

SEMIOTICS IN THE WILD

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF KALEVI KULL ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY



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Essays in Honour of Kalevi Kull on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday

Edited by Timo Maran, Kati Lindström, Riin Magnus and Morten Tønnessen

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KALEVI KULL AND THE REWILDING OF BIOSEMIOTICS. INTRODUCTION

*Kati Lindström, Riin Magnus, Timo Maran
and Morten Tønnessen*

This collection is dedicated to Kalevi Kull's 60th anniversary celebrated on August 12, 2012, and his eminent work in developing biosemiotics. It has been a long journey. In 1993 Kull started reading a regular lecture course on biosemiotics at the University of Tartu, and in the same year he initiated the Jakob von Uexküll Centre in Tartu, with the task of archiving and studying Uexküll's legacy. His contacts with theoretical biologists and semioticians both in Russia and the West – encounters which may be seen as constituting the soil for biosemiotic thought – date back at least two decades earlier (cf. Kull et al. 2011). In order to understand Kalevi Kull's role in biosemiotics, it is pertinent to recall that he has been in biosemiotics right from its start, or actually even before its beginning – that he has been creating contacts, tying threads and shaping biosemiotics in his subtle and almost invisible way through each and every stage of the discipline's history.

An example of such organising activity is his promotion of the connection between Juri Lotman and theoretical biology (Lotman 1988; Kull, Lotman 1995; Kull 1999b), an activity that has eventually influenced the identity of everybody connected to the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. In such a context it could be tempting to start contemplating on Tartu's tradition in

biosemiotics alongside the Copenhagen interpretation, Prague's biohermeneutic school, Marcello Barbieri's code biology and other contemporary interpretations in biosemiotics. Thus we could conceive of Tartu's tradition in biosemiotics as being historically informed, drawing on the legacies of both Uexküll and Lotman and seeing biosemiotics in relation with cultural semiotics. Kalevi has, however, been careful not to push the ideas of local schools too far, he has valued cooperation and academic discussion over confrontation of views. He is indeed a man of mystery, combining playfulness, strategic thinking and deep ethical principles in ways not always comprehensible for the bystander.

Public acknowledgement of Kalevi Kull's role in the history of biosemiotics appears to be modest. This is no doubt partly because he himself has been a major chronicler of the field. Nevertheless, Marcello Barbieri mentions Kalevi Kull's and Jesper Hoffmeyer's joint effort in turning "biosemiotics into a fully interdisciplinary enterprise that started attracting the attention of an increasing number of scientists" (Barbieri 2009: 226). Donald Favareau, in his *An evolutionary history of biosemiotics*, highlights the meeting of Kalevi Kull, Jesper Hoffmeyer and Thure von Uexküll in Glottertal, Germany in 1992 as the initiating event of contemporary biosemiotics and describes Kalevi as a "de facto historian both of biosemiotics in the Sebeok-Hoffmeyer tradition and of the tradition of Eastern European theoretical biology in general" (Favareau 2010a: 50). Favareau further compliments Kull's organisational activities and notes that because of his background in "biological fieldwork, experimental biology, ecology, ethology, theoretical biology and biosemiotics, Kull is uniquely positioned to situate the contemporary research agenda of biosemiotics within the larger history of theoretical biology" (Favareau 2010b: 420).

Kalevi Kull's role in developing biosemiotics becomes apparent in his efforts in overseeing thematic collections in biosemiotics, such as the special issue of the journal *Semiotica* on Jakob von Uexküll (Kull 2001), a volume dedicated to Thomas A. Sebeok (Cobley et al. 2011), two volumes dedicated to Jesper Hoffmeyer (Emmeche et al. 2002; Favareau et al. 2012), and the anthology

Towards a Semiotic Biology (Emmeche, Kull 2011). Among many other things, he has also been a general editor of the journal *Sign Systems Studies* and of the book series *Semiotics, Communication and Cognition* published by De Gruyter Mouton, as well as the initiator of several collective texts and theses in biosemiotics (Kull et al. 2008, 2009).

Today we again witness the importance of the common understanding of exploration, as in 2012 the biosemiotic movement has at least partly become caught up in the rivalry of different views and in altercations over terminology and the history of the field. Such internal struggles that threaten to replace normal development and outward-directed activities tend to characterise mature disciplines, these fading stars in the heaven of Academia. As Kalevi Kull's former and present students, we simply refuse to believe that biosemiotics is already finished. That is a key reason why the present collection was compiled in the specific way that it was, with the hope of contributing to push biosemiotics into new terrains, to encourage people to be more playful and speculative (as in 'conceptive', 'experimental'), to give the lust for life back to biosemiotics. These features are essential properties of its very research object, and should remain features of our young, vulnerable and far from decrepit discipline.

