Visual Semiotics and Real Events

Exploring the Bricolage of Images

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Abstract

This article adopts a semiotic (and edusemiotic) perspective that abolishes all binary divisions in favour of the process of semiosis that ensures a continuous translation of signs into other signs via the dynamic relations formed by the human mind, cultural artefacts, and events in real life. The mind, in edusemiotics, partakes of unconscious ideas in the form of mental images. As for culture, the field of communication phenomena calls for, according to Yuri Lotman, the identification of specific semiotic systems representing their 'languages', including non-verbal signs such as images, pictures, and other art forms that function as cultural texts. The methodology of bricolage (conceptualized in educational research by Joe Kincheloe) combines hermeneutics with narratology, and 'reading' images becomes imperative for advancing critical pedagogy. The article examines and interprets selected images, including those belonging to the low end of popular culture, and connects them with the exemplarily significant event at the level of socio-cultural reality. The paradoxical self-referential 'logic' is the prerogative of semiotic reason that constantly reflects on – thus bringing to cognition and transforming – our often unconscious assumptions, beliefs and habits thus contributing to the construction of subjectivity that uses critical reason informed by signs, which include the bricolage of images.

Keywords

semiotics – edusemiotics – visual communication – Lotman – self-reflection – subjectivity

1 Introduction

Does art imitate life? Or conversely, is it life that imitates art? What is the ‘right’ philosophical position: mimesis articulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* or its direct opposite, anti-mimesis, famously advocated by Oscar Wilde in his essay *The Decay of Lying* and compared with the ‘imitative instinct’ of life itself? For Wilde, life – and the whole of nature – strives for self-expression, while art, rather than representing reality, betrays it. This article, instead of presenting a customary (in the analytic philosophy) either-or argument in favour of the primacy of either art or life, suggests the both-and approach preeminent in edusemiotics as a novel educational theory that abolishes all binary divisions.

Edusemiotics adopts a dynamic, or process, philosophy that intends

to come to intellectual terms with the world’s empirical realities by deriving a framework of conceptions and ideas to integrate the products of modern inquiry into a coherent framework of thought linked to a metaphysical tradition reaching from Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, in antiquity, to Leibniz, at the dawn of the modern age.

RESCHER, 1996, pp. 3–4

and later to Bergson, Whitehead, Peirce, Dewey, and Deleuze among others. Despite the substantial nuances pertinent to each thinker, it is process that remains a common denominator, describing as such a ‘coordinated group of changes in the complexion of reality’ (Rescher, 1996, p. 38) that can be summed up by the dynamic notions of becoming, relation and event central to edusemiotics (Semetsky & Stables, 2014; Stables & Semetsky, 2015). Signs (minimal semiotic units) are not solely symbolic as in verbal language succumbing to the logic of identity whence any middle term is excluded. Signs include ‘pictures or diagrams or other images (... Icons) [and others] more or less analogous to symptoms (... Indices)’ (Peirce, CP 6.338) and need to be read and interpreted in practice.

The relationship between word and image remains historically, philosophically, and ideologically troubled. The verbal mode is characterized by ‘*linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract thinking*’ (Shlain, 1998, p. 1) while the medium of images demands ‘a *holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete*’ (Ibid.) mode of perception long lost in the course of modernity during which linguistic signs became the basic means of communication. Signs are relational entities surpassing Saussure’s linguistic dyads but representing triads formed by interpretants (Peirce’s term) as included

‘thirds’ between such dualistic categories of modern discourse as mind vs. world, subject vs. object, culture vs. nature, or image vs. word. It is self-reference – suspect in the analytic logic of language, denouncing it as circular and begging the question – that ensures the tri-relative process~structure of genuine signs as dynamic patterns (Kelso, 2000; Kelso, 2008) enriched with meaning. The notation $\sim$ (*tilde*) indicates a coordinated, complementary relation between perceived opposites, and it is surely by breaking the stability of ‘pre-existing assertions of object-subject relationships [that] this “philosophy of the image” has opened up a new era for understanding the nature of meaning’ (Peters & White in Peters et al., 2018, p. 58).

