

Book Review

Eero Tarasti, *Sein und Schein: Explorations in existential semiotics*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015, Pp. 466, hardcover, € [D]99.95/US\$140.00/GBP74.99. ISBN: 9781614517511

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1 Introduction

It is quite possible that existential semiotics could be the theory of our contemporary world. There are two main reasons: The first is due to the theoretical quality of it. Tarasti combines intuition and logical analysis together, and makes the huge challenge become the charm of thinking. What's more, the existential theory, by launching such difficult and abstract concepts as transcendence, the Zemic model, new categories of signs etc, attempts to offer a promise in answering the essential and vital problems to human beings. It seems that the Zemic model is more productive than semiotic square from which it is stemming. In the Zemic model existential and dynamic aspects are added and it thus enriches the theory of existential semiotics making it more mature. Existential semiotics is not a static, completed theory, it moves and grows, under the spirit of exploration. In the light of transcendence, communication gets new explanation; also because of transcendence, subjects give up solipsism and blend together. The second reason concerns the concept reality. Existential Semiotics has both epistemological level and the level of application. However, there will still be more space for new explorations and their application to our Dasein.

2 Introducing and Review of Existential Semiotics

Since the year 2000, a new semiotic theory has been set in motion by the Finnish scholar and professor Eero Tarasti, an amazing and exciting event in the contemporary history of semiotics since no one has dared to create a new theory of semiotics after the classical semiotics. This new semiotics is called “existen-

tial semiotics”, also the title of Tarasti’s collection of essays on the subject published in English as a monograph by Indiana University Press in 2000. *Existential Semiotics* was followed by expanded and deepened versions in different languages, such as French, Italian, Bulgarian, and Chinese; translations into Turkish and Farsi are in process. In China, the publication of *Existential Semiotics* was thought to be the most important work in *Translation of Contemporary Semiotics* edited by Yiheng Zhao, Director of the Institute of Semiotics and Media at Sichuan University. The Chinese translators Wei Quanfeng and Yan Xiaofang are two pioneering scholars who apply Tarasti’s theory of Existential Semiotics to the study of literature and films.

What is Existential Semiotics? How is it produced? What is the value of its theory and application? What is the main content of it? What is the innovation of it? And, how does it relate to the philosophical tradition? Here I want to summarize some ideas around these issues according to Professor Tarasti’s related books.

What is Existential Semiotics? A brief yet complete definition is the following:

Existential Semiotics is a new approach, or ‘school’, within general semiotics and philosophy. It tries to renew the epistemic foundations of the theory of signs, inspired by rereading the classics of continental philosophy in the line of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Arendt, and Sartre and, on the other hand, the whole tradition of classical semiotics from Saussure to A. J. Greimas. Yet, the new issue it offers is the revalorization of subject and subjectivity. It launches new notions to the field, such as transcendence, Dasein, modalities, values, Moi/Soi, and so forth. It constitutes a kind of ontological semiotics starting from the modality of Being and shifting toward Doing and Appearing, as well. Many concepts of various disciplines from representation and genre to dialogue and nature of communication can be re-interpreted in its light. Albeit it also takes into account moral and axiological acts, it emphasizes the transcendental aspect of value as virtual entities and hence does not belong so much to any postmodern or post-structuralist thought; rather, it aims for what is called ‘neosemiotics’, philosophy, and methodology of signification conceived in the 2010s. (Tarasti 2012: 316–343.)

This definition is rich in content, from which we can see the whole European tradition of philosophy and concerns in our present time. Yet Existential Semiotics is the product of our new age and new concrete experience. As Professor Tarasti says that semiotics can serve as a theory of the contemporary world as the same way as Hegelianism did in its time, I would like to say that it is very possible that Existential Semiotics could be the theory of our contemporary world. Yet why is it possible? I think there are mainly two reasons, outlined below.

