

# LOTMAN, PEIRCE AND YOU

## CAN WE REALLY COMBINE THESE APPROACHES?

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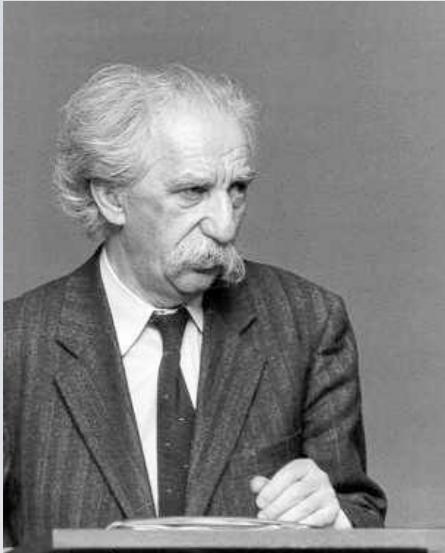
# ABSTRACT

This presentation will attempt to tackle in (very) general lines the tenets of Lotmanian and Peircean semiotics, observing their possible intersections and interactions as well as theoretical incompatibilities. As history would have it, both traditions stem from different roots, and their playing along cannot be taken for granted. In examining these historical roots in light of the naturalizing project of current semiotics, we can hope to find some points to connect both sides, even if not everything can fit in the same box. It will be argued that biosemiotics offers the most productive prospect moving forward.

# (REAL) ABSTRACT

Have you ever wondered what Lotmanian and Peircean semiotics have in common, but were too afraid to ask? Have you ever wondered what semiotics can actually do with either of them? The answer may surprise you (though probably not).

# INTRODUCTION



- What is this presentation really about?
  - Who are these people anyway?
    - Why do they matter?
  - What do I get from studying them?

# RECLAIMING HISTORY

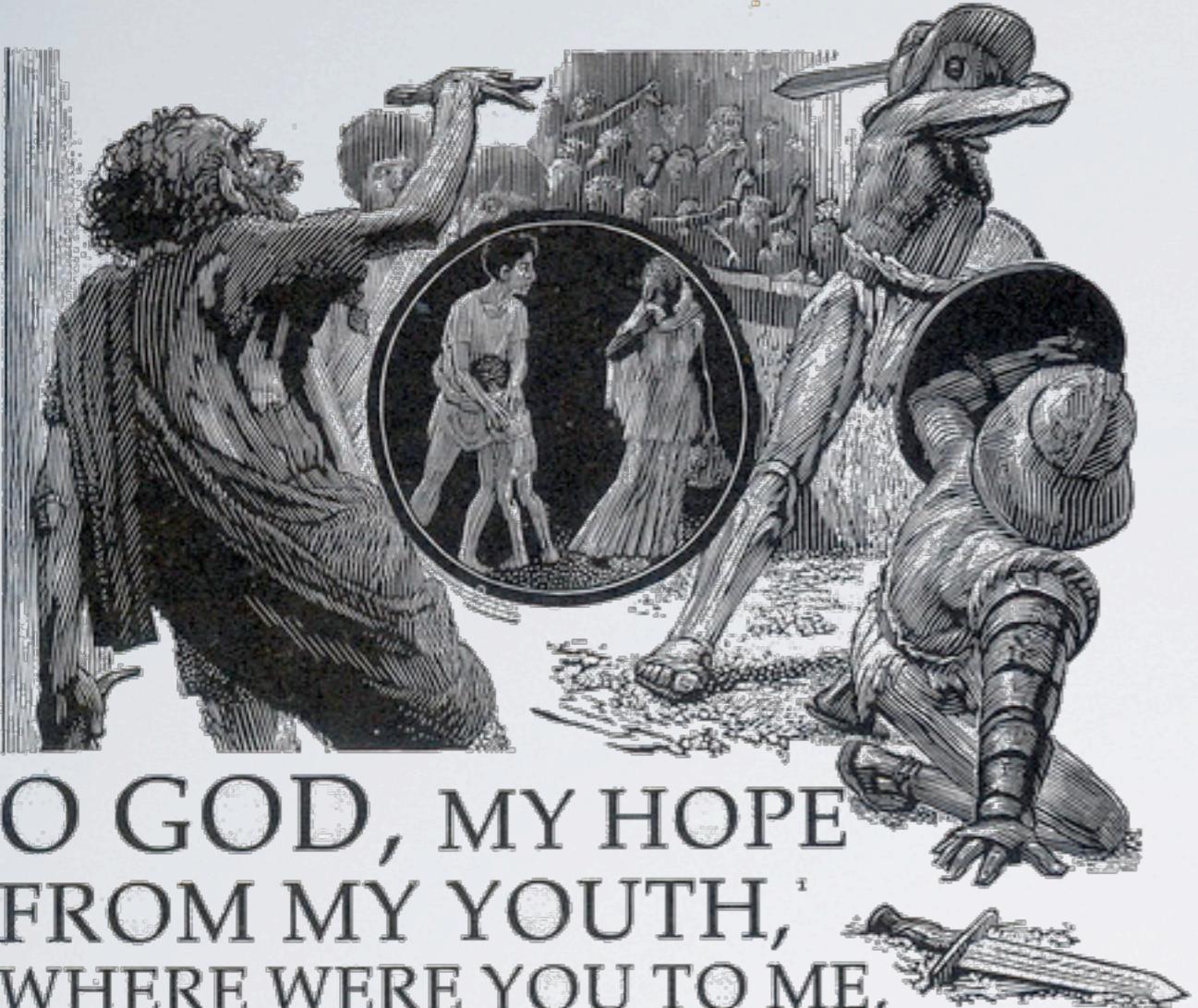
- There are two *histories* of semiotics, the history of the formal discipline and the reclaimed history within the history of philosophy.
- Is semiotics a method or a point of view? And how do we begin to answer this question?