Denouncing the Cartesian maxim, cognitive semiotics posits the ‘moving pictures of thought’ (Peirce, CP 4.8) as inferences, including abduction that functions as an intuitive, insightful and imaginative, judgement. The research on mind in motion (Tversky, 2019) indicates that pictures are remembered better than words, while an attempt to describe life events often defies words. Even as pictures, images and ‘graphic symbols (which include iconic and indexical signs) are a semiotically still largely unexplored field of research’ (Nöth, 1995, p. 219), in education the first steps from ‘page to screen’ were taken several decades ago (e.g., Snyder, 1997) and recent advances in educational theory, especially its ‘edusemiotic turn’ (Semetsky, 2014), demonstrate that ‘The “pictorial turn” is already upon us’ (Peters & White in Peters et al., 2018, p. 61). Pictures not only ‘have a continuous structure ... [but also] induce the reader to ... read the picture as if it were a written text’ (Posner, 1989, p. 276).

It is in the process of semiosis as the signs’ persistent action that signs acquire meanings via interpretants, thereby forming semiotic bridges between the human mind, cultural artefacts, and events in real life, even if dualistic philosophy and objective science ‘locates’ those three on otherwise incommensurable planes. Art, life and mind together comprise a semiotic space that takes the paradoxical shape of the so-called semiotic triangle, not unlike in Escher’s print *Relativity*. This figure inspired Oxford mathematician and physicist Roger Penrose to conceptualize the specific structure of the ‘impossible’ triangle – impossible, strictly speaking, in ordinary Euclidian space – which in turn was used by Escher in his depiction of the *Waterfall* (Schattschneider, 2010). Significantly, Escher defined his landscapes as *mindscapes*. The expressive language of art, in its many representations, deserves attention if edusemiotics intends to become a full-fledged learning theory, and for semiotics *per se* to be considered one of the methodologies in education research.

More often than not, researchers in edusemiotics still focus on predominantly linguistic signs and verbal communication. What is usually highlighted in edusemiotics is its constructivist aspect, while leaving behind its complementary, expressionist, aspect. But the action of signs conforms to the paradoxical 'logic of artistic construction' (Dewey, 1998, p. 199) with the expressionism of an artist being inseparable from the constructionism of a craftsman. Such a tri-relative logic of signs, which problematizes the true-false dichotomy but necessarily includes interpretants (human and non-human), becomes an answer to the persistent problematic of explaining the relation between the self, 'the social' (cf. Peters & White in Peters et al., 2018, p. 60) and the natural orders. In this respect, the edusemiotics of images represents a constructive-expressive synthesis. As such it becomes an element of the broader *bricolage* as a methodology of qualitative research posited by Joe Kincheloe who initiated the Paolo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy. The term *bricolage* was coined by anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1966) in the context of structuralism, defined as the search for the underlying patterns of thought and behaviour. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) referred to the bricolage as a schizoanalytic, transgressive mode of production that includes the production of human subjectivity.

Addressing the significant role of post-formal education and cultural pedagogy for the process of self-formation, Kincheloe conceptualized *bricolage* (Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Kincheloe & Berry, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008), drawing from multiple theoretical and methodological resources. A *bricoleur* constructs the object of study, paying particular attention to the webs of relationships, processes and interconnections while retaining the rigour of the best critical thought. While hermeneutics connotes the ambiguity of meanings, bricolage implies the fictive and imaginative elements – thus reading and interpreting the language of images becomes the work of a bricoleur. The bricoleur – a teacher or learner alike – makes creative and resourceful use of the 'material at hand' represented by pictures, images and signs in general. Bricolage combines hermeneutics with narratology and phenomenology, and reading images becomes imperative for advancing critical pedagogy and creating meaningful learning experiences, even if bricolage originally referred to a savage, primitive way of thinking. However 'Art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 66) that together with concepts form the aforementioned semiotic triangle. Surely, 'you need all three to *get things moving*' (Deleuze, 1995, p. 165), thereby ensuring the shift from static to moving images (Peters et al., 2018). It is the quest for meanings that becomes realized in a sudden awakening of the inner eye (Noddings & Shore, 1984),

‘creating a picture in our mind’ (p. 81) along the path to meaning-making. The bricolage of images *expresses* itself in the extra-linguistic mode, and while it is linguistic competence that duly *constructs* meanings, the concept of language in edusemiotics is broad:

language is the only thing that can properly be said to have structure, be it an esoteric or even non-verbal language. There is a structure of the unconscious only to the extent that the unconscious speaks and is language. ... Even things possess a structure only in so far as they maintain a silent discourse, which is the language of signs.