2.1 The Theoretical Quality of Existential Semiotics

The first is due to the theoretical quality of it. Let us take the key word of “transcendent” for example. In the new book, there is only one kind of transcendence yet in the year 2000 version, there are two kinds of transcendence: negation and affirmation (Tarasti 2000). It is a rather more abstract concept, and what surprises us is that Professor Tarasti tries to analyze it with a semiotic method. The former is like some virtual things, as it is defined “transcendent is anything which is absent but is present in our minds” (Tarasti 2015: 196); the other is somewhat pragmatic, and asks for rigid analysis. The two seem far away from each other, but Tarasti combines them, and makes the huge challenge surrender to the charm of his thinking, always lively and vivid, wise and profound, which compels the reader to keep on reading. What’s more, the existential theory, by launching such difficult and abstract concepts as transcendence, the Zemic model, new categories of signs, Schein, post-colonial analysis, the theory of resistance, and modalities, attempts to offer a promise to answer the essential and vital problems of imminent human beings. It comforts us to be assured that “often the most abstract theories prove to be the most practical and have the most pragmatic consequences when facing empirical reality” (Tarasti 2015: 97).

In addition to innovative concepts, such as transcendence and the Zemic model, the quality of Existential Semiotics also involves the renewal of traditional European theory. Professor Tarasti was a doctoral student of Algirdas J. Greimas, who was the founder of the Paris School of Semiotics. Professor Tarasti communicated with many classical semioticians such as Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Thomas Sebeok, Umberto Eco, and familiar with both the European tradition of semiotics and American semiotics. Tarasti borrowed more from Greimas, e.g. “modality”, the “semiotic square” and other inspirations. As well, he is indebted to continental philosophy, especially German philosophy, from Hegel and Kant to Heidegger. He appreciates German philosophy, especially German speculative philosophy, and asks, “Why is there no Great German Semiotics? The answer is simple: German semioticians rarely use their own roots in the history of philosophy from Hegel, Kant to Heidegger, but have subordinated themselves to Anglo-American empiricism” (Tarasti 2015: 326). And in Tarasti’s 2015 book, he provides a list of precursors who contributed to semiotics but were less well known than Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre and Saussure, Greimas and so on. We could see Josiah Royce, Victoria Lady Welby, Vladimir Soloviev, Wilhelm Sesemann, Roland Barthes (who seems to be the best-known among the names of the list), Ponzio, and José Luiz Martines.

One of the most important figures in the theory of Existential Semiotics is the “semiotic square of subject” (Wei Quanfeng, Yan Xiaofang 2012: 84–85). Yet it is changed into the Zemic model in the 2015 book. In fact, those elements or modalities are the same, yet a difference lies in the trace of the movement of subject, from “X” in “semiotic square of subject” to “Z” in the “Zemic model”. Both consist of four modes of Being, which have been arranged to form a square. According to Tarasti, the logical square was invented by ancient stoic philosophers. In the 1960s, the Paris school of semiotics took it up again and named it the semiotic square with terms *s1*, *s2*, *not-s2* and *not-s1* (Tarasti 2015: 196). This figure was used to articulate four modes of being stemming from Hegelian logic: from *an-sich sein* (being-in-oneself) to *für-sich sein* (being-for-oneself); in turn, this model was adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre in his existentialist philosophy (*L'Être et le néant*) (Tarasti 2015: 196). Then, borrowing from these sources, Tarasti added from the semiotic theory of the body (*soma/séma*) by Jacques Fontanille (2004), and from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, the categories of *Moi/Soi*. Accordingly there are four cases of *Moi/Soi*, M1, M2, S2 and S1. They correspond to the body, to identity (person), to social practices, and to social norms and values. Each one marks its own Greimassian modality and in the same order: will, can, know, and must. Thus the last modality, that of “believe”, has been reserved for transcendence, which can become present and actualized at any time via acts of negation and affirmation (Tarasti 2015: 196).

It seems that the Zemic model is a more productive one; it was less Greimas yet more of existentialism, because the trace of “believe” is the sign of the movement of the subject. Yet the sign of “X” in the semiotic square places much more stress on the “whole” in which the modalities of the four directions are parts of the “whole”. They are still structures, less of an existential style. So from existential aspects, the Zemic model is better than the semiotic square of the subject. From the latter to the former, the theory of Existential Semiotics becomes more mature. We can see that the theory is not a static, completed theory – it moves and grows, animated by the spirit of exploration.