# AUGUSTINE

- Why going all the way back to Augustine?

He gives us a systematic theory for natural and linguistic sign possibilities and a point of communion between future theories of the sign.

*“Things are learnt by means of signs”*



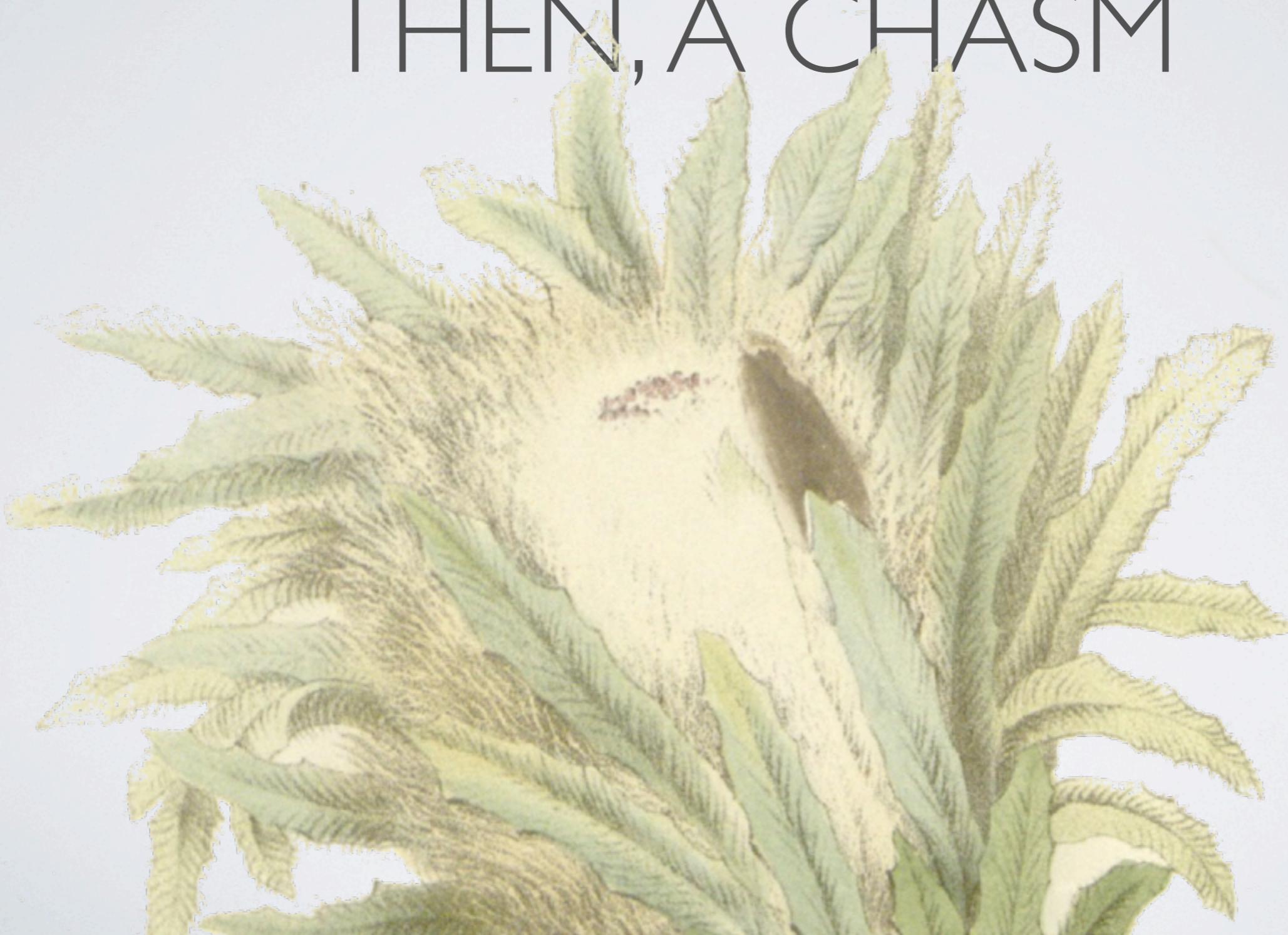
O GOD, MY HOPE  
FROM MY YOUTH,  
WHERE WERE YOU TO ME,  
AND WHERE HAD YOU GONE?  
DID YOU NOT CREATE ME, AND MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ME AND THE BEASTS OF THE  
field and the birds of the air? You made me wiser than them, yet I  
wandered through dark and slippery places, seeking you outside myself, and found not the God of my heart. I had come into  
the depths of the sea and had lost faith and hope in finding out  
the truth.