DELEUZE, 2003, pp. 170–171

2 Visual Communication

According to Russian neo-semioticians, the field of communication phenomena, as part of the typology of cultures, calls for the identification of specific semiotic systems representing their languages. Yuri Lotman, a famous scholar of the Moscow-Tartu school, saw culture as a set of texts (Lotman, 1990) – albeit non-linear and saturated with explosive moments (Lotman, 2009). The very ‘nature’ of culture is potentially determined by such explosions. Cultural values permeate the *semiosphere*, defined as a specific ‘synchronic semiotic space which fills the borders of culture, without which separate semiotic systems cannot function or come into being’ (Lotman, 1990, p. 3). Importantly, Lotman’s term has undergone its second birth in terms of describing *both* culture and nature: it is ‘just like the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and the biosphere. It penetrates to every corner of these other spheres, incorporating all forms of communication [and constituting] a world of *signification*’ (Hoffmeyer, 1993, p. vii) as signs of meanings in the universe.

Pointing out that culture in general is an open-ended semiotic system, Lotman emphasized its relation to *the world beyond the borders of language* – thus to the presence of the generic ‘other’ and, accordingly, the pressing need for translating one semiotic system into another. The moments of explosion bring in novelty and contribute to the discovery of meaning which is properly semiotic, paradoxical: *both* logical *and* creative. Cultural and artistic ‘codes’ are much more complex than the syntax of verbal language. The Russian word *klubok* (a ball of knitting wool) was used by Lotman as a metaphor for the tangled web of potential meanings comprising the semiotic space, including the visual. In such a ‘coalescent’ space, the state of explosion

‘renders possible unexpected leaps into completely different, unpredictable organisational structures. ... This moment is experienced outside of time ... [Such events] seize the consciousness of culture and strive to embed the transformed picture into memory’ (Lotman, 2009, p. 158) whenever opaque signs render themselves interpretable at the everyday level, in the middle and muddle of real human lives.

Edusemiotics interrogates the very notion of codification, locating it at the ‘frontier between *logics* and *poetics*’ (Guiraud, 1975, p. 24). A semiotic ‘code’ is not limited by digital algorithms. It is ‘Analogic coding [that] generates messages in a continuous space, such as images, models, or nonverbal signs’ (Nöth, 1995, p. 208) – however it is during reading and interpreting their silent discourse that the messages expressed by these signs are narrated, articulated and as such digitized: ‘ultimately every act of semiosis involves a digital transformation of messages’ (Ibid.), therefore eliciting the necessary translation between, and the integration of, different sign-systems. Lotman pointed to the explicit presence of the boundary line in its capacity to divide one cultural text from another, one set of values from another, the self from other. Ultimately, however, this binary division can be overcome because such a borderline can serve as a semiotic bridge or a sum total of translatable ‘filters’ to create the conditions for a dialogue, whether real or symbolic. The intercultural dialogue in social life is not just a means of communication but can become a foundational concept to avoid such dark signs of the excesses of globalization as exclusion, nationalism, and marginalization (Besley & Peters, 2012).

To develop a dialogue – with others as well as with our own *as yet unknown* ‘self’ – is a challenge faced by edusemiotics. The conscious ego is just a ‘mere wave in the soul, a superficial and small feature’ (Peirce, CP 1.112) in the vast sea of the unconscious that acts as ‘a real effective force behind consciousness’ (CP 5.288). Subjectivity as becoming-other depends on its own evolving character in the process of learning and self-reflection. A person is never ‘absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is “saying to himself,” that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time. When one reasons, it is that critical self that one is trying to persuade; and all thought whatsoever is a sign’ (CP 5.421), verbal or non-verbal alike. The discursive field expands to integrate in itself non-discursive formations by means of ‘the relational principles that determine the larger discursive field, otherwise known as the symbolic order. The alignment of signification with the symbolic order ... has only been made possible by the inclusion of a third category – that of subjectivity’ (Silverman, 1984, p. 42) as an interpreter of signs.

The educational advantage of images and other graphic signs lies in their semiotic function of construing ‘a different lesson, by rendering literally visible before one’s very eyes the operation of thinking *in actu*’ (Peirce, CP 4.6). Below are two photos (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), available on the Internet, representing, albeit in static form, the dynamics of explosion manifested in the real-life event of symbolic scope: the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11.

