

Animals, Semiotics, and Actor-Network-Theory

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Semiotics as a discipline studies sign systems and meaning processes in various domains, and currently it has a surprising, and as yet mostly unrecognized counterpart in social theory. Unlike standard biology, biosemiotics and zoosemiotics treats animals as semiotic *subjects*, capable of interpretation and activity in ecosystems and culture–nature relations. As such, it may have found its close ally in the paradigm that is known as Actor Network Theory, or ANT. This theoretical framework was originally developed as a method in the sociology of science, but has in recent decades broadened its scope to many adjacent fields (social theory, technology studies, posthumanities, and new branches of philosophy, such as speculative realism). It is also the case that throughout its history, many applications of ANT have thought it necessary to concern themselves with living nature and non-human species; in fact, bringing the “non-humans” to bear is one of the distinctive features of ANT, its goal being to revise many old-fashioned oppositions between the human and the non-human. This dissatisfaction with old habitual distinctions is the pivot around which semiotics and ANT will meet.

In this session we propose to juxtapose semiotics, particularly bio/zoosemiotics and ANT on various different levels: the history and philosophy of the two disciplines; their methodological and conceptual grounds; their application on different fields, with the aim of demonstrating their mutual commensurability. As such, these encounters will stress the relevance of the interactions, networks, and sociality for semiotics, and the role of meaning processes for ANT; it will also inquire into the limits of the sphere of application of both disciplines. The greatest boon, and the greatest resemblance between ANT and semiotic approaches is their capacity to understand meaning as a gathering of ever closer webs of connections. We do believe that this particular distinction between the two – from emphasis on meaning to emphasis on connections – can lead to novel avenues of research.

More specifically, we expect contributions in line of the following topics:

- historical and theoretical connections between ANT and semiotics;
- applying ANT in multispecies environments;
- agency in sign systems, semiotic networks, and semiosphere;
- ANT and Umwelt theory;
- ANT and semiotics in species conservation and management;
- possible discrepancies between ANT and general semiotics;