

Discurso inaugural para el VI Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Estudios Semióticos (IASS)

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Association for Semiotic Studies)

My dear Fellow Semioticians,
Bienvenidos a Guadalajara! It is
a great honor and delight for me to
welcome you as participants in the
VIth World Congress of the
International Association for Semiotic
Studies (IASS). You have come from
all corners of our planet to meet here
in Guadalajara

- in order to discuss the present
state of the art in the theory of signs
and its applications and

- to deliberate what Semiotic can
contribute to our understanding of
Nature and Culture.

When in 1994 the General As-
sembly of the IASS in Berkeley voted
in favour of Having the VIth IASS Con-
gress in Mexico, many good reasons
were given for this decision :

(1) The first four IASS Congresses
had taken place in Europe and the fifth
in the United States of America, and
there had always been a large num-
ber of high-quality contributions from
Latin-America.

(2) In the last twenty years, Latin-
American countries have built up a
dense network of semiotic research
institutes and teaching institutions
with an impressive output of semiotic
publications and a rapidly increasing
number of students.

(3) From the beginning, coopera-
tion between Latin-American

semioticians and their colleagues in
other parts of the world, notably Eu-
rope and North America, has been
very close.

While in the seventies and eight-
ies this cooperation mostly had the
form of scholars from the Northern
Hemisphere being invited to give lec-
tures and courses in Latin-America
and many Latin-American students
going to study in Europe and North
America, the intellectual balance
gradually changed so that now more
and more Latin-American professors
are invited to teach in the Northern
Hemisphere and students from there
come here to complete their academic
training in Latin-America.

(4) In light of this, the fact that
the University Chair of the European
founder of Semiotics Ferdinand de
Saussure in Geneva was held by the
Argentinian Luis J. Prieto in the last
three decades has acquired symbolic
value. Many of us learned from Prieto
a way of understanding Saussure that
is both faithful to Saussure and up to
date with respect to modern develop-
ments in epistemology and in the set-
theoretical foundations of Structural-
Semiotics.

(5) When Post-Structuralism be-
came prominent and combined with
Post-Modernism in Architecture, Art,
Literature, and Music, the Latin-

American cultural experience became a model case for a new way of looking at Culture also in the North.

The Northerners were accustomed to using the historical sequence in which the new media had been introduced and in which new art styles had gained acceptance as a nearly axiomatic background for their practical application and their theoretical analysis. However, when you live in circumstances which lead to a modification of this very sequence :

- when you become acquainted with the big cinema only *after* having seen TV all your life,

- when you are shown silent movies *after* having become used to looking at tone films,

- when you discover the value of photography *after* having produced videos,

- when you experience the various ways of painting not before, but *after* having been introduced to photography,

- when you learn to operate computer games and CD roms *before* learning how to read books,

then you become perceptive to the timeless qualities of these media and feel free to use them in any combination. You develop a special sensitivity for the benefits and limitations of each art style, for the possible effects of their new combination, and for the aesthetic value of their mutual mirroring, even if it takes place in an ahistoric way.

Walking through the beautiful center of this thriving city of Guadalajara, each of you has an opportunity to see and hear how Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial lifestyles have become essential ingredients in the general Western Culture. It is this light-hearted breaking with conventional forms of art, this creative bricolage of heterogeneous resources -each well-founded in vital cultural traditions- which has made the Latin-American Cultures one of the major sources of intercul-

tural stimulation for the contemporary Western Culture.

(6) With the simultaneous presence of the remains of four millennia of High Culture, Mexico is an overwhelming subject for studies on human sign systems. And Guadalajara is very well located with respect to the Aztec Empire as well as to the Spanish Conquest, thus providing an ideal starting point for such studies. But even more impressive is the high level of semiotic scholarship to be found in Mexico.

To name just a few prominent examples :

- In 1947 the Center for Linguistic and Literary Studies (CELL) was established at the Colegio de México. Directed by Beatriz Garza Cuarón since 1978, it has not only helped translate classic semiotic works by authors such as Greimas, Roland Barthes, Todorov, Kristeva, and Derrida, but also published eminent treatises by its own members such as Garza Cuarón's *Connotation and Meaning*.

- In 1978 José Pascual Buxó created a Poetics Seminar at the National University of México UNAM. This provided the basis for organizing the *International Colloquium on Poetics and Semiology* and for publishing the journal *Acta Poética* (1979ff).

- At the same time a Semiotics Seminar was introduced at the University of Veracruz in Jalapa. This was due to the initiative of Renato Prado Oropeza, who also founded the journal *Semiosis* (1978ff).

