Meeting the cultural other : semiotic approaches to intercultural communication

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MEETING THE CULTURAL OTHER: SEMIOTIC APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the present era of globalization and media control, ensuring cultural diversity requires the development of codes that are both understandable and acceptable to all members of the global community. This situation has placed a new emphasis on the ability to acknowledge and integrate cultural otherness and to handle intercultural communication. The famous scene in Robinson Crusoe in which Crusoe discovers a "Man's Footprint" on the beach of his lonely island can be seen as an all-too-common reaction to a confrontation with cultural otherness: instead of rejoicing at this sign of human presence after fifteen lonely years on the island, Crusoe is overcome by terrible fears and therefore barricades himself against all potential contact with this "other". Taking this as my starting point for a discussion of alterity construction from classical times to the present, I will consider four semiotic models of constructing otherness and intercultural communication, namely the "canonical" cultural semiotic model proposed by the Tartu school; Bakhtin's dialogic view of communication; the constructivist approach taken by Maturana and Varela, and the theory of interpretation offered by the semiotics of C.S. Peirce.

Key Words: otherness, cultural diversity, intercultural communication, modeling systems, dialogism, constructivism, semiotics.

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Fig. 1. Crusoe discovers "the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore" (Blewett 1995: 112)

One of the most famous meetings with the cultural other in the history of Western literature is when Robinson Crusoe discovers a footprint in the sand, "the Print of a Man's Naked Foot on the Shore" (Defoe 1994 [1719]: 115). It is often wrongly assumed that it is Friday's footprint, but Friday only appears years later. It is never made clear whose footprint it really is. The discovery of the footprint prepares the way for the much later appearances of the "Savages"; it also marks the beginning of Crusoe's terrible fear that "his" island, on which he has lived alone for fifteen years, will be invaded by "cultural otherness" in the form of "Cannibals" or "Savages" (fig.1).

This scene has also had a special significance for semiotics, the science of the signs and their functions. The definition of the sign is *aliquid (stat) pro aliquo,* meaning that something stands for something else; i.e., it represents something, just as the footprint represents the prior presence of a human. That is why Charles Sanders Peirce, the founder of modern semiotics, used this scene precisely to illustrate the functions of signs, thus making the famous footprint a stock feature for explaining the indexical sign. According to Peirce, a sign relates to its object either by similarity (icon), by spatio-temporal relations of cause and effect (index), or convention or habit (symbol). As Peirce (1906: 496) writes, "[t]hat footprint that Robinson Crusoe found in the sand ... was an Index that some creature was on the island". However, as Peirce points out, "at the same time, as a Symbol [the footprint] called up the idea of a man" in Crusoe's mind. As we have seen, Crusoe's first reaction is not one of joy after fifteen lonely years on an island, but instead one of fear, which sends him off in a panic, "mistaking every Bush and Tree, and fancying every Stump at a Distance to be a Man" (1994 [1719]: 112). Once he has come to his senses, however, he persuades himself that the footprint must originate from his own foot. In this case, it would be an exact imprint of his foot and would then function as an icon. But when he goes to the shore and actually measures his own foot against the footprint in the sand, he discovers that it is much larger than his own. It cannot be an imprint of his own foot but of someone else's, which returns Crusoe to his previous state of panic and us to Peirce's interpretation.

It is, however, not only the fact that the footprint is causally related to the person who made the imprint that has made this a textbook example of the function of indexicality, but also the fact that the example gives an indication of what goes on in Crusoe's mind. Suddenly, he realizes that he might not be alone on the island, and his fears, "these Things", as he says,

"fill'd my Head with new Imagination, and gave me Vapours again, to the highest Degree, so that I shook with cold, like one in an Ague: and I went Home again, fill'd with the Belief that some Man or Men had been on the Shore there, or, in short, that the Island was inhabited...", (1994: 115). The time between this incident and the "actual" arrival of the "Cannibals" is the period of greatest anxiety during which Crusoe's notion of self is threatened - a self, which he has painfully managed to recreate after his shipwreck - not by the presence of the "Cannibals" but by their absence, since he has, up till now, never seen any. As in other parts of culture, these "monsters" are imaginary constructs of cultural alterity; in this case, however, Defoe has Crusoe's fear of them be generated by a "real" sign of a prior human presence.