We asked several renowned biosemioticians, Kalevi Kull's friends and students to share some of their original ideas. Most scholars produce sketches, theses or fragments of academic papers that remain unpublished, because of lack of time to develop the argument fully or perhaps because the thoughts seem too unorthodox at the given moment. Such sketches, we thought, are a valuable material, as they hold the Peircean firstness, the yet unrevealed potential of the discipline. We believe that in concert (or in consortium, as it were), these papers manifest a true celebration of creativity and vitality, and show possible further developments in biosemiotics.

Given the nature of this material that we hereby publish, it is rather difficult to point out common topics and dimensions among different texts. A common thread running through many of them

is an understanding of the connectedness or dialogic nature of academic theories as well as people's lives. Some authors appear to engage in dialogue with Kalevi Kull's own views – their contributions should probably be interpreted in the context of Kull's respective publications. Several contributions seem to question the borders of biosemiotics by pointing to or demonstrating the connectedness of the biosemiotic subject matter in question with regard to the human cultural sphere, or by proposing novel theoretical perspectives. We also observe joint attention focused on the identity of biosemiotics and its ethical (or more-than-scientific) implications.

In addition to original contributions of a thematic nature, this Festschrift presents Kalevi Kull's bibliography. Previously a bibliography of Kull's biosemiotic writings has been published in a student journal (Magnus, Tønnessen 2010). As detailed there, Kull has published on biosemiotics in English from 1992 onwards, and in Estonian from 1982 onwards (most of the latter, counting 74 articles as of the summer of 2010, are of a popular scientific character). Some of Kalevi Kull's biosemiotic writings have further been translated into Bulgarian, Danish, Italian and Portuguese, and appeared in Russian. Furthermore, a bibliography of Kull's popular writings in Estonian has been published, detailing over 200 entries on various topics from 1968 to 2002 (Kull 2002: 33–42).

The bibliography of the current volume lists Kalevi Kull's scientific publications published in English. Although this volume is dedicated to a rewilding of biosemiotics, it should be noted that Kull has published on a number of other topics of biology as well. In fact, his most cited publication, quoted more than 200 times (based on Google Scholar, 05.05.2012), is an article called *High species richness in an Estonian wooded meadow* (Kull, Zobel 1991). His other most cited publications include *Leaf weight per area and leaf size of 85 Estonian woody species in relation to shade tolerance and light availability* (Niinemets, Kull 1994), one further text on wooded meadows (Kukk, Kull 1997 – an English summary of an Estonian monograph) and one more article with the keyword “leaf” in the title (Niinemets, Kull 2003). Kull's most influential biosemiotic publications are *On semiosis, Umwelt, and semiosphere* (Kull

1998a), *Biosemiotics in the twentieth century: A view from biology* (Kull 1999a) and *Semiotic ecology: Different natures in the semiosphere* (Kull 1998b). Interestingly, these three most quoted biosemiotic articles were all published in 1998–1999, and they all appeared in semiotic journals (*Semiotica* in the two first cases, Tartu's own *Sign Systems Studies* in the latter).

Several topics that are central to his biological publications are equally relevant in light of the biosemiotic ones: diversity, plurality, the recognition concept of species, consortia, to name a few. Despite such a convergence of his research objects, Kalevi has insisted on the fundamental differences between the two research methodologies or even world views: the physical and the semiotic approach (Kull 2007). His knowledge and skills, which allow him to work with both of those tools, have given him credibility in natural sciences as well as in the humanities. At the same time, this amphibian academic existence has demanded more subtle argumentation and in-depth devotion to the matter at hand, with the aim of responding to sceptical fronts on both (or indeed all) sides.

Kalevi Kull has played a noticeable role as a teacher, supervisor and in general academic mentor for all of the four editors of the present volume. Though none of us have *become* Kalevis, we have certainly become somewhat Kalevian. As a teacher, Kalevi has remarkably deep knowledge in biosemiotics, theoretical biology, the history of continental biology and other fields where he has been active (as well as knowledge about and interest in a wide span of other fields – indeed, to call him a *modern polymath* is no exaggeration) – and he is more than willing to share this knowledge. He is a bibliophile by nature and a collector of all strange forms of knowledge (as for instance rules in biology – Kull 2008), with a special drive towards forgotten books and their authors. Attending the courses, lectures and academic talks given by him has been just one aspect of being his students. The deepest insights that he has shared with us might just as well stem from words of wisdom pronounced in informal talks and walks in nature. Indeed, he always finds time for a reflective chat with students, and never hesitates to take them out of the classroom, to living nature, in order to

introduce the variety of life forms and semiotic processes *in situ*. For a foreign student, Kalevi is frequently a man of few words, but despite his apologies for poor English the reason is not any lack of vocabulary or oratory skill. Rather, he is, in the moment, looking for the exact right words. In Kalevi's mind, words should not be wasted, they should not only be *said* but be *thought*. As a teacher, Kalevi is thinking – *in* the classroom, *with* the students.

Thank you, Kalevi, and Happy Birthday!

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