- At the University of Puebla, Adrián Gimete-Welsh formed a Center for Language Studies in 1982, launched the book series "Colección Signo y Sociedad", and founded the journal *Morphé*

(1986ff), which is devoted to the analysis of language as a manifestation of ideology.

- The Semiotics of Culture has become the focus of interest at the Seminar on Semiology and Culture, which was formed at UNAM by Oscar Uribe Villegas in 1979. Among its publications is a book of *Readings in Semiology* with special emphasis on Semantics and the journal *Semiología* (1984ff), which was renamed *Semiótica* in 1986.

- In addition, there are genuine Mexican approaches to

- the Philosophy of Language with the journal *Dianoia*,

- Psychosemiotics,

- Semiotics of Mass Communication, and

- Semiotics of Architecture,

all at the National University of México UNAM.

- In 1985 the University of Puebla and the UNAM organized the *First Latin-American Congress on Semiotics Studies* and published its proceedings in the journal *Morphé*.

As President of the IASS, I am proud to be able to refer to this high level of expertise in Mexican semiotic research, to these great achievements in the teaching of Semiotics in México, and to the considerable activities in the organization of our interdisciplinary field through book series, journals, and congresses.

It was with this expertise that you, Prof. Adrián Gimete-Welsh, approached the organization of the present Congress.

With great respect and appreciation the IASS Bureau accepted the generous joint offer by

- the Colegio de México

• The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), and

• The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)

to finance this Congress, including the funding for its plenary speakers and various types of stipends for semioticians from all continents.

It was with high expectations that the IASS Bureau then prepared the scientific infrastructure of the Congress. A Congress Topic was formulated. It has succeeded in stimulating excellent semiotic contributions on Nature and Culture focussing on the revolutionary new results in the natural sciences and in the human sciences concerning the mutual relationship of Nature and Culture (in the singular). And it has spurred semiotic discussions on the world-wide political problems created by the fact that we live in a plurality of cultures which contrast and compete with one another and which exploit Nature to various degrees.

In order to ensure that the Program structure will allow for a full articulation of all these ideas, a Scientific Committee was appointed with distinguished scholars from four continents as members. Two Screening Committees were established, one in Europe and one in México, to evaluate the abstracts of the papers contributed to the Congress and in order to distribute them to the various sections of the Congress Program. These decisions were taken at preparatory Bureau meetings which also took place in Latin countries: one in Porto in September 1995, and the other in São Paulo in September 1996. All of these committees and events were coordinated in Vienna by our General Secretary Jeff Bernard and his Assistant Gloria Withalm. They were especially involved in adapting the various electronic information systems (fax, e-mail, and internet) to the needs of intercontinental communication.

As you can see, many sign processes have already taken place to make this VIth Congress of the IASS in Guadalajara a success and an unforgettable experience for all of you.

It is a pleasant duty for me to thank all persons involved in the Congress preparations, especially the distinguished authorities of

• the Colegio de México,
• The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, and

• The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
for the generous contribution of funds.

Our cordial thanks go to

• the member of the IASS Executive Committee and President of the Portuguese Semiotics Society Norma Tasca for organizing the 1995 preparatory IASS Bureau meeting in Porto and to

• the IASS Vice President and President of the Brazilian Semiotics Society Maria Lucia Santaella for the organization of the 1996 preparatory IASS Bureau meeting in São Paulo.

Special thanks are due to

• Pierre Pellegrino, the member of the IASS Executive Committee who acted as Head of the Scientific Committee for this Congress. He made several intercontinental trips, some of them without any financial help, in order to secure an interesting and transparent program structure.

Undoubtedly, each of you who is contributing a scientific paper has experienced the deep commitment to

our Congress shown by the members

• of the European Screening Committee chaired by Dina Goriée and
• of the Mexican Screening Committee chaired by Adrián Gimete-Welsh.

They deserve our gratefulness.

And so do Jeff Bernard and Gloria Withalm in the IASS General Secretariat, who were ready day and night to help where and whenever help seemed possible.

Last but not least, our cordial thanks should be addressed to the Mexican Organizing Committee as a whole, and especially to you, Prof. Gimete-Welsh, together with your working team including Marfía Rayo Sankey García and Juan Manuel López acting as Communication and Culture Coordinators, as well as Celia Jiménez, who performed most of the secretarial tasks. Despite the surprisingly small number of personnel and limited amount of resources, you have all performed an incredible amount of work in fulfilling the requirements and wishes of hundreds of participants from all five continents.

It will depend on you, dear Congress participants, whether the joint efforts of all these persons will prove successful in making this International Congress a lively and pathbreaking event for the future of Semiotics and for the improvement of our human condition. Please keep in mind that all preparations, whether adequate or inadequate in themselves, will only receive their justification through the way in which you take them up and make them function in your scientific encounters.