Defoe makes good use of a long and glorious tradition. The notion of alterity as something strange, different and often "cannibalistic" was common already in Greek historiography. As early as in 500 B.C., the Greek Ktesias made a thorough inventory of monsters. Descriptions of deformed and monstrous people and strange beings not only accompany past historical events but also populate particular spaces outside the Greek cultural sphere. What is remarkable is the boundary which is constructed between one's own, familiar space and that of the foreign culture. Besides language, culture and physical appearance, feeding habits often played a decisive part in the description of foreign people and gave them their names, as in the case of the Ichtyophagi (Fish-eaters), the Astomi (Apple-smellers), or the Anthropophagi (Man-eaters), who all lived on the periphery of the Greek world and in particular in India and Ethiopia. Later, in the writings of Pliny, it is the physical aspect that seems to be more important, since his descriptions of monstrous people concern the Monoculi (one-eyed), the Struthopodes (Sparrowfeet), the Sciapodes (Shadefeet) or the Panotii (Big-ears), all of which are said to populate the realms beyond the peripheries of the Roman Empire (cf. Münkler and Röcke 1998: 705-6).[1]

Although today, *these* kinds of alterity seem rather farfetched, does that mean that we have become more capable of meeting cultural otherness and of handling intercultural communication? In our times of globalization and media control, ensuring cultural diversity requires the development of codes that are both understandable and acceptable for all mem-

[1] As Münkler and Röcke (1998: 708) argue, the issue is not whether people believed that these "monsters" really existed but that, on the discourse level, there is no difference between "monsters" and "barbarians" or "savages", which likewise do not exist.

bers of the global community (although, at the time of writing, this idea seems rather utophian). How can we make sure that this cultural diversity is respected? This article explores four semiotic approaches to intercultural communication: Lotman's model of cultural semiotics, Bakhtin's dialogical model, the constructivist approach as proposed by Maturana and Varela, and finally, the theory of communication outlined by C. S. Peirce.

I. The "canonical" cultural semiotic model

Such descriptions of monsters as those offered by Ktesias and Pliny above, and, in particular, the constant interactions between different cultures constitute one of the areas of research for cultural semiotics. This branch of semiotics does not concern itself so much with the difference between nature and culture, but much more with the varieties and differences in a particular (ethnic) culture and what is not considered to belong to it.

Cultural semiotics also deals with culture in itself, i.e. with the mental and material models we construct in order to understand our own and other cultures. Each culture constructs its own model or models of itself, including a model of nature, since nature is always perceived from a perspective that is culturally determined. This is one of the areas that cultural semiotics investigates; it also studies how the same natural phenomena are interpreted in various cultures. In contrast, new areas of semiotic research such as zoo semiotics, biosemiotics or physicosemiotics take the perspective of general semiotics and investigate sign processes in nature as semiotic processes in themselves. These branches see culture as a part of nature and not the other way round, which, from an extensional perspective, makes culture a part of nature, whereas, from an intensional viewpoint, nature remains a part of culture (cf. Sonesson in press).

A classical model is the cultural semiotics proposed by Yuri Lotman, the founder of the Tartu school of cultural semiotics, for whom the concept of modeling system is a key notion. To Lotman (1977), modeling systems are structures of elements and combination rules, which function analogously to the entire sphere of knowledge and cognition. Lotman's primary modeling system is that of language, whereas art and culture are regarded as secondary modeling systems constructed after the model of language. However, by including myths, card games, money or rules of behavior, Lotman extends his cultural theory from only including language, art and literature in a narrow sense to encompassing a much broader field, which he calls the semiosphere. The semiosphere is the