By this time my mother, strengthened by her piety, had come to me, following me over sea and land. In all perils she felt secure in you. Amid the dangers of the sea she comforted the very sailors, who are more accustomed to giving comfort to inexperienced passengers when they are alarmed. She assured them of a safe arrival, for in a vision you had assured her of this. She found me in a perilous state, despairing of ever finding truth. When I told her that, though not yet a Catholic Christian, I was now no longer a Manichee she did not leap for joy as at unexpected

# THE IDEA OF GENERAL SIGN

- Signification is not limited to linguistic correspondence
- A general sign then may mirror linguistic signification, but it is extended to multiple possibilities
- Modality and intentionality can be problematized, but they are covered by the notion of general sign

THEN, A CHASM



# WHAT DO WE REALLY DO WITH SEMIOTICS?

Let's backtrack for a second. At first we asked all sorts of questions about what we can do with these figures and semiotics. So what do we really do with it?

# THE SPLIT

- The Saussurean sign puts a model to the intuition of linguistic reference
- The intuition of linguistic reference can be expanded into general meaningful reference
- We can move from word to culture in the same process

But this is not about Saussure, nor about semiology.



LK JAMES

# THE DIFFERENCE, IN A NUTSHELL

- Continental semiotics: The starting point is the *synchronic*, with *dual* signs at its core. Social communication.
- Peircean semiotics: Cognition is the starting point and signs are linked to mental representation.

# LOTMANIAN SEMIOTICS

What makes this branch of semiotics interesting?

The systematic view of culture as a bundle of significations marks a departure from the language-centric, synchronic view of semiotic processes.

# KEY CONCEPTS

- **Text**
- **Semiosphere**
- Boundary
- Explosion
- **Modelling systems**

# TEXT

- Bundle of significant elements
- Cohesive
- Contextualized
- Basic unit of analysis

# MODELLING SYSTEMS

- A “structure of elements and rules of their combination, existing in a state of fixed analogy to the whole sphere of the object of perception, cognition, or organization. For this reason, a modelling system may be treated as a *language*.” (Lotman 2011:250)
- Division between primary and secondary.

# SEMIOSPHERE

- “The semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages.” (Lotman, 2001, 123)
- General analytical tool to frame multilinear communication processes in culture.

Putting all those together we have an anthropocentric view of signification with a cybernetic twist. This semiotics doesn't pay attention to individual signs, but rather to strings in context based on the idea that language is the basis of modeling (and thus, cognition).

# A COUPLE OF ISSUES

- Primary modeling: Language?!
- How do we divide the semiosphere?!
- What do we do with these concepts?!





(sorry Mr. Uexküll)

As Sebeok reconfigures our understanding of Lotmanian semiotics, he also makes a strong case for a generalized biosemiotic approach to meaningful phenomena.

