



What is pansemiotics?

Description

Pansemiotics has not yet made it into the Oxford English Dictionary. The term crops up several times in Winfried NÃ¶th's expansive 1990 book, *The Handbook of Semiotics*.

The term provides a means of describing the theological view that â??the whole universe became [in the Middle Ages] signs of divine revelationâ?• (382), as in the Old Testament statement, â??The heavens declare the glory of Godâ?• (Psalm 19:1), as if everything in the universe is united in this primary mission to communicate divine glory.

By another reading, according to NÃ¶th, â??any information processing by individual organisms (but not by machines) constitutes an instance of communicationâ?• (170). Anything that involves information exchange (the transmission of signals between cells and organs, genetic exchange, etc), constitutes a semiotic system.

Peirce the pansemiotician

In summarising Peirce's contribution to pansemiotics, NÃ¶th notes: â??In a pansemiotic perspective, communication is any form of semiosisâ?• (170).

The strong claim of semiotics is that it is a universal science, covering fields known to Peirce, the 19th century philosopher, such as mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, play, wine and the human condition.



Man is a sign

For Peirce, pansemiotics expands the claims of semiotics beyond how human beings interpret the world. It subsumes human kind as a subspecies of semiotic processes, rather than a controller, interpreter or generator of signs. Nã¶th describes Peirce's pansemiotic view of the universe (41) thus.

The point of departure of Peirce's theory of signs is the axiom that cognition, thought, and even man are semiotic in their essence. Like a sign, a thought refers to other thoughts and to objects of the world so that all which is reflected upon has [a] past (41).

His last quote is from Peirce's article *Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man*, page 24.

Nã¶th draws attention to Peirce's proposition that every thought is a sign, and life is a train of thought. For Nã¶th, This semiotic interpretation of man and cognition has a present, a past, and a future dimension (41).

Here are two more passages from Peirce. I've highlighted some of the radical phrases.

It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe, not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as the truth, that **all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed**

exclusively of signs?• (394).

Without fatiguing the reader by stretching this parallelism too far, it is sufficient to say that there is no element whatever of man's consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that **life is a train of thought**, proves that **man is a sign**; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that **man is an external sign**. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for **the man is the thought**?• (54).

Pansemiotics is here stated in anthropocentric terms, but it doesn't take much of a stretch to think that communication is going on whether we are part of it or not. Also see my chapter on geosemiotics in [Network Nature](#).

Here's a [Google Ngam](#) of the frequency of the term *pansemiotic* in books since the 1950s.



References

- N  th, Winfried. (1990). *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1992. The basis of pragmatism in the normative sciences. In Nathan Houser, and Christine Kloesel (eds.), *The Essential Peirce, Selected Philosophical Writings Volume 2 (1893-1913)*: 371-397. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
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Notes

- Image is of the defunct early warning system Duga-3 near Chernobyl in Ukraine.
- Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) provided a rival position to Peirce. Saussure identified the non semiotic world as "a vague, uncharted nebula." He said, "nothing is distinct before language". N  th describes Saussure's position as "transsemiotic agnosticism," "nothing can be said about the non semiotic world" (81). So, according to Saussure, we can't say anything about communication other than that exercised by and between human

beings and their cultural systems. Saussure's semiotics is entirely anthropocentric. These quotes from Saussure are from his 1983 *Course in General Linguistics*, translated by R. Harris. London, Duckworth (pp.111-112), originally published as *Cours de Linguistique G n rale*, Payot, Paris in 1916.

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