semiotic space determining the process of semiosis, which is the action and interpretation of signs. It is the location of culture and language; according to Lotman (2001: 124), outside the semiosphere there is neither communication nor language. Using spatial metaphors such as center and periphery, inside and outside, Lotman describes the semiosphere as binary, asymmetrical and heterogenous. It is binary when the issue is the relationship between culture and non-culture, or the relationship between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. It is asymmetrical with regard to its center and its periphery: the center is the place where cultural texts are generated, whereas, on the periphery, chaos and disorder threaten culture. This is, however, what makes the periphery the place for creative innovation, too, since it is the tension between the center and the periphery that produces new meaning and a new culture, which will eventually transform the present center. This is a dynamic process, which generates a constant innovation of codes, whether it concerns social jargon, colloquial language or even fashion.

According to this model, which is often called "canonical", each culture considers itself a cultural order, which stands in opposition to an outside space synonymous with disorder and barbarism, or which is not even visible at all. Lotman (2001: 129) uses the example of Andreas Cappelanus, a well-educated and "civilized" poet who wrote a treatise on courtly love but did not hesitate to violate a village girl. According to his view of the world, she did not have to be taken into account, as she did not belong to his cultural semiotic domain and actions involving her did not have be accounted for.

However, although this model seems very ethnocentric and full of preconceived value judgments, it can also have a generalizing function, as we are all situated within the boundaries of our own culture and perceive that as our reality. The question is only how high we set the semiotic threshold, i.e., the dividing line between the semiotic and non-semiotic world, which, to some semioticians is still equivalent to the threshold between nature and culture (cf. Eco 1976; Greimas and Courtès 1986).

Yet, the boundary between nature and culture can also be instrumentalized the other way round. A culture might present itself as being outside the desired culture and describe itself as "underdeveloped", "natural" (in a negative sense) and "chaotic". Lotman (2001: 141) gives the example of the attempts to modernize Russia undertaken by Peter the Great and other Russian rulers, who were impressed with the Enlightenment and with European philosophies. The Slavophiles, in contrast, saw

Mother Russia as the culture *par excellence* and Europeans as the barbarians. Today, many Third-World countries regard their own culture as inferior to that of the West and thus present the latter as the ideal. This is the case with American culture, where young people in particular construct an image of American life as a desirable life-style.

Within this model, the most important aspect is the way in which people and things are defined and categorized. The focus lies on language and discourse more than general sign interpretation of "reality". This becomes apparent when we look at how cultures and people are described as being "barbarian", "savage" or "monstrous". As Marina Münkler and Werner Röcke (1998: 708) point out, these terms denote more or less the same thing, since neither "barbarians", "savages" nor "monsters" exist in reality. The word "barbarian", in the sense of categorizing someone as being "primitive", "uncivilized", "coarse", "insensitive", "brutal" or "vicious", is in fact originally a synonym for the "other". Etymologically, its Greek root was non-normative: it categorized someone as "not-Greek", having a different language and other habits, a concept which was later redefined to make it mean someone with incorrect language. The "barbarians" were those who were unable to speak properly, which thus diminished their human semiotic potential. That this concerns what it means to be human, or one's own insecurity about one's own human semiotic potential, has been argued by John Block Friedman (1981: 2), who asserts that, until early modern times, people were very uncertain about "what constituted the human state". This was obviously a problem that also concerned Defoe (1994 [1719]: 133) as late as at the beginning of the eighteenth century, since he has Robinson Crusoe reflect over his desire to kill the "Cannibals" and wonder if he, after all, is a "Savage", too, and thus no better than the "Man-eaters"?

Meeting the cultural other starts with the problem of how to define alterity and, therefore, with hermeneutics. In his fascinating *The Conquest of America,* Tzvetan Todorov's (1999 [1982]) controversial but fascinating analysis of the accounts of the takeover of the New World by the Old, Todorov approaches the problem by choosing two extreme cases of meeting cultural otherness in history, namely the experiences by Columbus and Cortés upon their arrival in the New World.[2] Taking as his starting

[2] As Anthony Pagden (1999: ix) points out, Todorov has declared that his intention was "to write not a conventional work of history, but something more like a moral treatise, what he called - adopting a familiar eighteenth-century term - an 'exemplary history'".

point Rimbaud's famous line *Je est un autre,* Todorov investigates "the discovery self makes of the other" (ibid: 3) by comparing the different strategies pursued by the two explorers. Both face a difficult hermeneutic task, in particular Columbus who lands in a culture and country he is totally unprepared for, since he thinks at first that he has reached India. In contrast, Cortés knows what to expect - during the thirty years between Columbus "discovery" of the Americas in 1492 and Cortés' conquest of Mexico in 1523, knowledge of strange and foreign cultures and countries has spread.