# WHAT ABOUT CHARLES?



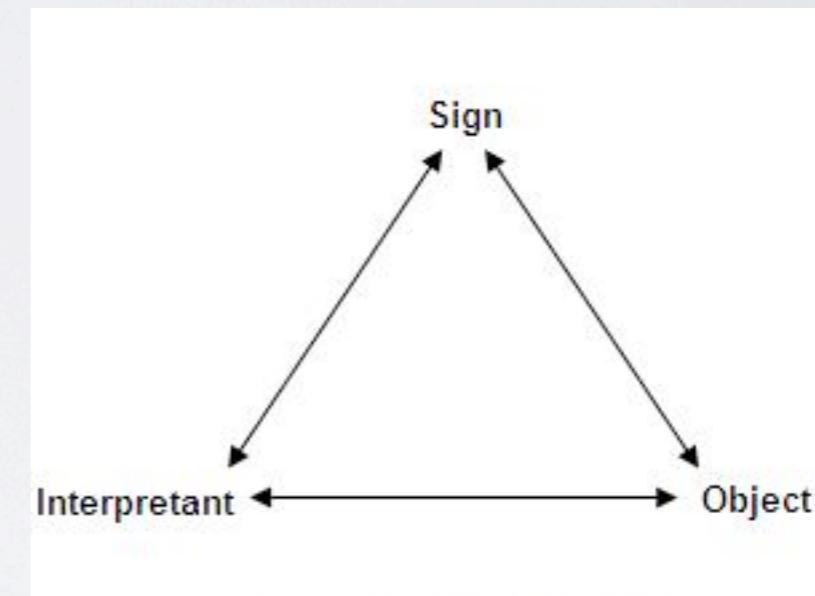
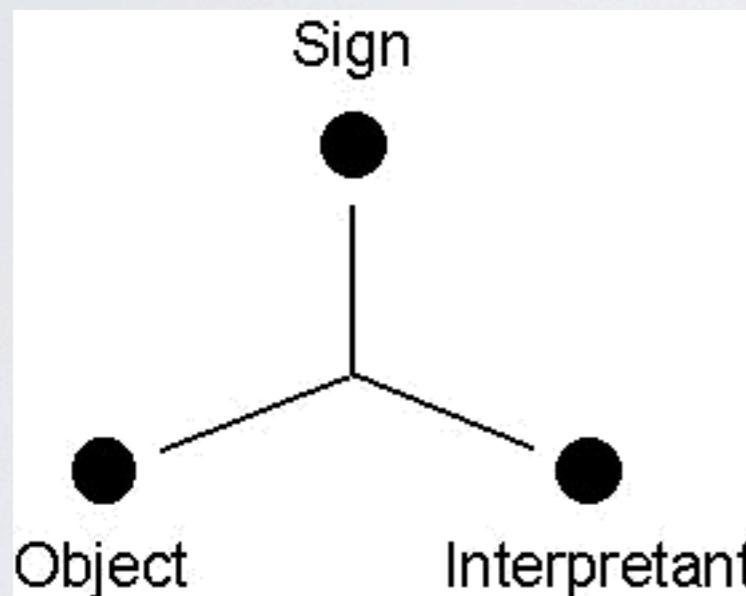
Cambridge, MA, 1860

- But who was Charles S. Peirce?
- How did we get to deal with him?
- What is a sign in Peircean terms?



Simon Newcomb

# (A QUICK REMINDER)



(Hoffmann — ugly internet representations — Ogden & Richards)

# SO WHY PEIRCE?

- Sign as an abstraction (no linguistic priority)
- This abstraction can cover different levels!
- But where's the limit?

# PSYCHOLOGISM

We can pinpoint the discussion to whether we think signs are only signs because they are perceived somehow or we believe they stand on their own.

So where do we put cognition in all this?  
(Peirce's metaphysics gives us a hint.)

# WHAT DOES A SIGN DO?

Saussurean tradition: *Representation*

Peircean tradition: *Action*

# ENDS AT ODDS

Some main differences:

- Linguistic approach
- Theoretical background
- Aims

# PRIORITIES, PRIORITIES

- Lotman sees Peirce as prioritizing the sign. But for Lotman, text is the name of the game
- But Lotman sees Peirce through Jakobson (Peirce's icon-index-symbol)
- Semiotic space is conceptually more important in Lotman's semiotics

# CAN WE MOVE PAST THIS?

- Can we do justice to both views by subsuming one under the other?
- Would the study of culture be better off with a more robust concept of the sign via Peirce?
- Can you append synechism to semiospheric boundaries?

# (VERY BRIEF) BIOSEMIOTICS

- Naturalization of semiotic phenomena and the biosemiotic project
- ↳ Lotman and cybernetics
- ↳ Sebeok's reading of both authors
- ↳ Peirce's general sign as a way forward

# WHAT ABOUT US?!

- Can we frame animal behavior as culture \*and\* use Lotmanian concepts for their study?
- Can the study of cross-cultural communication be enriched by studying abstract signification processes à la Peirce?
- If we encountered alien life forms, could we use anything from semiotics to help us understand their sense of signification?

# AND SO

- No theory is complete on its own when it is grounded on its own references and context
- What works for one theory may be meaningless for another
  - Deciding on units of analysis is crucial
- Biosemiotic is bio- because it assumes the biological necessity of sign processes

