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# Against the Frame

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**Abstract.** The paper explores theoretical foundations of the frame from two semiotic perspectives: that of the Saussurean dyadic sign dominant in the European tradition and that of the triadic sign of the Peircean/American descent. If – within the post-Saussurean agenda – meaning can be fairly easily “framed” and closed in the field of the signified, Peirce’s concepts of interpretant and infinite semiosis implement a mechanism which inherently obliterates the frame. Given this duality of approaches, the contention “No meaning without a frame” is thus true and paradoxical at the same time, and that paradox goes far beyond the Derridean concept of the *parergon*, which only *belongs* to both the inside and the outside. The frame, as construed in this paper, is not merely a material or imaginary, inactive partition, but is itself an operational agent which isolates and delineates a text ontologically as the other of the context, and simultaneously subverts that otherness by necessitating further semiosis and its own partial self-erasure. Regarding the interrelations amongst texts and between text and context, the frame is thus envisaged, and investigated in the paper, not so much as a factor of resistance or separation, but as an osmotic boundary facilitating rather than preventing a bi-directional flow of meanings. Putting this in epistemological terms, one may say that interpretation – paradoxically again – requires an enframing of its object, but at the same time it dissolves the stipulated frame and reaches beyond it.

**Keywords:** frame; boundary; Peirce; infinite semiosis; nebular text

The assumption of the necessity of frame – whether explicitly postulated or tacitly assumed – seems to underlie much of semiotic research. Recently, it has been well summarised in a brief, but alluring phrase: “No meaning without a frame” – a rather powerful contention, which became a motto for the conference organized by the University of Tartu.<sup>1</sup> Out of this contention, the frame emerges as a fundamental concept,

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<sup>1</sup> Framing Nature: Signs, Stories, and the Ecologies of Meaning, University of Tartu, April 29 – May 3, 2014.

the one which is a *conditio sine qua non* for meaning to materialize. Yet the obviousness of the frame is far from being obvious, especially when we look at it from the perspective of the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. It seems expedient, then – and it will be the purpose of this article – to explore the concept of the frame itself and, more specifically, the ontological conditions of possibility of the frame within the context of two semiotic traditions: the one originated by Peirce, and the other by Ferdinand de Saussure.

The concept of frame will be construed in this paper in both the material and immaterial sense. The materiality of the frame belongs to the sphere of the signifier (or representamen, sign-vehicle in Peirce's theory): print, white edges, boundaries of the matter of an artefact such as a painting or a sculpture, the stage in the theatre, the screen in the cinema, the body of an organism. However, what is by far more important is the immaterial frame encompassing the semantics of the matter, the meanings that the signifier (or representamen) carries or produces. It is primarily in this latter sense that the concept of the frame will be considered in my argument.

### **Desire for totality**

Most generally speaking, what hides behind the idea of the frame is the need for a totality of an object under scrutiny or, to use a more contemporary term, the totality of the text – be it a literary, visual, biological or a sociological one. This desire for wholeness and completeness is by no means a new development; it has its roots in antiquity and is already present in Aristotle's depiction of tragedy and epic in *Poetics*, and is aptly formulated in his definition of the whole in *Physics*: “[w]hat has nothing outside it is complete and whole. For thus we define whole – that from which nothing is wanting, as a whole man or a whole box. What is true of each particular is true of the whole as such – the whole is that of which nothing is outside” (Aristotle 1930: 207a). Two thousand years later, a contemporary thinker assures us that “[t]he meaning of a text must be constructed or construed as a whole, acknowledging its character as a structured totality irreducible to sentences of which it is composed” (Thompson 1984: 180–181). The clause of completeness, in brief, of “having nothing outside”, has permeated the general Western way of thinking from ancient times through Descartes to structuralism and hermeneutics. Even if the text of a work of art is to signify infinity, as Juri Lotman (1977: 210) insists, it itself has to be finite and demarcated. What guarantees finitude and secures the retrieval of meaning is the frame circumscribing the text.

Grown out of a long-lasting ancestry, the need for a frame seems well justified. If we want to examine an object or text we first need to demarcate its boundaries; if we want to explore the relation and mutual influences of the object or text and its environment or context, respectively, we first need to isolate the former from the latter by a discernible frame. In either case, the emphasis is on separation and distinction.

The emphasis on clear-cut separation of texts became also one of the principal tenets of the European tradition in semiotics, methodologically rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of sign. For European semiotics, the Saussurean sign is a pivotal lens because it both focuses the enduring Occidental desire for wholeness and closure, and projects that desire, or – one could even say – the necessity of closure, onto subsequent semiotic developments. “The importance of the problem of frame”, writes one of the most revered exponents of semiotics, Boris Uspensky (1973: 137), “is evident. [...] We must emphasize the general semiotic importance of framing”. It is the structure of the Saussurean sign that provides the conditions of possibility – or perhaps better to say – necessity of the frame. Not only is the indivisible unity of *signifiant* and *signifié* a self-contained whole closed in itself, but also the ensuing concept of text construed as a complex sign – a unity of the plane of expression (*signifiant*) and the plane of content (*signifié*) to use Hjelmslev's terms – constitutes such a whole “of which nothing is outside”, a whole circumscribed by an imaginary frame.

Irrespective of particular variations, models of text based on the Saussurean sign – from after the linguistic turn until the deconstructive and poststructuralist onslaught – all aim at totality and closure. An explicitly hypothesized or implicit textual frame makes possible the recuperation of meaning (“No meaning without a frame”) and the investigation of the internal structure of a text: “the properties of structure and demarcation are interrelated,” writes Lotman (1977: 53). The frame becomes thus not only a factor identifying and isolating the text from its context, but also a foundational methodological principle:

The text – as an object – is a whole. [...] Every literary text is enclosed in a frame, whose function is, among other things, to tell us exactly that it is a text, to determine it as text. (Mayenowa 1974: 291; my translation, W. K.)