Columbus, much in the same way as Andrea Cappelanus, only sees his reality. As Todorov (1999 [1982]: 15) points out, Columbus believes "not only in Christian dogma, but also in Cyclopes and mermaids, in Amazons and men with tails ... 'dog's heads'" and other monstrous people. He even writes about meeting three mermaids who "were not as beautiful as they were painted, for they had something masculine in their countenance" (Columbus, quoted in Todorov 1999: 15).[3] He is not sure whether the Indians are human or not. In his letters, they form part of the landscape; for instance, when he describes what he finds on an island, it is "land, plants, fruits and flowers, and also people" and his first reaction to them is that they are "naked" (Todorov 1999 [1982]: 44). Basing his judgment on his perception of the Indians, he first projects his own values on them; later, when he decides that they are inferior, he shifts to an ideology of enslavement and categorizes them as being "fit to be ruled" (ibid.: 46).

Defoe (1994 [1719]: 133)[4] has Robinson Crusoe think along much

This is what it makes it so similar to Defoe's eighteenth-century model exemplum *Robinson Crusoe*, which the author declared to be "a just History of Facts" (Defoe 1994 [1719]) and which was initially believed to be a "true" story (cf. Ljungberg in press). Defoe set out to make a point, just as Todorov does - and it is their respective literary representations of meeting cultural otherness that I have taken as the point of departure for my argument.

[3] In this respect, Todorov (1999 [1982]: 75) argues, Columbus' mental structures are more like those of Montezuma and the Aztecs who believe in a network of natural, social and supernatural relations. This links him to the "medieval conception of knowledge", since he also tries to see his discoveries as predicted by prophecy and thus heavenly ordained, as becomes clear in his *Book of Prophecies* (1501).

[4] I am well aware of the methodological difficulty of comparing texts about historical and fictional figures; however, I would like to compare it with the difficulty associated with the two troublesome categories of "fact" and "fiction". These categories become even more fluid in historical accounts of famous figures like Columbus (who does not seem very sure of the difference between the two, either) and Cortés, where sources differ greatly and were strongly influenced by myth, religion and cultural preconceptions. In particular, it should be borne in mind that these sources derive from a period when the separation between "facts" and what we now know to have been "fiction" was not always clear (cf. Ljungberg, in press). As Todorov (1999 [1982]: 54) also states, the account of Cortés' conquest is

the same lines. Crusoe is not quite sure that the tribes visiting "his" island are human; instead, he is afraid that these "Savages" and "Cannibals" will "contaminate" him to the point of losing his own humanity. Not even once he has been joined by Friday does he learn anything from him but instead teaches him his own language and culture; he is particularly proud when he has taught him to say "master", "yes" and "no". Defoe thus represents Crusoe's behavior according to the canonical model, which takes an egocentric cultural perspective: seeing his European world as his center, he looks at foreign cultures with aversion, without any desire for interaction. Instead, he tries to transform alterity into his own, English world.

II. Bakhtin's dialogic view of communication

Intercultural communication should supposedly take place in the encounter between a cultural self and a cultural other. If we follow the canonical Tartu model outlined above, the exchange of cultural information functions as a transfer of cultural messages from the center to the periphery. But is that how intercultural communication works? In the two accounts of Columbus and Robinson Crusoe, neither is represented as exchanging any messages; rather, whereas, in Todorov's description, Columbus projects but does not seem to interact, Defoe has Crusoe apply his cultural knowledge onto both the foreign island, where he interprets the natural changes, and onto Friday, teaching him but learning nothing from him. Instead, he expects Friday to obey himself and his culture.