FIGURE 1 The Twin Towers on 9/11

PHOTO COURTESY OF FEMA

FIGURE 2 The Twin Towers on 9/11

U.S. NAVY PHOTO BY JOURNALIST 1ST CLASS PRESTON KERES

The photos – and the event they depict – are at once real and hyperreal: the poststructuralist critique asserts hyperreality in terms of the amplification of signs in the multitude of simulations that can eventually become more real than reality itself. A singular event of explosion in/of culture can become subjected to unforeseeable consequences, propagating unpredictably and eliciting semiotic effects ‘not just in the direct economic, political, financial slump in the whole of the system – and the resulting moral and psychological downturn – but the slump in the value-system’ (Baudrillard, 2002, pp. 31–32) as well. Not only terrorism is blind, but so were the actual towers – ‘no longer opening on the outside world, but subject to artificial conditioning’ (p. 43) – air conditioning or mental conditioning alike. The ultimate destruction – a material body turned into a lifeless skeleton – is seen in Fig. 2. The images are as shocking as the real events – still ‘shock is the very form of communication of movement in images. ... the shock has an effect on the spirit, it forces it to think, and to think the Whole. ... It does not follow like a logical effect, analytically, but synthetically as the dynamic effect of images “on the whole cortex”’ (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 157–158). It is shock that elicits the process of the transformation of signs during which a sign acquires meaning, and hence becomes another sign.

Semiosis crosses the boundary line of the present level of consciousness and can transform human subjectivity *per se* in the process of holistic (Whole) learning while integrating affects into cognition. It is such “synthetic consciousness [that implies the] sense of learning” (Peirce, CP 1.377) peculiar to edusemiotics. The effect of images consists in their creating holistic consciousness that achieves new understanding in the form of novel meanings for experience. The collapse of the towers signifies a sudden interruption to the status quo of the state of affairs, leading to the loss of identity that tends to prevent people from being able to understand a deeper symbolic meaning of such an explosive event, the full significance of which stays out of immediate awareness and becomes clear upon the often lengthy learning process in the midst of cultural education and self-reflective revaluation of experience. Paradoxes abound, a sign by definition is always already a sign of something other than itself, and its self-reference partakes of self-transcendence in terms of ‘the creative overcoming of the status quo’ (Jantsch, 1981, p. 91) via the power to *affect itself* by crossing the boundary line of current knowledge. Contrary to a single pre-given Truth due to ‘social passivity’ (Lotman, 1990, p. 35) that characterizes human subjects as simple consumers of information, it is the active interpretation of signs by

virtue of our very participation in semiosis that can ‘increase the number of texts ... and ... encourage a rapid increase in knowledge’ (Ibid.).

While pictures, photos and cultural artefacts are material objects, it is important to remember that semiosis encompasses a much broader, *psychosomatic*, reality of signs and ‘embraces ... also mental structures, such as ideas, concepts or visions’ (Jantsch, 1980, p. 50) that ‘form their own world of symbolic representation of reality and ... can change and redesign reality’ (p. 161). To reiterate, semiotic processes are circular, self-referential and paradoxical. Peirce’s term *retroduction*, used interchangeably with *abduction*, stresses the backward movement of self-reflection while also performing a leap forward towards novelty. This dynamics brings to mind Escher’s famous image *Ascending and Descending*. In this sense inference partakes of the act of creation as ‘an incursion into the novel’ (Dewey, 1916/1924, p. 172). Dewey, a formidable forerunner of edusemiotics, stressed that logic is ‘a circular process’ (Dewey, 1938, p. 20). Such a ‘circle’ however is never vicious but virtuous. Signs are double-sided, relational entities. Our thinking is embodied in lived experience and demands self-reflection while also involving aesthetic appreciation. Reading, interpreting and narrating the images parallels the dynamic action of signs, and mind – as Dewey prophetically said in his *Art as Experience* – is ‘a verb’ (1934/1980, p. 263), the function of which is to translate between two different semiotic systems. It is precisely semiotic ‘interpretation [that] means learning’ (Nöth, 2014, p. 12) because it brings into being ‘a new magnitude of thirdness’ (Deely, 1990, p. 102) and thus creates a novel world of signification.

