics are addressed in papers on the image in general (NÖTH, 2003), on abstract painting in particular (2002 b), and in a much-quoted paper on why pictures are signs (2005). The latter was written in reply to the anti-Peircean arguments of a group of German art historians and theoreticians who claim that works of the visual arts are usually not signs but "phenomena sui generis".

In 1990, I first about iconicity in spoken and written language (NÖTH, 1990). In a series of ensuing studies, I extended the traditional view of iconicity as onomatopoeia to include Peirce's theory of the icon as image, diagram, and metaphor (NÖTH, 1990, 1999, 2001b,

2008b, 2014b). Further extensions of this topics area to a general Peircean linguistics resulted in papers on Peirce as a pioneer in linguistics (NÖTH, 2002a), on the Peircean foundations of linguistic pragmatics (NÖTH, 2011) and on the questions of meaning and vagueness (NÖTH, 2011) and on the question of meaning and vagueness (NÖTH; SANTAELLA, 2011), among others.

My research in semiotic machines began with an invitation by Frieder Nake to contribute a paper to the 1996 Dagstuhl Colloquium on "Informatics an Semiotics" and his invitation to extend the study presented there to a lecture at the University of Bremen soon after. The paper on "Semiotic Machines" (NÖTH, 2002c), which I presented there has meanwhile been published six times in three languages. The most important sequels to this study are my papers on the instrumentality and semiotic agency of signs, tools, and intelligent machines (NÖTH, 2009). The question of semiotic agency and autonomy of signs is currently one of the hottest topics in philosophical and social studies, to which Peirce's semiotics can contribute important insights (NÖTH, 2010b).

Question: What is the proper role of Peirce's work in relation to philosophy and other academic disciplines?

Winfried Nöth: Peirce was a polymath, and it is well known that he contributed important insights to the most diverse academic disciplines, from cartography to photometric research and from mathematics to metaphysics (see especially Fisch 1986), but for Peirce, semiotics, the research field whose foundations he had laid, provided the missing link between all sciences, form the natural sciences to metaphysics. The relation of Peirce's work to philosophy and other academic disciplines can best be epitomized in the much-quoted words he addressed to Lady Victoria Welby in his letter of December 23, 1908: "It has never been in my power to study anything – mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology, except as a study of semiotics" (SS 1977, 85-6). However, despite this declaration on the ubiquity of sign,

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Peirce was not a pan-semiotician in the sense of an advocate of a hegemony of semiotics over other domains of research. He had a very clear vision of the place of semiotics within the concert of the sciences, as his ambitious outline of the classification of the sciences (CP 1.176-283) shows, in which semiotics is only one of the three normative sciences, after esthetics and ethics, all of which are preceded by phenomenology and followed by metaphysics.

Question: What do you consider the most important topics and/or contributions in the field of Peirce studies?

Winfried Nöth: The ubiquity and general acknowledgement of Peircean ideas in the most diverse fields of study makes it impossible to determine any specific topic as most important among all others. It is impossible to say whether Peirce's theory of abductive reasoning is more important than his work on existential graphs, his classification of signs, his metaphysics, or his cosmology. Peirce was a thinker far ahead of this time. It took more than half a century until the great originality of his method of existential graphs became fully acknowledged. Peirce's general theory of signs took no less time to be understood. For decades, under the influence of behaviorism, his semiotic ideas were severely distorted, especially by Charles Morris's reinterpretation of Peircean key concepts. Although it is unfortunate that many of Peirce's ideas have only survived as fragments, even the challenge of reconstructing his ideas is awarding in itself.

One of Peirce's greatest general contributions to modernity consists in his achievement of overcoming dualisms of all kinds, From Peirce's doctrines of semiotic mediation, synechism, and fallibilism, we can learn that we cannot expect to find "ultimate truths" but only approximations to final interpretants.

Question: What are the most important open problems in this field and what are the prospects/avenues for progress?

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Winfried Nöth: In the speculative sciences, as Peirce called them in a Scholastic fashion, it is always hard, if not impossible, to identify problems that are still unresolved. On the one hand, as Peirce's doctrine of synechism teaches, the identification of a problem is already the first step to its resolution. On the other, his doctrine of fallibilism teaches that final "resolutions" are never impossible. However, there are insights from Peirce that more and others that are less relevant to discussions of contemporary intellectual and cultural life. In an interview for the Tallinn cultural journal *Keel ja kirjandus*, Marek Tamm asked me about the greatest challenges to the humanities today. My answer was about the challenges to the humanist doctrine of the autonomous human mind in a posthuman world in which semiotic machines seem to be taking over (NÖTH, 2008a). From Peirce we can learn that semiotic machines will act no more and no less autonomously than human minds. In the long run, it is the agency of the sing that will prevail in the evolution of semiosis.

The most important open problem in the field of Peirce studies is certainly the slow progress in the edition project of Peirce's *Writings*. More than thirty years have passed since the first volume of was issued, but the number of volumes that have been published so far is still less than half of the number of volumes which deserve and need to be made available to scholars and students of philosophy, semiotics, and other sciences. The avenue for progress can only be the reconsideration of the research priorities in the country indebted to Peirce for the privilege of having one of the greatest philosophers of all times among its citizens.

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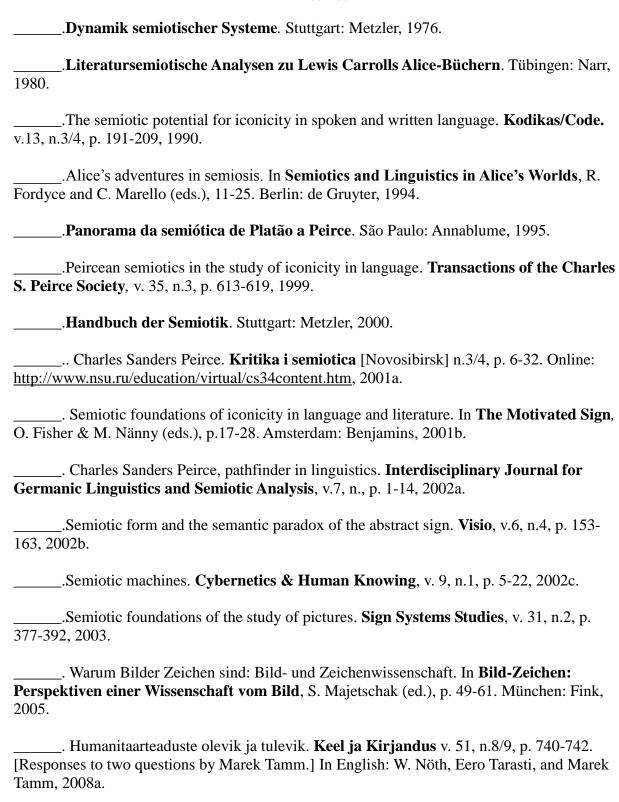HUMANITIES: State and prospects. **Sign Systems Studies**, v.36, n.2, p. 527-532, S/D.

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