In contrast, Todorov (1999 [1982]: 71) sees the key to Cortés' victory over Montezuma and his people in his insight into how the Aztec culture functions. Although the interaction between Cortés and the Aztecs seems rather one-sided, too, Cortés' hermeneutic abilities enable him to come to grips with this powerful civilization. He immediately provides himself with an interpreter, which enables him to understand and interpret the Aztec society in order to use it to his own advantage. It

"less a question of knowledge of the truth than of knowledge of versimilitude. That is, an event may not have occurred, despite the allegations of one of the chroniclers". This especially concerns accounts about the Indians and accounts given from their points of view since, because of "he absence of native writing, they are all subsequent to the conquest and therefore, influenced by the conquerors" which makes it difficult to decide whether the events are "history or legend (though it matters little which)" (ibid.:56), cf. fn2.

is, in particular, his figuring out how Aztec communication works that results in his subjugation of Montezuma. According to Todorov, the intricate codification and ritualization of all social behavior had made efficient interhuman communication impossible. Montezuma knew how to inform himself through an efficient spy system and how to deal with his local Mexican enemies, since this exchange of information followed already well-established paths. The Spaniards, however, represent a radically different otherness which defies Aztec categorization. That is why, to the Aztecs, the Spaniards can only be gods. That insight also helps Cortés understand the symbolic meaning of firearms, which plays an important role in the victory by a few hundred malnourished Spanish soldiers over hundreds of thousands of highly organized Aztecs in their own country; as Bernal Diaz, a chronicler who accompanied Cortés, writes: «if they had known, "how few, weak and exhausted we were at that time...."» (quoted in Todorov 1999 [1982]: 73). Instead, the Aztecs are taken by surprise, since they cannot figure out the rationale for the actions taken by the Spaniards, which, to them, are both unpredictable and incomprehensible.

It could thus be argued that the activity of translation is prototypical for explaining the process of how cultural otherness is construed. Winfried Nöth (Nöth 2001: 240) points to the self-referential character of this process: the other must be constructed within the self in a way that is reminiscent of how a translator «reconstructs a text from another language into his or her own language instead of merely "rendering" or "translating" it, in the etymological sense of "transferring" it from a foreign to a native tongue». The text and its meaning are thus reconstructed, not transmitted. A similar view has also been taken by Mondher Kilani (1994:20), who argues that cultural alterity is not transferred by a flow of information from the other to the self, but must instead be constructed within the very self which is addressed.

In accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory of textuality (Bahktin 1990), however, the self can only view itself from the perspective of the other. Otherness becomes the "ground of all existence and [...] dialogue the primal structure of any particular existence" (Clark and Holquist 1984: 65). Because it is only the other that can be seen entirely from the outside, it seems like a complete and perfect whole; our own bodies, however, can only be perceived piecemeal, since some part will always be out of our range of vision. Only through our minds can we fill this gap. Discovering the self thus remains an endless quest for something

that can never be completely understood, which makes it similar to a "stream of consciousness" that only stops with death. In this sense, the other has, in contrast to the self, the property of "outsideness, or transgredience" (Bakhtin 1990: 27 ff) and of a transgressor, since access to the "I" in the interior self is only permissible from the exterior perspective of the other, which thus becomes the originator of selfhood.

To Bakhtin (1986: 7), this "outsideness" is a "powerful factor in understanding". This also extends, I would argue, to the communicative process. For, as Bakhtin points out, "it is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more)". The encounter between the self and other and the interpretation of other cultures does not involve empathy or identification with another culture, but instead, it involves entering the other culture and then returning to a position outside it, an external vantage point: "A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sided-ness of these particular meanings, these cultures". Yet, this does not imply the transfer of meaning that Lotman suggests in his "canonical" model. To Bakhtin (1986: 7), such a "dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging and mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched".

