

23-24 June 2025

# IDEOLOGIES OF CONSERVATION AND TRANSFORMATION

**FBK**  
FONDAZIONE  
BRUNO KESSLER

CENTER FOR  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**PROGRAMME**



Direzione generale  
**Educazione, ricerca  
e istituti culturali**

The initiative was also made possible thanks to the contribution of the Directorate-General for Education, Research, and Cultural Institutes of the Ministry of Culture

The 2025 ISR-FBK Summer Symposium will bring together scholars from diverse fields to discuss the semiotic ideologies underlying processes of conservation and transformation.

At the core of the symposium is a critical engagement with the ways meaning is preserved, adapted, or radically reconfigured across different domains—religion, politics, digital communication, and cultural heritage.

Building on contemporary debates in religious studies, semiotics, linguistic anthropology, and philosophy, the event invites participants to explore how belief systems, traditions, and ethical frameworks mediate the shifting landscapes of meaning-making.

What ideological forces shape our understanding of continuity and rupture? How do religious traditions and their ethics provide foundational paradigms for structuring change? What are the semiotic infrastructures through which transformation occurs, and how do they constrain or enable novel forms of signification?

The symposium will examine these questions by focusing on three intersecting themes:

- Semiotic ideologies of conservation and change: The role of beliefs about semiosis in structuring the transmission and transformation of meaning.
- Religious traditions as semiotic reservoirs: The persistence of ethical and doctrinal frameworks as infrastructures for stability and innovation.
- Digital mediation and the transformation of meaning: The challenges posed by algorithmic environments, deepfakes, and digitalized identities to historical paradigms of representation.

Through interrogating these dynamics, the symposium will illuminate how meaning is never static but continuously reshaped by historical, technological, and ideological forces. It will offer a platform for dialogue between semioticians, anthropologists, philosophers, and religious studies scholars, fostering a transdisciplinary conversation on the ethics and politics of signification in a time of accelerated change.

## INTRODUCTORY SESSION

CHAIR Simona STANO, University of Turin

9.00 **Comparing Semiosis**

Webb KEANE, University of Michigan

Constantine NAKASSIS, University of Chicago

Massimo LEONE, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies

10.30 **Discussion**

11.00 Coffee break

## SESSION 1

CHAIR Jenny PONZO, University of Turin

11.30 **Semiotic Clashes. Psilocybe Cubensis between Sacralization and Medicalization**

Annalisa BUTTICCI, Georgetown University

12.00 ***Pouring New Wine into Old Skins:* Translation and Semiotic Ideologies of Religious Conversion in the Sulawesi Highlands of Indonesia**

Aurora DONZELLI, University of Bologna

12.30 **Bodily Semiotic Origins of Religious Ideology and Spiritual Ecstasy**

Jamin PELKEY, Toronto Metropolitan University

13.00 **Discussion**

13.30 Lunch

## SESSION 2

CHAIR Gabriele MARINO, University of Turin

15.30 **Stereotypes and Ideologies in Generative Artificial Intelligence**

Maria Giulia DONDERO, F.R.S.-FNRS

University of Liège

- 16.00 Superstitions, Rumors, AI: Oh My! Semiotic Fittedness for Today**  
Stéphanie WALSH MATTHEWS, Toronto  
Metropolitan University
- 16.30 Fundamentals of Meaning-Making: Semiotics in Theoretical Biology Today**  
Kalevi KULL, University of Tartu
- 17.00 The Representation of Disability. A Cognitive Semiotics' Point of View on Inclusion and Ideologies**  
Claudio PAOLUCCI, University of Bologna
- 17.30 Discussion
- 18.00 Coffee break

### SESSION 3

CHAIR Graziano LINGUA, University of Turin

- 18.30 Roundtable**  
Georgiana Diana APOSTICA, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies / University of Turin  
Lorenzo CORTESI, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies  
Valeria FABRETTI, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies  
Lucia GALVAGNI, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies  
Accursio GRAFFEO, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies / University of Turin / University of Zurich  
Tommaso ROPELATO, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies / University of Turin  
Rebecca SABATINI, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies / University of Turin  
Debora TONELLI, FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies

**19.30 Conclusions**

**20.00 Dinner**

#### SESSION 4

CHAIR Remo GRAMIGNA, University of Turin

**9.00 Peirce as a Philosopher of AI**

Frederik STJERNFELT, Aalborg University Copenhagen

**9:30 AI: A New Religion in Higher Education**

Nataša LACKOVIC, University of Lancaster

**10:00 Gender Ideologies and Algorithmic Bias:  
A (Bio)semiotic Perspective**

Ľudmila LACKOVÁ, Charles University of Prague

**10.30 Discussion**

11.00 Coffee break

#### SESSION 5

CHAIR Antonio SANTANGELO, University of Turin

**11.30 Conserving Interpretation: Technology and Ideology  
in the Reading Process**

Paul COBLEY, Middlesex University

**12.00 Landscape as Ideology : Prolegomena to a  
Comparative Semiotics of Landscape and Garden**

Sung Do KIM, Korea University

**12.30 Cognitive Semiotics is a Humanism**

Jordan ZLATEV, Lund University

**13.00 Discussion**



**Annalisa BUTTICCI**  
**Georgetown University**

**Semiotic Clashes. *Psilocybe Cubensis*  
between Sacralization and Medicalization**

This paper examines the semiotic ideologies that shape the contested meanings of *Psilocybe cubensis* (psilocybin mushrooms) across two divergent traditions: Mazatec healing ceremonies in Mexico and contemporary biomedical psychedelic research in the United States. In the Mazatec tradition, healing ceremonies (*veladas*) involving the ingestion of *niños santos* (“holy children”) function as dense ontological spaces, where language, ritual, sound, and bodily sensations generate spiritual and existential meaning and transformation. The *niños santos* are divine beings whose meanings, functions, and powers are embedded in the Mazatec semiotic reservoir encompassing ethics, ecology, spirituality, and socio-political life. These elements provide coherence, continuity, and healing within a relational world.

By contrast, the biomedical paradigm reframes psilocybin as a secular neurochemical intervention, abstracted from its spiritual and social ecology and situated within clinical models focused on pathology, neuroplasticity, and therapeutic efficacy. Like the *velada*, the lab is a ritualized space—but one governed by secular epistemologies. This shift entails a semiotic rupture: sacred speech becomes symptomatology, divine encounters are labeled “mystical-type experiences,” and spiritual discernment is reduced to data. For patients, the absence of spiritually grounded interpretive frameworks can render existential or moral insights difficult to integrate. What might be experienced as sacred revelations or ethical reckonings in indigenous contexts risks being pathologized.

By tracing these semiotic disjunctions, this paper contributes to broader debates on the conservation and transformation of meaning. It asks how different semiotic ideologies mediate the sacredness of psychoactive plants in an era of psychedelic medicalization. What gets preserved, translated, or erased when indigenous semiotic infrastructures are bypassed in favor of sec-

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ular technoscientific paradigms? And what new—but potentially fragile—forms of meaning emerge when therapeutic innovation unfolds without spiritual continuity?

The paper draws from my current research project and ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico and the US.



**Paul COBLEY**  
**Middlesex University**

**Conserving Interpretation: Technology  
and Ideology in the Reading Process**

Over a decade ago, and partly in the decade preceding that, Big Data analysis and computational methods fuelled the growth of digital humanities. One component of this was the project of 'distant reading' announced by Moretti (2000, 2013) as a recapitulation of Annales School method. Arguably, such computational methods have a longer history still (Igarashi 2015) where reading is concerned. Yet new methods in reading have customarily met with ideological resistance (as in the 'reading wars' – see Pearson 2004; Kim 2008; Castles et al 2018) even when no technology beyond the book is at issue. For some, distant reading – in contrast to its putative predecessor, close reading - entails a lack of attention and a loss of focus (Editors of SubStance 2009). Yet questions remain regarding whether distant reading is the obverse of close reading or whether it simply operates on a different scale. This paper will consider the criticism of distant reading within the the apparent dichotomy of quantitative vs. qualitative methods (Eve 2019), within the question of whether technology-assisted interpretation – especially using AI – is actually possible and with reference to recent findings in the neuroscience of reading (Trasmundi and Cobley 2021; Engberg et al 2023). In the process, the paper will outline the ideological character or the implications that appear to accrue to these approaches and the extent of the ideological contours that exist in the impulse to conserve existing methods of interpretation.



**Maria Giulia DONDERO**  
**F.R.S.-FNRS / University of Liège**  
**Stereotypes and Ideologies in Generative  
Artificial Intelligence**

The training datasets of GAI, such as Midjourney and DALL-E, consist of billions of text-image pairs that encode stereotypes related to gender, race, professions, and age. These biases are then reproduced by users, amplifying their presence in the digital landscape.

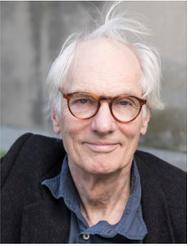
In the first part of my talk, I will analyze the correspondences between words and images in GAI, examining how these associations reflect underlying ideologies on various themes such as health and religion. In the second part, I will explore how these GAI influence image production and the theorization of images within visual semiotics and visual studies.