An impossible triangle is dubbed as such because it certainly creates a paradox: it seems to close on itself, however at each ‘closure’ on the interpretant, when the meaning becomes temporarily fixed, the relation of the sign to the object (as a sign’s referent) necessarily becomes the object of yet another, new, sign, thus building up a chain of signification while bringing out ‘the hidden *telos* in the *archê* and the hidden *archê* in the *telos*’ (Iser, 2000, p. 74). While semiosphere constitutes a synchronic space underlying different semiotic systems, a cultural text and its semiotic ‘readership’ always exist in a reciprocal relationship of mutual fecundity. A sign doesn’t belong to a solely synchronic slice but, according to Lotman (1990), cuts across it, thereby creating a past-future connection, thus demonstrating its own diachronic dimension as an unorthodox memory including the paradoxical memory of the future. An interpreter of signs – themselves a sign among others – ‘denotes whatever is the object of his attention at the moment; he connotes whatever he knows or feels of this

object, and is the incarnation of this form ... his interpretant is the future memory of this cognition, his future self (Peirce, CP 7.591).

Describing the phenomenon of art as a dynamic semiotic space with explosive potential, Lotman (2009) refers to it as generating a transformative relation between the moment of explosion, consciousness and memory. In semiotics terms, memory – defined as the capacity to not only preserve and reproduce information but also to create it anew – is necessarily collective. It is visual information in particular that manifests ‘its profound effect in and across popular culture’ (Peters & White in Peters, et al., 2018, p. 58). An alternative pedagogy of images can transgress the boundaries of a formal classroom or the borders of solely cognitive knowledge by expanding educational spaces and learning to read the language of signs. Verbal communication can often become dysfunctional, especially in case of not only different native languages, but different values and worldviews that tend to resist ‘translation’. The integration of the non-verbal mode can repair the relationship between a generic ‘self’ and a generic ‘other’. Different culture is always perceived as being the ‘other’ to the ‘self’: *svoi* and *chuzhoi* as Lotman used to say.

3 Cultural Pedagogy

Taking the self-other *relation* as foundational brings to the fore the reflective way of knowing that in antiquity distinguished true pedagogy from plain sophistry. Subjectivity as individual agency is not all there is: a relational ontology of semiosis demands in turn ‘a relational self ... as a growing collection of encounters, actual responses, memories, reflections, evaluations ... generated, or ... characterized by, some affect’ (Noddings, 2010, p. 115). Affects – such as those permeating Lotman’s explosive moments – constitute the predominantly unconscious dimension of experience, exceeding the current level of existing knowledge: they ‘proceed from the subconscious... They do not seem to come from the self, because they issue from a self not consciously known’ (Dewey, 1934/1980, pp. 65–66). While the conscious Cogito employs propositional thought and verbal language directly representing ‘objective’ reality, the unconscious uses the language of images, which enable us to access the *semiotic reality* of signs.

According to philosopher Henry Corbin, who was a professor of Islamic Studies at Sorbonne, there exists an intermediate realm between micro- and macrospace called mesocosm which he dubbed the *imaginal* world – *mundus imaginalis* or *mundus archetypus*. Archetypal ideas express the ‘extra-

propositional ... presentation of the unconscious, not the representation of consciousness' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 192), and "learning" always takes place in and through the unconscious, thereby establishing the bond of a profound complicity between nature and mind' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 165). Archetypes are opaque signs pointing beyond themselves 'to a meaning that is ... still beyond our grasp, and cannot be adequately expressed in the familiar words of our language' (Jung in Nöth, 1995, p. 119) but needs mediation and interpretation so as to be communicated to consciousness. The *imaginal* world of archetypes constitutes a distinct order of reality corresponding to a distinct mode of perception, in contrast to the purely *imaginary* as simply unreal. It is the human cognitive function enriched with imagination that provides epistemic access to the imaginal, archetypal world. Corbin makes clear that the 'figures of the *mundus imaginalis* do not subsist in the same manner as the empirical realities of the physical world, [nor] in the purely intelligible world' (Corbin, 1972, p. 6), and references the expression *spissitudo spiritualis* coined by Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist. Not unlike Plato's *chora* which gives birth to ideas, this 'in-between' world becomes 'a metaphysical necessity. Imagination is the cognitive function of this world' (Ibid.) and, as Corbin warns, is not to be confused with what modernity identifies as fantasy.