Obviously, such a process also requires a readiness and openness towards otherness, which neither of our two historical nor our fictional explorer seems to possess. In the case of Columbus, although he can interpret the signs of nature for his own interests, there is never any dialogue with the natives (Todorov 1999 [1982]: 75). Only when, in Jamaica, the native population refuses to give him food (after feeding his crew for eight months), does he make use of his knowledge of the stars to get his will through. Knowing the date of an imminent moon eclipse, he threatens to steal the moon: "On the evening of February 29, 1504, he begins to carry out his threat, before the terrified eyes of the caciques .../His success is instantaneous" (ibid.: 19). As to Robinson Crusoe, Defoe has him actually initiate a dialogic process, but only with himself. Composing a diary in which he does not only report his activities on the island but also uses it as a means to construct the island as text, he succeeds in writing himself into existence. However, he does not really seem interested in the culture of the "Cannibals", nor in an exchange between cultures. Other-

ness, as it manifests itself in the footprint and the "Savages" is only represented as a threat, not a potential partner for communication

In these three narratives of meeting cultural otherness, the only one of our three explorers who is represented as making use of the dialogical model of communication is thus Cortés. However, his main objective is not the mutual cultural enrichment that Bakhtin has in mind. Rather, Cortés' orders are to conquer Mexico and put it under Spanish rule - objectives that he can only achieve by allowing his own behavior to be rewritten as a text of the other culture. Thus, Cortés' communicative strategy does not serve as a means for mutual exchange, but only to subjugate and conquer the other - a war that he wins since, as Todorov (1999 [1982]: 97) points out, the Spaniards "are incontestably superior to the Indians in the realm of interhuman communication" - which ultimately results in the destruction of the Aztec culture and thus could not be defined as being "intercultural".[5]

III. Self-referential communication

The most radical view of communication is the one taken by constructivism. From a constructivist viewpoint, there is no such thing as "transmitted information" in communication. In Maturana and Varela's (1998) biological theory of cognition, on the level of cell organization, a cell is at the same time an input and an output device, in which the inside decides what will be allowed to enter through the membrane separating it from the outside and what will go out. They consider this principle also valid for all biological organisms and human societies. In their view (1998: 196), communication is a process of interaction that takes place between autonomously operating systems that are only connected through structural coupling, which they define as "recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between two or more systems" (ibid: 75). Each of the communicative systems is what is known as autopoeitic, that is, closed and self-referential. The meaning of the other is never transmitted to the self: it is only evoked inside the self, in a self-referential process, which requires "a behavioral coordination in a realm of structural cou-

[5] It could of course be argued that Cortés' intention is not the only issue and that the conquest of Mexico will eventually result in the very rich and syncretistic Mexican culture; however, the fact that the Spanish influence will continue to be the by far more dominant one (language, rule, etc.) makes this event more a cultural take-over than an example of intercultural understanding.

pling". Communication is thus only possible when the sender and the receiver are "homomorphic, so that "each state of the emitter triggers a unique state in the receiver" (Maturana 1978: 54). Instead of congruence being the goal and purpose, it is the very condition for any communicative process to take place.

To Maturana and Varela (1998: 195), communicative behaviors are "those behaviors that occur in social coupling" and communication is "that behavioral coordination which we observe as a result of it". They attack the common metaphor of communication as information traveling in a tube, pointing out that people say what they say and hear what they hear "according to their own structural determination; saying does not ensure listening". In this sense, communicative activity always entails ambiguity: "The phenomenon of communication depends on not [sic] what is transmitted, but on what happens to the person who receives it" (Maturana and Varela 1998: 196).