A text always possesses certain boundaries, which disjoin it from other texts. [...] Being opposed to other texts, a text acquires certain independence and autonomy of existence [...] in the communicative fund of the society. (Gindin 1981: 107–108)

*Demarcation.* It is inherent to the text. In this respect a text opposes, on the one hand, all materially embodied signs not entering into its composition, in accord with the principle of inclusion – exclusion. On the other hand, it *resists* [emphasis mine, W. K.] all structures not marked by a boundary. (Lotman 1977: 52)

As a methodological tenet, the frame thus provides a crucial element of the definition of the text and performs a “defensive” function of shielding the text from the outside, so that it can *resist* “all structures not marked by a boundary”.

## Beyond the frame

However, one has to acknowledge attempts to go beyond the constraints of the textual frame within semiotics of Saussurean descent. These attempts did not necessarily involve discussing the problem of the frame directly, but the semiotic mechanisms which they exposed and elaborated implicitly contained a possibility of meaning reaching beyond the boundary of one text. The first impulse to discover such mechanisms came from *The Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* – an excellent, but rather hermetic work by Louis Hjelmslev. Hjelmslev distinguishes between the *expression plane* (equivalent to de Saussure's *signifiant* in a sign) and the *content plane* (Saussure's *signifié*), within which he further differentiates between two strata: that of substance and that of form. Following a meticulous analysis of the relations of those four concepts in a section devoted to denotation and connotation, Hjelmslev (1963: 119) writes:

Thus it seems appropriate to view the connotators as content for which the denotative semiotics are expression, and to designate this content and this expression as a *semiotic*, namely a *connotative semiotic*. [...] A connotative semiotic is a semiotic that is not a language, and one whose expression plane is provided by the content plane and expression plane of a denotative semiotic. Thus it is a semiotic one plane of which (namely the expression plane) is a semiotic. What may be particularly surprising here is that we have discovered a semiotic whose expression plane is a semiotic.

The term 'semiotic' in the quoted passage (and throughout *Prolegomena*) refers to a semiotic system, and not to a discipline. By differentiating between denotative semiotic and connotative semiotic (and also metasemiotic, whose content plane is constituted by a semiotic), Hjelmslev envisions a multilayered process of semiosis which, consequently, leads to the crossing of the frame of one sign level. What is important is that Hjelmslev's analysis is not limited to the linguistic system, but may involve "semiotics" of other kinds. As Miriam Taverniers (2008: 270) rightly observes, while on the first level the expression-content relation refers to a linguistic sign, "on a more abstract level, content and expression refer to two general dimensions of *semiosis* (whether in language or in other semiotic systems). It is this more abstract vision which leads to the concept of a connotative semiotic [...] as a 'second order' semiotic". Even though Hjelmslev does not concern himself with the connotative semiotic and delegates its investigation to *semiology* (as different from his glossematics or linguistics in general), and only vaguely designates its scope as involving social, psychological, geographical, historical and similar aspects of sign usage, he definitely establishes – within the general framework of the Saussurean sign theory – a possibility of semiosis reaching beyond the boundaries of one sign system and, consequently, beyond the frame of a text constructed in that system.

That step beyond the closure of one sign/text takes on a more specific shape in the semiological writings of Roland Barthes. In *Elements of Semiology*, elaborating on Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena*, Barthes takes up his ideas and reworks them in a broader context of non-linguistic, cultural sign systems. Having affirmed that "[t]he plane of signifiers constitutes the *plane of expression* and that of the signifieds *the plane of content*" (Barthes 1968: 39) and having defined connotation as "the development of a system of second-order meanings" (Barthes 1968: 30), he rewrites Hjelmslev's proposition as a general (ERC) RC formula which he explains as follows:

It will be remembered that any system of signification comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes: ERC. Let us now suppose that such a system ERC becomes in its turn a mere element of a second system, which thus is more extensive than the first [...] *the first system (ERC) becomes the plane of expression, or signifier, of the second system [...]: (ERC) RC*. This is the case which Hjelmslev calls *connotative semiotics*; the first system is then a plane of *denotation* and the second system (wider than the first) the plane of *connotation*. We shall therefore say that *a connoted system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system*: the common cases of connotation will of course consist of complex systems of which language forms the first system (this is, for instance the case with literature). (Barthes 1968[1964]: 90–91)<sup>2</sup>

The movement beyond the frame of one signifying system – and thus also beyond textual frames governed by that system into another signifying system and another semiotic level of meaning – is for Barthes a movement into the realm of broadly understood ideology: "We might say that *ideology* is the *form* (in Hjelmslev's sense of the word) of the signifieds of connotation [...]" (Barthes 1968: 92). The substance of the signified (again in Hjelmslevian terms) will be supplied by a specific signifying (ideological) system.