The imaginal world creates a semiotic bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, thus functioning as the included third in its role of an unorthodox interpreter or a 'container' for the archetypal, as yet unconscious or virtual, ideas comprising the bricolage of images: 'The cognitive function of imagination provides the foundation for a rigorous analogical knowledge permitting us to evade the dilemma of current rationalism, which gives us only a choice between the two banal dualistic terms of either "matter" or "mind"' (Corbin, 1972, p. 7). The embodiment of archetypal ideas in the material medium makes it possible to articulate the expressive 'voice' of images when the creative imagination leads to the construction of meaningful narratives. For Peirce, 'Every general word excites a pictorial idea. Even to the modern student, the pictorial ideograph becomes a considerable part of the idea it excites; and the influence of the hieroglyphics, the modes of expression, etc., is to make "a composite of pictures" particularly expressive in describing the idea conveyed' (CP 2.354). Such Platonism, albeit reversed, reminds us of the theory of recollection exemplified in *Meno*, when it is by contemplating geometrical figures as visual signs and engaging in a dialogue – that is, actively participating in a symbolic image-word relationship – that the slave boy finally learns. Learning becomes equivalent to an apprenticeship in signs.

Pointing out the semantic intersection as the explosion of meanings, Lotman links these explosive moments with the notion of inspiration, which can pull 'humanity out of the sphere of logic into the arena of unpredictable creativity' (Lotman, 2009, p. 20) at the point of intense contradiction between the two. In this context he cites *The Artist* – a Russian poem by Alexander Blok dedicated to the role of the unconscious. The artist as the protagonist in the poem struggles 'to render the inexpressible in words and to express the world, which lies beyond the limits of logic' (p. 21). It is the explosive moment of artistic and poetic inspiration that 'cancels out the contradictions in their particular deep-level unity' (p. 22). Conversely, is it the archetypal ideas inhabiting Corbin's imaginal world that inspire artists to create pictures as material representations of such supposedly inexpressible ideas? Two images representing a real-life explosive event, when planes hit the Twin Towers (Fig.1) and fully destroyed them (Fig. 2), demonstrate a strange affinity with some pictures that have their place in an existing, albeit marginal, cultural practice traditionally located at the 'low' end of popular culture, in contrast to the 'high' art represented by such cultural artefacts as paintings or sculptures.

Figs. 3 and 4 below are pictures, indeed called *The Tower*, that belong to two Tarot decks. Tarot practice, which originated as a cultural game (Dummett & Decker, 2002), is a part of the esoteric tradition in Western philosophy (Faivre, 1994) – recall Deleuze's non-verbal 'esoteric' language cited earlier. The *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* (Sebeok, 1994) describes Tarot as a branch of divination based on the symbolic meanings attached to the pictures which are interpreted according to the purpose of a reading and modified by their relation to each other in their specific position in a layout. A Tarot reader thus becomes a bricoleur, because *doing bricolage* means engaging with marginalized practices and developing transgressive conceptual tools as well as exploring the breadth of underestimated human cognitive capacities in need of being enriched with the imaginative function that should have its place in education (cf. Peters & Freeman-Moir, 2006; Semetsky, 2011, 2013). The picture in Fig. 3 bears an uncanny resemblance to the real-life photo in Fig. 1, even though this deck was created in 1910, that is, almost a century before the tragic destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001.

FIGURE 3 From the Rider-Waite Tarot deck

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The art of Pamela Colman Smith, who designed the deck from which this image is taken, was inspired by her conversations with poet W. B. Yeats, a proponent of Celtic spirituality and unity of cultures as the goal of religious

reconciliation. Or were they both receiving inspiration from the *mundus imaginalis* where the archetypal ideas dwell? The Tower, which in some decks is called *The House of Destruction*, portrays the shocking image of falling bodies. It is a symbol for an unforeseen cataclysmic event in both history and myth that suddenly brings people down to earth by disturbing the existing norm and order of things, either through an abruptly terminated current psychological state or a break-up in a set of dominant cultural values. In the feminist interpretation (Gearhart & Rennie, 1981), this image signifies radical intervention, the overthrowing of false consciousness, violent social conflict and change, destruction of the old order on a grand scale, and release from imprisonment in the patriarchal phallic structure during the very process of its demolition. The collapse of the seemingly stable structure of meaning leads to the necessity of learning by 'reading' and interpreting the language of visual signs.