As Winfried Nöth (2000: 242) argues, not only does Maturana and Varela's concept of closure contain elements of traditional communication theories, but also semiotics claims that "only those signals can be emitted by the sender and understood by the receiver which were previously internalized in the communicators' codes". As both Jakob von Uexküll's (1982 [1940]) biosemiotic functional circle and Norbert Wiener's (1961) cybernetic control system show, biological and cybernetic systems interact with their environment according to their inner needs, their "desired states". Radical constructivist ideas may thus not be as radical as constructivists think. Even the argument of self-referentiality in the communicative process is already inherent in C. S. Peirce's theory of communication as a process of unlimited semiosis. In a passage in his *Collected Papers*, Peirce argues that, even though communication takes place in a dialogic process, it does not necessarily result in the self's interpretation of the other's signs, although the sender in a communicative process believes that the receiver will be able to call up the same images or "reminiscences of sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, smells, or other sensations" as those that he has in his own mind. This also extends to assertions, since as Peirce points out,

> the assertion which the deliverer [sender] seeks to convey to the mind of the receiver relates to some object or objects which have forced themselves upon his attention... he will miss his mark altogether, unless he can succeed in forcing those very same objects upon the attention of the received. (CP 3. 436).

Communication, in Peirce's view, is thus the process of evoking an idea of an object within the mind of the other that is parallel to the one within the mind of the self. This is necessarily a precarious undertaking, since the very process of sign interpretation entails the production of new signs. Hence, as Peirce says,

> No communication of one person to another can be entirely definite, i.e., non-vague. We may reasonably hope that physiologists will some day find some means of comparing the qualities of one person's feelings with those of another, so that it would not be fair to insist upon their present incomparability as an inevitable source of misunderstanding. (CP 5.506).

IV. Consensuality and intercultural communication.

Yet, if the other is only a construction of the self and communication seems doomed to be forever vague and indefinite, how can we ever hope to achieve a "true" image of the cultural other? The problem of the representation of cultural alterity has been a frequent topic in literary studies during the last decade. Edward Said, one of the most influential critics of cultural paradigms, discusses in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993) the intermingled relationship between culture, politics and economy, which does not allow cultural otherness a voice. In particular, he draws attention to the profound influences caused by the extraordinary reach of Western imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; these continue to play a decisive part in today's postcolonial world through its literature that, in his view, cooperated with the imperialist undertaking. As he notes (1993: xii-xiii), "In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or state ... Culture in this sense is a source of identity". To prove his point, he attacks some masterpieces in the Western literary canon such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), and Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942). Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* comes under fire, too, as "the prototypical modern realist novel ... and certainly not accidentally it is about a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant non-European island" (1993: xii). In his view, even Defoe and his contemporaries already situate their work in a "carefully surveyed territorial greater Britain" which gives their works an "imperial perspective". These imperialist assumptions, according to Said, continue to influence Western culture. Said's (1993: 278) argument is that Eurocen-

tric imperialism is not about a moment in history but is instead a continuing self-reflexive discourse functioning like a constructivist system, in which, for instance, European theory and Western Marxism are "cultural coefficients of liberation that haven't in the main proved themselves to be reliable allies in the resistance to imperialism". Instead, as he suggests, "one may suspect that they are part of the same invidious 'universalism' that connected culture with imperialism for centuries".

Yet, although Said's investigation is a fascinating exploration of the intertextual network of politics, economics and culture, I find his choice of works somewhat strange. Not only is Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) a very particular and un-Austen like novel, but Said's recontextualization of Austen herself as being part of a budding colonial expansion does not take into account her status as an unmarried, middle-class, writing woman who lived as a dependent at the edge of her brother's estate and managed to bring forward a row of great novels. Only one of these ever mentions the topic of colonialism, and scantily at that. Said's treatment of Conrad is somewhat more nuanced – Conrad's scathing criticism of the Belgian colonial enterprise in Africa is put against his favorable views on Britain – yet he seems disappointed that Conrad's Eurocentrism could not come up with a theory of resistance to the empire. As to Camus' *L'Étranger*, a complex work in a politically complex situation – the French involvement in Algeria –, an exclusively political analysis of Camus misses the point, I think. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is, in Said's (1993: 70) view, a work "whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England", he later concedes, however, that Defoe's later novels are less "single-mindedly compelled by the exciting overseas prospects".