The reference to ideology in *Elements* echoes Barthes's earlier celebrated paper "Myth today", in which the transgression beyond the frame of one semiotic system is translated – if I may use an anachronism – into the mechanism of *myth production* in the domain of ideology. Barthes analyses specific verbal and visual texts and uncovers the mechanism of the movement of signification beyond the frame of the sign/text: the sign of the first level (as a unity of signifier and signified) is appropriated or "stolen" by ideology as a signifier of some ideological concept (signified) and produces a new sense which he calls signification. In other words, the meaning of the sign/text of the first level becomes an empty form to which, again, a mythological

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<sup>2</sup> Like Hjelmslev, Barthes also distinguishes the metalinguistic, or metasemiotic, relation which, however, is less important here, and which he writes down as E R (ERC).

signified is attached.<sup>3</sup> What is significant is that the textual frame of the second level (second-order semiological system) does not constitute a final closure: the “robbery” which myth performs on language<sup>4</sup> (the first-order semiological system), or more specifically, on a text produced in the first-order system, can be further performed on myth itself: “Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth. Literature offers some great examples of such artificial mythologies” (Barthes 1973: 135). In Barthes’s cultural-ideological approach, the Saussurean frame encircling the text (as a relation of the signifier and the signified) is not so much fractured or diffused as used as a foundation for another level of signification, another signifier-signified relation of a higher order, possibly open for further multilevel semiosis.<sup>5</sup>

A mechanism similar to the Barthesian myth production, albeit of much greater complexity, seems to operate in the case of Tartu-Moscow renowned secondary modelling systems which arise “on the basis of language (primary system) and acquire supplementary secondary structure of a special type” (Redkollegiya 1965: 6). In *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures*<sup>6</sup> (Lotman *et al.* 1975[1973]: 76–77), the authors declare:

As a system of systems based in the final analysis on a natural language (this is implied in the term ‘secondary modelling systems’, which are contrasted with the ‘primary system’, that is to say the natural language), culture may be regarded as a hierarchy of semiotic systems correlated in pairs, the correlation between them being to a considerable extent realized through correlation with the system of the natural language. (6.1.3)

Secondary modelling systems became one of the seminal concepts of the Tartu-Moscow School and of semiotics of culture in general. Even though the concept underwent a noticeable evolution in the writings of the semioticians belonging to the group, its fundamental principles remained unchanged: first, while language constitutes the primary system, all other cultural systems are secondary modelling

<sup>3</sup> A useful and discerning comparison of Hjelmslev’s and Barthes’s views on connotation or second-order semiological systems can be found in Taverniers 2008: 372–375.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes uses ‘language’ in a broad sense inclusive not only of verbal, but also of visual texts (“any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual”; Barthes 1973: 111).

<sup>5</sup> This opening is visible in Barthes’s later paper, in which he takes on an explicitly poststructuralist stance: if we “strip the sign off” to look behind its form, “what this stripping off reveals is not a content, a *signifié*, but another form, another *signifiant*, or if one prefers a more neutral term, another level which is never the last. [...] Therefore we can no longer see a text as a binary structure of Content and Form; the text is not double but multiple; within it there are only forms, or more exactly, the text in its entirety is only a multiplicity of forms without a content” (Barthes 1971: 5–6).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed bibliography of “Theses” and its translations, see Salupere *et al.* 2013.

systems and are “built” upon the foundation of the primary system or are correlated with it,<sup>7</sup> and secondly, semiotic translatability between different, usually hierarchical levels of semiosis is possible. An indication of the necessity to go beyond one sign level is visible, for example, in Juri Lotman’s concepts of “paired” and “plural external recoding” and of “equivalence” (Lotman 1965; 1977: 35–39) as well as of the hierarchies of archisemes in *Lectures on Structural Poetics*:

The archisemes that arise here are specific to their given poetic structure. Subsequently the semantic structure is built on the level of archisemes which, themselves forming mutual oppositions, reveal the similarity and contrast of their content, forming archisemes of a second and higher rank. (Lotman 1964: 100–101; English translation quoted after Shukman 1977: 60)

There is no room and, in fact, no need to elaborate here on the richness of meticulous analyses and distinctions developed by the Tartu-Moscow scholars<sup>8</sup>; what is crucial for our discussion is the implied possibility of the movement beyond the boundary of one text, governed by the primary modelling system, into another text governed by a secondary system. It is important at this point to emphasize that the concept of language and, consequently, the concept of the ‘text’ have been extended by the Tartu-Moscow semioticians to encompass not only linguistic systems (resp. texts), but also nonverbal ones, i.e., all cultural texts generated by secondary systems:<sup>9</sup>

The concept of ‘language’ as proposed above will encompass: a) natural languages (for example, Russian, French, Estonian, Czech); b) artificial languages – the languages of science (the languages of scientific descriptions), the languages of conventional signals (road signs, for example), and so on; c) secondary languages (secondary modeling systems) – communication structures built as superstructures upon a natural linguistic plane (myth and religion, for example). *Art is a secondary modeling system.* (Lotman 1977: 9)

What is thus implicated (as one of the many complex relations, interactions and interdependencies between the primary and the secondary modelling systems) is that a text structured in the primary system reaches beyond the frame of its linguistic meaning to produce an overlaying, but still enframed, cultural text in the secondary system. There is a possibility of such multiple overlaying textual structures, but to be recognized as texts, they still have to be demarcated by a frame.

<sup>7</sup> Even though the Tartu-Moscow semioticians usually define the primary modelling system as natural language, it seems that the function of the primary system may also be performed by nonverbal, e.g., visual systems, or, respectively, by nonverbal, visual texts.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed and critical discussion of their contribution, see Portis-Winner 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Again, we find here an analogy to Roland Barthes’s approach in “Myth today”.