But have we been learning? Or do novel meanings still tend, with time, to sink back into the unconscious and remain there until the next cataclysmic event awakens an analogous memory of forgotten ancestors? Archetypal ideas subsisting in the *mundus imaginalis* and *inhabiting* the unconscious manifest in life as *habits* of which, in the absence of critical self-reflection, we remain largely unaware, behaving repetitively in the grip of old assumptions and beliefs – thus reinforcing the habitual patterns that sink even deeper into the unconscious to the point of being 'forgotten' and lost. It is this forgetfulness that may lead to erecting yet another Tower, never mind symbolic or real. Archetypal ideas are timeless – still, they can become awakened during explosive and shocking moments at the level of sociocultural reality. In turn, real events of such a scope can awaken our sleeping collective memory, and thus make explicit their implicit meanings.

The image in Fig. 4 not only brings to mind the real event portrayed in Fig. 2 but also reminds us of the masterpiece that, in contrast, belongs to 'high' art – *The Tower of Babel* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The picture conveys a structure which is sealed yet open, 'an oxymoronic structure: it is an open/enclosure' (Casey, 1997, p. 325), not unlike the 'impossible' semiotic triangle. Any genuine sign that *closes* on itself is simultaneously *open* to further interpretation and meaning-making through the paradoxical logic behind the self-referential dynamics of semiosis.

FIGURE 4 From The Lovers' Tarot deck

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The Tower is a tragic sign of instability, representing false omnipotence and mistaken certainty within the most powerful instance of the collision of opposites amidst mutual misunderstanding, persistent contradiction and the conflict of values. In the biblical narrative, an excess of pride and human hubris 'raises a man not only above himself, but also above the bounds of his mortality and earthliness, and by the very act of raising him, it destroys him. This "rising above himself" is expressed mythologically in the building of the heaven-high tower of Babel that brought confusion to mankind' (Jung, CW 5, 171): the confusion of tongues indeed. The coalescent (using Lotman's term) place of explosion is uncertain and underdetermined. The real-life ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11 is symbolically equivalent to what Lotman called zero space, characterized by the absence of meaning, save the presence of the extraordinary medium of communication. Still, such a zero space carries educative value precisely because it possesses the rich 'reserve of semiotic uncertainty' (Lotman, 2009, p. 146) that can and must be filled with meaning. It is the evolution of signs that provokes the evolution of culture. But not only that.

Edusemiotics demands that human culture act in resonance with the signs in nature: 'nature speaks a language which may be interpreted. To a being who thinks, things are records of their past, as fossils tell of the prior history of the earth, and are prophetic of their future' (Dewey, 1991, p. 15) – only as such can we avoid anthropocentrism and the prevalence of dualistic thinking that still haunts education. It is quite easy to miss the warning signs: their discourse is silent. Reading the images and understanding their expressive messages becomes imperative, even if the challenging

task of rendering such signs legible and accessible was in the past left to artists and so-called prophets. However, at this time we must learn to read such signs for ourselves. We can no longer abdicate or delegate this responsibility. Each one of us has to learn to decipher what is happening to us now, in a way that helps us to detect those silent underground symptoms that indicate the inappropriateness of our present postures.

HEDERMAN, 2003, p. 22

We can thus explore important alternatives that may very well reside in Corbin's imaginal world, should we learn to communicate with it by employing the bricolage of images.

4 An Open-ended 'Conclusion'

It is dialogue (or should we say, triologue, considering that semiosis is a tri-relative process~structure) that enables the means of communication to create the cultural text as a *unitary whole* (Lotman, 2009) which is characterized by the ultimate translatability of different languages and values into each other, however without denying their original plurality. The 'reading' of such a new cultural text, while in the present, confirms that a sign-system 'has a memory of its past states and an anticipation of potential "future states"' (p. 172), capable of creating a semiosphere of shared meanings. The interpretation of visual signs in particular includes the faculty of imagination as a property of analogical (partaking of right-brain) reasoning, thus creating a text 'in which the right-hemispheric values of tolerance, caring, and respect for nature will begin to ameliorate the conditions that have prevailed for the too-long period during which left-hemispheric values were dominant. Images, of any kind, are the balm bringing about this worldwide healing' (Shlain, 1998, p. 432).

This article, instead of closing on a set-in-stone conclusion, would like to open further discussion as a sign in the evolution of educational philosophy and critical thought. As Lotman's son Mikhail, a professor of semiotics at Tallinn University, Estonia, remarked (Clark in Lotman, 2009), *For my father there were two types of scholar – the one who has the questions and the one who has the answers. He belonged to the first.*

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