But how were these writers supposed to have written? Their narratives about cultural otherness are shaped by their time and environment and by the intertextual web that they were part of, so how could they have seen through the ideological basis of imperialist discourse? Both Conrad and Camus are aware of the problem of intercultural communication, and both discuss the disastrous results of colonialism; the existential focus in both novels, however, is on the human condition, not on colonialism. Despite his attempts to show the self-referential nature of imperialist discourse, Said does not take a constructivist approach. Although he criticizes his authors for being part in a large intertextual network in which various interests self-reflexively mingle, he never seems to reflect that his

criticism, too, although often justified, might still belong to our contemporary postcolonial and ideological framework.

A similar criticism of Said that also been proposed by Winfried Nöth (2001: 245). Analyzing the Eurocentric, colonialist and auto-reflexive accusations Said puts forward in his famous *Orientalism* (1979), Nöth points out that Said's claims that self-referentiality in writings on the Orient function as an indicator of the writers' ideologies and of their limited knowledge of the Orient seem, instead, to derive from Said's own political bias He designates Said's position as realist, since Said claims that there is a "real" Orient that can be reached once the ideological basis of this self-referential discourse is revealed. Against this "realist" view of the cultural other, Nöth posits the constructivist model by which any discourse is self-referential and embroiled in an intertextual network. Neither presents a satisfactory theory of intercultural communication:

> Whereas the realist one does not tell how the "reality" of the cultural other can be determined and does not admit that this reality also constitutes a network of intertextualities, the constructivist does not tell us how it is possible not to resign ourselves to complete relativism in the face of such bewildering networks of intertextual relationships (Nöth 2001: 247).

As an alternative, Nöth proposes C.S. Peirce's theory of interpretation, which, as he says, "provides a theoretical framework for an approach to the cultural other which accounts for its intercultural nature without resulting in a relativist position". As was mentioned in our earlier discussion of the constructivist communication model, Peirce is well aware of the self-referentiality inherent in the communicative process. According to his theory, communication is always a process of endless sign production. In his writings, Peirce's idea of semiosis already defines concepts that communication theory later would embrace. The common ground of communication and semiosis is the principle dialogicity of signs and of unlimited semiosis, which characterizes both processes. With Peirce, dialogicity does not start only in the act of communication between adresser and addressee, but already in the process of thinking and cognition. This is what differentiates Peirce's concept of dialogicity from that of Bakhtin's, which, too, is an unlimited process; however, Bakhtin's kind of dialogicity is more static and closed off. Whereas Bakhtin persists that it is still possible to get access to the self from the exterior perspective of the other, Peirce argues that we can never have any access to the self, just as

we can never really know the other. We can only approach them through signs, which makes the self, at the same time, an other.

So what options are we left with to get to know the cultural other and other cultures? If the other is only a construction of the self, how can we ever hope to achieve an apt idea of cultural alterity? According to Peirce, communication can only take place when there is common ground and mutual understanding. In addition, there must be a common code or a sign system, but also a mutual knowledge of the world which functions as a "collateral experience" (CP 8.179). Although this understanding will always be different between sender and recipient, there is, after all, a mutual basic mindset. I would argue that, by introducing the concept of the final interpretant, Peirce's concept of the "consensual domain" has certain similarities with the constructivist definition of communication as "the coordinated behaviors mutually triggered among the members of a social unity" (Varela and Maturana 1998: 193). It is within this "consensual domain" that dialogue has the greatest potential to function, and within which intercultural coomunication could be achieved. With the final interpretant, however, Peirce leaves the door open for consensus as a constantly changing web of interpretative semiosis. The way he formulates it, as "that would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion would be reached" (CP 8.184; cf. Nöth 2001: 247), indicates that he is aware of the conditional character pertaining to the concept of consensus. As Peirce well knows, the process of consensus and understanding is unlimited and potentially endless, since new ideas and understanding must and will always be included.

To conclude, our image of the cultural other is always a construction of our own self. As we have seen, the framework of this construction is tied into an infinite and intricate tangle of different cultures' intertextual relationships. Only through dialogic discourse with the cultural other and through the other's discourse about her or his own self can we ever hope to approach an approximation of the other's idea of reality and thus achieve an interpretative consensus as a means to functioning intercultural communication.

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