What perhaps most weakened the frame at the threshold between structuralism and poststructuralism was the idea of intertextuality, when, to quote a classic, “in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect” and the text becomes “a mosaic of quotations” (Kristeva 1980: 36), or, to quote another classic, “a tissue of past citations” (Barthes 1981: 39), “a plurality of other texts” (Barthes 1974: 10). The roots of the idea of intertextuality go back, of course, to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1983: 279) “dialogic orientation of discourse” construed as a general discursive principle. Within the framework of this all-encompassing discursive dialogicity, each “word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction” (Bakhtin 1983: 279). Each word, thus “tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word” (Bakhtin 1983: 293). In order to let into a text those traces of other texts, those “tastes” that words have acquired in other contexts, the frame had to be punctured; it could no longer fully resist the external pressure. Even though punctured, however, it still retained its delimiting function.

Within the context of the Saussurean semiotic tradition, the only successful and fruitful endeavour to reconceptualize the concept of boundary was accomplished by Juri Lotman in his later period, and especially in *Universe of the Mind*. It is significant perhaps that in *Universe of the Mind* Lotman (2000[1990]: 131) uses the notion of ‘boundary’ rather than ‘frame’ as a “mechanism of individuation”. In *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, ‘boundary’ and ‘frame’ are used interchangeably, with the dominance of the latter, and the stress is put on defensive demarcation and separation rather than neutral individuation: “[...] the problem of the frame – the boundary separating the artistic text from the non-text – is of fundamental importance. [...] What is on the outside does not enter into the structure of a given work” (Lotman 1977: 209). One reason perhaps is that ‘boundary’ seems to be a broader concept applicable equally well to various levels and realms of semiosphere as to individual texts: “The notion of the boundary separating the internal space of the semiosphere from the external is just a rough primary distinction. In fact, the entire space of the semiosphere is transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts [...]” (Lotman 2000[1990]: 138). The other reason, however, seems more subtle: ‘frame’ (and even more the verb ‘to frame’) implies total enclosure and almost entrapment, a complete separation and disconnection; boundary, on the other hand, allows for exchange:

The notion of the boundary is an ambivalent one: it both separates and unites. It is always the boundary of something and so belongs to both frontier cultures, to both contiguous semiospheres. [...] The boundary [...] is the place where what is ‘external’ is transformed into what is ‘internal,’ it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere’s internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics. (Lotman 2000: 136–137)

This concept of boundary quite radically departs from the structuralist emphasis on separation and closure, and from the defensive frame of *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. The very notion of semiosphere, as indicated by Daniele Monticelli<sup>10</sup>, makes “impossible a clear separation of an internal from an external space. Lotman describes it as a continuum of different semiotic systems, in which there is no clear separation [...]” (Monticelli 2009: 331); “In [...] Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere, the focus shifts from (structuralist) totalization, by which a given semiotic system is made into a separate whole with clear-cut boundaries, to an infinite and open totality, which ‘comprehends’ any system and makes it vulnerable to the effects of numerosness and plurality” (Monticelli 2012: 329).

On the one hand, the boundary as “a mechanism of individuation” is an effect of the operation of the “meta-language of self-description [which] functions as a universal translational device at the centre of the semiotic space and univocally determines its boundaries: on the inner side, what is translatable [into the dominant meta-language], and on the outer side, what cannot be translated” (Monticelli 2012: 332). The “metalanguage of self-description”, while being a device of identity construction and self-definition in opposition to the untranslatable otherness, is at the same time a mechanism of exclusion of that otherness into the realm of the external. On the other hand, however, the workings of this centre-focused mechanism is not only counter-balanced, but also overridden in the peripheries of the system by a specific kind of dialogicity which Lotman calls “the translation of the untranslatable”. What is untranslatable from the perspective of the dominant metalanguage, still remains in dialogue with the system and is eventually translated into its terms, albeit in an inadequate and indeterminate way.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, “the translation of the untranslatable” is responsible for the heterogeneity and plurality at the peripheries of the system. In effect, the boundary loses its linear, circumscribing power and becomes a topological border-space: “This means that a given semiotic space can never really close on itself so that in the semiotic reality the boundary, instead of separating and isolating, functions as an instrument of connection. The connecting boundary is not understandable as a one-dimensional line, it is rather a multi-dimensional space, an (at least) ‘bilingual belt’ [...]” (Monticelli 2009: 334). The boundary thus construed is the space of mutual interpenetration of the interior and the exterior.

<sup>10</sup> In the following argument I extensively refer to Monticelli’s resourceful analyses and re-interpretations of the concept of boundary from the Lotmanian perspective (Monticelli 2008, 2009, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Monticelli 2009: 335: “In the bilingual border-space translation always remains [...] inadequate and incomplete in two senses: 1) inexhaustibility: since the untranslated remainder never dries up, always new and unpredictable results emerge from translation (the crossing of the boundary), thus indefinitely deferring the fixation of a final result; and 2) irreversibility: if we translate back, that is if we cross the boundary in the other direction, we never get back to the original point, but always to a new one”.

What emerges then from Lotman's topological exploration of the semiotic space is a concept of textual boundary which, rather than only a means of separation, should also be seen as a peripheral sphere of connection and immersion into textuality: "The reality of the text (as semiosphere) [...] constitutes first of all the space of a dialogue between different systems (polyphony) and, secondly, it cannot be separated from the textual continuum in which it is always already immersed (textuality and intertextuality)" (Monticelli 2009: 331–332). Lotman's great and independent mind moves far beyond structuralist restrictions and beyond the axiom of a "defensive" frame. The boundary, as presented in *Universe*, falls rather into the poststructuralist paradigm<sup>12</sup> than the structuralist semiotics of Lotman's earlier phase; it no longer enframes and separates, but *connects* realms and texts. The boundary thus loses its separatory and, in a sense, negative, power, and – as a membrane or border-space – it facilitates the movement of semiosis between the outside and the inside or, in Lotman's terms, between the 'external' and the 'internal'.