Still, there is another important change in the 2015 book I need to point out as compared to the earlier one. In the new semiotics of 2015 he tries to dispense with the solipsism of subject:

It is not enough for a subject to hear with himself the voice of a transcendental subject, which guides him to the right aesthetic resolution or ethical choice, he must also manifest this voice to others in the world of communication; this involves encountering a subject who is alien -psychi entity ... Why does our subject want to communicate? Communication is always a crossing over the boundary ... The subject wants to show through communicating that his message goes beyond the boundary, that it is supported by the authority of transcendence. But he also wants by this communicative act to abandon his

own boundaries and taste in advance what the complete disappearance of such borderlines would mean, Communication on this level of transference, as shifts of values and modalities means just such a fusion with the other. (Tarasti 2015: 20)

In the light of transcendence, communication gains a new explanation; also because of transcendence, subjects relinquish solipsism to encounter a fusion with the other. It seems so easy yet actually wise.

2.2 The Quality of the Reality

So why it is possible that Existential Semiotics could be the theory of our contemporary world? The second reason I propose has to do with its concentration on the quality of reality. True, perhaps from the birth of semiotics, it has never lost its concerns with reality. It is said that the semiotics of Greimas are of both speculative and empirical intent. And so is Existential Semiotics.

At present, some semioticians worry about the possibility of a “semiocrisis”, which could pose a big challenge to semiotics. As Tarasti suggests, a semiocrisis is due to the changes of epistemes in a culture (Tarasti 2015: 142). What’s more, “In general semiocrisis means that the visible, observable signs of social life do not correspond to its immanent structures. Signs have lost their isotopies, their connections to their true meanings” (Tarasti 2015: 143). Accordingly, when the value isotopies of a culture begin to shift, they cause semiocrisis. “It is as if under the surface of the everyday reality there would loom a kind of sociokinetic energy field, which can combine things in unexpected manners. Just these changes in such a socio-energetic level are recognized as semiocrisis” (Tarasti 2015: 143). Semiocrises are excellent lessons of semiotics because we became conscious of signs in their disorder. Thus semiotics is tied very closely to the reality of society.

How to deal with a semiocrisis? Tarasti suggests thinking about “collective subject” and “individual subject”, which relates to Existential Semiotics and its philosophical basis of “being”. According to Tarasti, without a theory of subjectivity, we cannot get very far in our analysis of the *condition humaine* of a globalized world. And collective subject and individual subject are the two faces of such a theory (Tarasti 2015: 136). Of course the existential aspects fit well with individual issues; and Existential Semiotics has developed its concern about the individual subject.

There is yet time for Existential Semiotics to further explore applications: “It is true I have not yet expanded my theory very efficiently towards the social realm. But I shall show you later how a door is opened in that direction in some

new issues of semiotic identity” (Tarasti 2015: 137). However, for a long time semiotics has been looking for ways of answering the essential and vital questions of mankind, not only by being subordinated to the service of the capitalist consumer world and economic profit, but by pondering on a non-utilitarian basis the essence of such imminent problems of world cultures as Umwelt, a non-violent society, human responsibility, growth, education, and cultural identity. Existential theory – by proposing such thorny concepts as modalities, transcendence, the Zemic model, Schein, new categories of signs, the theory of resistance, and post-colonial – attempts to offer a promise in this direction. Semiotics has always involved much independent thinking, and is full of the spirit of the vanguard. And so is Existential Semiotics.

3 Free expression of Scholars and their subjectivity

Finally, I would like to say that here you can see many conclusions have been drawn from Tarasti’s own explanations because conceptual and philosophical theories are almost always nothing but absolutizations of the personal life experiences of the scholar. So it may be the scholar himself who knows better of his theory than any others. According to Tarasti, a theory is wrong or right depending on whether it represents the intuition of the scholar and whether he is able to express and communicate it to other members of the scientific community. I wholeheartedly agree that scholars should be allowed free expression, and their subjectivity should be fully respected.

As to existential semiotics, Tarasti pointed out when interviewed by me: “where shall I put my own theory of existential semiotics in modern semiotical main streams?” (There are three directions: (1) Peircen fundamentalists who think Peirce discovered the truth and we only need to follow him; (2) orthodox Greimassians who want his theory untouched like an antique epitaph engraved on a stone, also that is something perpetual; (3) market semiotics who adapt to economic needs and the ideology.) “I do not know which is the right place in the contemporary paradigm of semiotics, or whether I have a place there at all! My theory has grown organically through all my life, so it is what it is”, said Tarasti.

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