Yet, given the historical derivation of Lotman's thought from within the Saussurean tradition of semiotics, this undermining of the demarcatory frame is accompanied by a certain paradox. Lotman's innovative concept of boundary does not emerge as a *necessary* consequence of the structure of the sign (and, eventually, text) as developed in the Saussurean strand; on the contrary, it is rather an effect of overcoming the restrictions of de Saussure's dyad, or more generally, of giving "theoretical primacy [to] the dialogical situation over 'instruments of semiosis'" (Monticelli 2012: 335). The Saussurean sign, closed on itself, as well as his notion of the equally closed system, are the guarantees of the separation of the outside from the inside; in order to let the outside inside, to open the boundary into a border space rather than a line of separation, those guarantees had to be (at least implicitly) contested. In this sense, paradoxically, rather than basing his notion of boundary on the originary semiotic foundations (dyadic sign, closed system), Lotman implicitly had to eradicate those foundations and erect his own. Incidentally, Jacques Derrida also had to deconstruct the Saussurean sign and combine its operation with Peirce's idea of infinite semiosis (Derrida's 'deferral') to arrive at his principal quasi-concepts: *différance*, dissemination, supplement etc. (I shall refer to Derrida's *parergon* later in this paper). From this perspective, Lotman's postulate of construing the boundary as both separating and connecting space is more of an ingenious design of a brilliant intellect than a semiotically warranted – i.e., rooted in the structure of the sign – *necessity* of semiosis reaching beyond the boundaries (or frames) of a text.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Monticelli's discussions of Lotman and Derrida (Monticelli 2012) and Lotman, Derrida and Lacan (Monticelli 2008).

<sup>13</sup> One of the reasons for this predicament is the foundational concept of binarism (rather than dialectical synthesis, for example) in de Saussure's tradition, still lingering in Lotman's

As we have seen, then, ingrained originally in de Saussure's sign, the idea of the frame continues to be a more or less explicitly foundational concept in the field of semiotics and its vicinities. Hjelmslev's, Barthes's and the Tartu-Moscow semioticians' resolution to move beyond the frame of the text are important contributions to the liberation of meaning from the closure of the Saussurean signifier-signified structure, and to the study of multilayered semiosis. In each of these attempts, however, the textual frame remains intact and the effect of recoding is always a new frame demarcating the sign-text on a higher level (connotation, myth, cultural text). Even the movement of meanings and connotations amongst texts effected by intertextuality, and also by Lotman's membrane-like or border-space boundary, only impaired the power of the frame, but did not destroy it; albeit perforated and osmotic the boundary is still retained. However, if we now change the perspective from within the Saussurean tradition, and adopt a Peircean one, the very idea of frame or boundary circumscribing the text becomes problematic.

### A Peircean perspective

Peirce does not directly concern himself with the issue of boundary or frame, yet that issue is implicitly embedded in the structure of the sign that he proposes, and in the way his triadic sign participates in the process of semiosis. The following argument, therefore, will be rather an exposition and expansion of the implications that the Peircean sign has for the concept of textual frame than Peirce's own claims. In order, however, to work out those implications we need to place the triadic sign within the context of at least some of the most fundamental tenets of Peirce's semeiotic and phaneroscopy.

To begin with, it might be useful to recall briefly the structure of the sign as Peirce envisions it. Unlike the Saussurean one, which embraces the relation of two elements (signifier-signified), Peirce's sign is a relation of three correlates: the representamen (sign vehicle, sometimes called the sign itself), the object (the internal element of the sign as abstracted from its external referent or [dynamical] object<sup>14</sup>) and the interpretant:

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work, even if that binarism is multiplied and pluralized: "*Binarism and asymmetry* are the laws binding of any real semiotic system. Binarism, however, must be understood as a principle which is realized in plurality [...]" (Lotman 2000[1990]: 124).

<sup>14</sup> Peirce distinguishes between two objects of sign: the dynamical object, which is the reality external to the sign, but represented in it in some respect, and the immediate object, internal to the sign as its second correlate, which is some aspect of external reality as actually represented in the sign: "The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I sometimes call the ground of representamen." (CP 2.228); "The sign is never the very object itself. It is a sign of its object only in some aspect." (MS 599);

Representation necessarily involves a genuine triad. For it involves [...] mediating between an object and an interpreting thought. (CP 1.480); We must distinguish between the First, Second, and Third Correlate of any triadic relation. (CP 2.235); A Sign, or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be able to determine a Third, called its Interpretant [...]. (CP 2.274)

It is the operation of the interpretant – the third, mediating element in the triad – which is central to the question of frame.

For Peirce, the sign is an indispensable vehicle of cognition – there is no immediate cognition or cognition without the mediating participation of signs: “The only thought [...] which can possibly be cognized is thought in signs. But thought which cannot be cognized does not exist. *All thought must therefore be in signs*” (CP 5.251). “We have no power of thinking without signs” (CP 5.265); “*Every thought is a sign*” (CP 1.538, emphasis mine, W. K.). At this point, however, we need to reformulate the generally shared concept of cognition itself, usually construed as a process occurring in an individual mind of a cognizing person. In terms of Peirce’s categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, cognition is a concept reaching far beyond the confines of actuality; in fact, actuality, i.e., actual cognition performed by an individual, is secondary to cognition understood in a broader, non-actual and non-mentalistic sense.

However paradoxical it might seem, cognition – or, more broadly, semiosis – does not require the participation of a cognizing human intelligence to occur. In one of his definitions, Peirce contends that Thirdness “is an informing thought, or cognition. But take away the *accidental* human element [emphasis mine], and in this genuine Thirdness we see the operation of the sign” (CP 1.537). The semiotic process – cognition – which takes place in an individual mind is, in fact, “accidental” to semiosis understood more generally as interpretive relations and processes that occur among signs themselves without the participation of the “human element”. The interpretability of the sign (its potentiality) is ontologically independent of an actual instance of interpretation: “each sign must have its peculiar interpretability before it gets an Interpreter” (Peirce 1977: 111; see full quotation below). That distinction between actual and potential or, better, *virtual* semiosis is reflected in the distinctions that Peirce makes within the idea of interpretant.

The interpretant may be an actualization of meaning in a particular mind of an interpreter, but primarily and more importantly, it is the potential meaning of the sign, not necessarily present in any particular mind: “A Sign is a Cognizable that [...] determines some actual or potential mind, the determination whereof I term

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“We have to distinguish the Immediate Object, which is the Object as the Sign itself represents it, and whose being is thus dependent upon the representation of it in the Sign, and the Dynamical Object, which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation” (CP 4.536).

the Interpretant created by the Sign [...]” (CP 8.177). On the one hand, then, the interpretant may be construed as a psychological or psychosomatic effect exerted by the sign upon the interpreter, on the other hand, however, and more significantly, it refers to Thought in the non-mentalistic sense “broadly defined as a sign-relating process” (Wykoff 1970: 59). In other words, the process of semiosis taking place in an actual mind is a reflection, or a partial realization, of the broader process of semiosis occurring amongst signs themselves, in the “potential mind” and without any participation of a particular user.

Since the sign “is a Cognizable” (CP 8.178) and is thus prior to the *cognized*, likewise the interpretant in the sign is prior to the interpretant in the mind of the interpreter.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Lady Welby, Peirce proposes one of his two best known trichotomies of interpretants:

My Immediate Interpretant is implied in the fact that each sign must have its peculiar interpretability before it gets an Interpreter. My Dynamic Interpretant is that which is experienced in each act of Interpretation and is different in each from that of any other; and the Final Interpretant is the one Interpretative result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered. The Immediate Interpretant is an abstraction, consisting in a Possibility. The Dynamic Interpretant is a single actual event. The Final Interpretant is that toward which the actual tends. (Peirce 1977: 111)

The distinction between immediate, dynamic and final interpretants does not, however, mean that they should be construed as three distinct meanings of the sign. As Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz (1981) rightly observes, they are rather three different “grades of interpretant”, or, perhaps better, three different aspects of the sign’s meaning. In terms of phaneroscopic categories, the immediate interpretant falls into the category of Firstness and encompasses pure possibility – the sign’s possible interpretability that may occur: “It is not necessary that the Interpretant should *actually* [emphasis mine] exist. A being *in futuro* will suffice” (CP 2.92). The dynamic interpretant represents Secondness; it is the actual effect of the sign produced in (the mind of) the interpreter. The final interpretant is Thirdness, pure Thought independent of any actual mind and any actual act of interpretation; it is the meaning of the sign as interpreted in other signs. However, *final* should not imply here any kind of finitude of semiosis; given the principle of fallibilism and the fact that the semiotic universe is not a static, petrified system, but a permanent dynamic permutation of interpretive relations among signs, the final interpretant refers to the meaning of the sign towards which actual interpretations (dynamic interpretants) will tend at a given moment or state of the semiotic universe; final, in the case of Thirdness, does not imply that semiosis will be brought to a stop.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the precedence of potential over actual semiosis, see Kalaga 1986.

To recapitulate: the process of semiosis progresses in two interrelated modes: as *actual semiosis* occurring in an individual mind and as *potential (virtual) semiosis* occurring among signs themselves. Further, the potentiality of sign operation reveals itself in two aspects: as pure possibility (interpretability) and as interpretation of a sign in other signs governed by interpretive rules of Thirdness (interpretive paradigms) construed as non-mentalistic Thought independent of any actual mind. Interpretation is understood here in an ontological sense as a mode of being of signs; signs exist not (only) because they are actually interpreted by someone, but primarily because they are interpreted in other signs.<sup>16</sup>

The distinction between actual and potential semiosis and the ontological rooting of the sign in interpretation in other signs are crucial for the understanding of the infiniteness of semiosis. While actual semiosis may be interrupted at any moment, potential semiosis is continuous by its very nature: “Continuity, as generality is inherent in potentiality, which is essentially general” (CP 6.204). Continuity and, in consequence, the infinite character of semiosis are thus inherent in the structure of the triadic sign, and especially in its interpretant.<sup>17</sup>

The interpretant is the meaning of the sign. However, since it is a basic precept of Peirce’s theory that meaning (or thought) can be conveyed only through signs – “No sign can function as such except so far as it is interpreted in another sign.” (CP 8.225) – the interpretant is not only the meaning of the sign, but also a sign in its own right. As a sign, the interpretant also has its own interpretant, which is a sign, and which has its interpretant, which, being a sign, has its interpretant, “the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on, *ad infinitum*” (CP. 2.303). The infiniteness of semiosis and, as a consequence, the transgressive nature of the sign is referred to by Peirce in numerous fragments of *Collected Papers*, e. g.: “The interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along, and as a representation, it has its interpretant again”. (CP 1.339); Representation is “the capability of the endless translation of sign into sign”. (CP 2.153); “The idea of representation involves infinity, since representation is not really such unless it be interpreted in another representation” (CP 8.266). Unlike the Sausurean sign, then, which is closed on the signified, Peirce’s triad is inherently open and – via the interpretant – transgresses its own structure into another sign.

<sup>16</sup> On interpretation as an ontological category, see Kalaga 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Relevant discussions of continuity in semiosis can be found in Buczyńska-Garewicz 1978 and Komendziński 1996.

## Nebulae

Given this inherently transgressive nature of the triadic sign, its structure – rather than a condition of possibility – becomes a condition of the impossibility of the frame as envisaged in the Saussurean vein. If we follow the general agreement on the semiotic nature of texts – of any kind of text, not only linguistic – then it is only a truism to say that the text is a complex sign consisting, of course, of numerous constituent signs. As such a complex sign, within the Peircean perspective, the text cannot be circumscribed by a boundary or frame, because it is exactly a fundamental property of the text-sign that – through its interpretant or interpretants of the constituent signs – it reaches beyond itself. In brief, infinite semiosis and the potential interpretability of the text-sign in further signs abolish the possibility of an external frame, *parergon* or edge.

The text reaches beyond itself also in another sense. Inextricably embedded in the semiotic universe, it remains in dynamic interrelations with interpretive paradigms operating within that universe. These interrelations are dynamic in a double sense: on the one hand, the interpretive paradigms undergo a permanent change effected by the appearance within the universe of new texts and new interpretive habits; on the other hand, reciprocally, the interpretive potentialities of the text alter because new interrelations on the axis text – (alternating) paradigm emerge. Unlike the Saussurean dyad, then, the triadic text-sign should be construed not as a static object, but as an unceasing process taking place in a permanent and infinite interaction with interpretive paradigms of the semiospace.

Yet, on the other hand, if pushed to an extreme, the idea of infinite semiosis carries with itself the danger of limitless dissemination of signs, the effect of which would be an undifferentiated field of textuality without identifiable individual texts. In other words, without some kind of delimiting factor, infinite semiosis would translate itself into total erasure of textual identity; the text would lose any possibility of limit or boundedness. This danger of the dissolution of the text in the semiotic cosmos, however, is prevented by the teleology inherent in the sign (and, consequently, text as sign), which accompanies the semiotic drift into infinity.<sup>18</sup> For Peirce, the sign is intrinsically teleological: “The whole *purpose* of the sign is that it shall be interpreted in another sign” (CP 8.191; emphasis mine, W. K.). Again, we face a certain paradox here: while the movement of semiosis is teleological – the movement towards interpretation in another sign – it is at the same time infinite: the *telos* itself is never a final one, because further interpretation continues to constitute another *telos*, “and so on, *ad infinitum*”. Yet, despite the lack of finality, the very movement of teleology and the constitution of each non-ultimate *telos* impose coherence and consistency upon

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<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of teleology in semiosis, see Kalaga 1995.



the sign/text: “Consistency belongs to every sign, so far as it is a sign; and therefore every sign, since it signifies that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency” (CP 5.313). The sign, therefore, not only signifies (carries meaning), but it also, and firstly, points to itself as sign, and it does so through maintaining the internal correlatedness of its elements and through its inherent teleology. By doing that, by signifying its own nature as sign, the sign establishes its inevitable internal coherence and its relative separateness and identity. In this way, teleology, intrinsic to the sign, balances and to a large extent neutralizes the disseminating power of infinite semiosis.

Construed as a sign from this perspective, the text is the site and effect of the engagement of two unceasingly operating contradictory forces: transgression (the drift towards the outside) and consistency (the intrinsic interconnectedness). It is the reconciliatory balance of these two forces that maintains the internal boundedness of the text and that makes a given text a self-contained and identifiable entity. The demarcating, external frame is thus not only impossible, but also unnecessary for the text to retain its identity. Rather than circumscribing the text externally and separating it from the outside, the “frame” emanates (or radiates) from inside the text and accounts for its coherence: consistency introduces an intensity of internally connected semiotic relations, where the “inside” is actually produced by the force of mutual attraction of those relations.

“No meaning without a frame” is thus true and contradictory at the same time. The metaphorical frame emerging as the effect of the internal consistency of a text-sign and emanating from its inside is not a material or imaginary inactive partition, but is itself an operational agent which delineates and marks out a text ontologically as the other of the context, and yet simultaneously subverts that otherness by necessitating further semiosis and its own partial self-erasure. Derrida’s (1987: 95) paradoxical proclamation: “*There is a frame, but the frame does not exist*”, although used by him in a different context, provides an apt image of the operation of the internal, “framing” consistency of the text as sign.

Yet the Derridean *aporia* should not mislead us into identifying his concept of *parergon* with that of the “internal” frame proposed in this paper. Derrida’s *parergon* does effectively obliterate the strict separation of the inside from the outside and deconstructs the closure of the Saussurean sign, but it still remains an external, albeit paradoxical, edge circumscribing the text; paradoxical, because – while remaining an edge, it allows the outside “to penetrate and determine the inside”. It is in exactly in order to effect the collapse of the outside and the inside that Derrida needs a boundary, an edge – “If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge” (Derrida 1979: 83). This edge is needed to demonstrate that the text “differs from itself”, that it escapes the bondage of totalization: “The structure thus described supposes that there are only contexts, that nothing exists outside the context, as I have often said, but also that the

limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of non-closure. The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside” (Derrida 1988: 153).

For two reasons, however, *parergon* – even though it wipes out the inside-outside division – seems inadequate as a metaphor for the text’s non-closure. First of all, the concept of edge, of a substantial frame, is applicable only to the materiality of the signifier, whose physicality and tangibility are a mere basis (Secondness) for the text’s semiotic existence (Thirdness). In contrast, the frame derived here from Peirce’s triadic sign, does not need the pretence of an imaginary or material circumference; it radiates from the internal relations of the text-sign. Such an oxymoronic, “nonexistent frame” does not separate the text from other texts or contexts, but inextricably connects it with them. The text is “enframed” from within, but at the same time it dissolves the stipulated frame and reaches beyond it. It is in this sense that – as implied in the title of this paper – we may argue *against* the frame construed as a cutting line of separation, and propose instead an oxymoronic, non-existent, fuzzy “frame” emanating from the inside. Secondly, as I have argued elsewhere (see Kalaga 1997: 142–143), the recourse to *parergon* generates another metaphor, which is, in fact, Derrida’s principal metaphor for the text: the metaphor of fabric, texture, textile, tissue, weaving: “the text in general as fabric of signs” (Derrida 1976: 14); “*texts* [...] cannot be outlined except in a fabric” (Derrida 1976: 65); “This interweaving, this textile, this *text*” (Derrida 1989: 26); “tissue of differences” (Derrida 1981: 33). Derived from the texture-text analogy, this image of text, however, reduces it to a flat and two-dimensional surface, and thus denies the text its *spatial* density, which is prerequisite for its interaction with the semiotic universe (*semiospace*).

If we were to use a spatial metaphor, the text – rather than as a location of meaning enclosed in a frame separating it from the outside, *resisting* the outside, or as two-dimensional Derridean texture or fabric – should be seen as a nebular structure whose contours disperse in the surrounding space of textuality, but whose identity is maintained by the force of consistency. As such a nebula, the text is fully identifiable, but it never has a clear-cut edge, only a fuzzy and nebulous contour which merges with the outside.<sup>19</sup> The frame thus envisaged, does not function as a factor of resistance or separation, but as an osmotic fringe facilitating rather than preventing a bi- or multi-directional flow of meanings. Consequently, the notion of semiotic universe can be reformulated as an infinite, self-perpetuating space – a metaphorical cosmos – encompassing nebular condensations of texts without definite contours, which fade away into other nebular condensations, separated by areas of “thinner” semioses. The text construed as such a nebular condensation is by no means a static structure; it is an active and dynamic aggregate of potentialities remaining in permanent motion because of its complex relations with an ever-changing semiotic universe.

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<sup>19</sup> For a more extended elaboration of the idea of the nebular text, see Kalaga 1997.

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## Против фрейма

В статье рассматриваются теоретические обоснования фрейма с двух семиотических точек зрения: исходя из диадического знака Соссюра и триадической модели знака Пирса. Если в соссюрианской традиции значение может быть с легкостью «помещено в рамки» и закрыто в поле означаемого, то пирсовские понятия интерпретанты и бесконечного семиозиса создают упраздняющий рамку механизм. Учитывая эти два подхода, утверждение «нет значения без фрейма» одновременно верно и парадоксально, и этот парадокс распространяется дальше дерридианского понятия *parergon*, который только *принадлежит* как внутреннему, так и внешнему. Фрейм, с точки зрения автора статьи, является не только материальным или воображаемым пассивным ограждением, но и активным агентом, который разграничивает и отделяет текст онтологически в качестве контекста «другого». В то же время рамка уничтожает эту инаковость, обуславливая необходимость дальнейшего семиозиса и частичного самостириания. Что касается взаимосвязей между текстами, а также текстом и контекстом, то рамка здесь представляется не как средство сопротивления и отделения, но как осмотическая граница, которая способствует, а не препятствует двустороннему течению значений. В эпистемологическом плане можно сказать, что интерпретация парадоксально нуждается в обрамлении своего объекта, но в то же время растворяет созданный фрейм и переходит его.

## Raami vastu

Kahest semiootilisest vaatenurgast lähtudes uuritakse artiklis raami teoreetilisi aluseid – lähtuvalt Saussure'i diaadilisest märgist, mis on valdav Euroopa traditsioonis, ning Peirce'i/Ameerika päritolu triaadilisest märgist. Kui saussure'ilikust vaatest tõukuvalt saab tähendust kergesti "raamistada" ning tähistatava välja sulgeda, siis Peirce'i interpretandi ja lõputu semioosi mõiste toovad kaasa mehhanismi, mis raami kaotab. Arvestades nende kahe lähenemisega, on väide "Ei ole tähendust ilma raamita" ühtlasi õige ja paradoksaalne, ning see paradoks ulatub kaugemale Derrida *parergoni* mõistest, mis ainult kuulub nii sisse kui välja. Raam, nii nagu seda tõlgendatakse käesolevas artiklis, pole vaid materiaalne või kujuteldav, passiivne vahesein, vaid on ise aktiivne agent, mis eraldab ja piiritleb teksti ontoloogiliselt kui konteksti 'teise'. Samal ajal hävitab raam teisesuse, tingides vajaduse edasise semioosi ning enda osalise tühistamise järele. Tekstide ning teksti ja konteksti vaheliste seoste valguses kujutatakse ja uuritakse artiklis raami mitte kui vastupanu ja eraldamise vahendit, vaid kui osmootilist piiri, mis pigem soodustab kui takistab kahesuunalist tähenduste voolu. Epistemoloogilises plaanis võib öelda, et taas kord vajab interpretatsioon paradoksaalselt oma objekti raamistamist, kuid lahustab samas enda seatud raami ning ulatub sellest üle.