**Aurora DONZELLI**  
**University of Bologna**

***Pouring New Wine into Old Skins: Translation and Semiotic Ideologies of Religious Conversion in the Sulawesi Highlands of Indonesia***

This paper describes an early twentieth-century religious encounter between indigenous communities of the Toraja highlands (in Sulawesi, eastern Indonesia) and neo-orthodox Calvinist missionaries from the Netherlands. This encounter mobilized different conceptions and practices of translation, which, in turn, stemmed from and fueled specific models of missionization. At once a *metaphor for* and a *technology of* religious conversion, translation was a pivotal concern for the Dutch missionaries who were sent to Sulawesi with a dual task: translating the Bible into the Toraja ritual language (*kada kada to dolo*) and transducing “pagan practices” (*alukta*) into Christian rituals and beliefs. As Webb Keane (2007) has pointed out, ‘semiotic ideologies’ (i.e., people’s cultural assumptions about what signs are and how they function) play a key role within processes of religious conversion. Here, I apply Keane’s insights to the historical and ethnographic data I gathered during my long-term fieldwork in Toraja to analyze some of the practical predicaments and theoretical tensions underlying the evangelizing efforts undertaken by the Dutch missionaries who sought to Christianize the communities of non-Islamic ancestral ritualists dwelling in upland Sulawesi. More specifically, I identify two major sites of friction and ambiguity vis-à-vis evangelical ideals of conversion as radical transformation and renewal. In the first place, I analyze the interplay between the missionaries’ sociological method according to which conversion should resemble the “pouring [of] new wine into old skins” (a positive reversal of the Biblical proscription found in Mark 2:22, Matthew 9:17, and Luke 5:33) and their domesticating approach to translation, which, in line with missionary-linguist Nicolaus Adriani’s ([1932]1963) guidelines, prescribed that “the language into which the translation is being made, should be given priority [... so that] the translation should not constantly reveal the fact that it is a translation.” In the second place, I focus on the missionaries’ efforts at reconciling

the collisions between their vision of translation based on the primacy of denotational meaning and the Saussurean arbitrariness of the linguistic sign with (i) the indexical dimensions of utterances referring to entrenched “pagan” practices and (ii) divergent Toraja semiotic and linguistic ideologies, which emphasized the poetic function of ritual language and the formal properties of parallel couplets. By discussing a few instances of collision between the different semiotic ideologies underlying the translation of the Biblical word and Christian beliefs into the Toraja ancestral language and ritual practice, I highlight how the religious encounter under analysis entailed a complex mixture of cultural adaptation and semiotic calibration. In so doing, my goal is to show how the Calvinist project of radical moral transformation actually required a great deal of compromise and mutual mimesis.



**Webb KEANE**  
**University of Michigan**  
**Comparing Semiosis**

This session will bring together three leading scholars in a dialogical exploration of semiotic ideologies, focusing on their intersections and divergences across distinct intellectual traditions. Structured as an interactive dialogue between Keane and Leone instigated by Nakassis, the session will begin with a series of foundational questions posed by the latter, inviting each speaker to articulate their perspectives on the nature of semiotic ideologies and their relevance to the study of religion. This initial round will serve as a baseline, allowing the speakers to establish their conceptual approaches and theoretical foundations. In the second part of the session, the dialogue will evolve into an open exchange, with each speaker posing questions to the other, creating a dynamic and reflexive engagement. This format will not only illuminate contrasting views but also foster mutual insights, highlighting how semiotic ideologies are informed by diverse religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts. The discussion will pay special attention to the implicit theological dimensions of semiotic theories, tracing how the Protestant intellectual heritage (in figures like Locke, Saussure, and Peirce) contrasts with and complements European Catholic conceptions of the sign. By examining the ideological underpinnings of semiotic theories and their religious implications, this session will offer participants a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and transformed across cultural and intellectual landscapes.



**Sung Do KIM**  
**Korea University**

**Landscape as Ideology: Prolegomena  
 to a Comparative Semiotics of Landscape  
 and Garden**

The essence of East Asian gardens can be condensed into the natural philosophy, ecology, and poetics embedded in the spatial construction. The view of nature contained in East Asian spaces is a core principle found in the ideas, literature, and traditions of East Asian civilizations. Ecological thought in East Asia can be explained by the idea of the unity of heaven, people, and earth and the yin-yang and five elements. Before we can decipher the meaning of garden art, which can be said to be the pinnacle of East Asian art, we need to identify two principles that dominate the aesthetic perception of East Asians. First, compared to other civilisations, East Asians have sought beauty in nature and worshipped the beauty of nature. When examining the archaeology of landscapes and comparative cultural history, it is confirmed that the East Asian civilizations are the ones that have achieved the highest level of aesthetic and cultural achievement in landscapes.<sup>118</sup> Secondly, the aesthetic human in East Asia also attached importance to the perception of beauty through a form of perfection based on human agency. This tendency is particularly evident in Japanese garden art, which has shown an exceptional aesthetic sense in recognizing beauty in forms created by humans, compared to Korea and China. For example, the proportion and harmony of the paper partitions of windows and doors, and the wooden lattice covering the facade of traditional Japanese houses, are objects of aesthetic appreciation for the Japanese. Through this, Japanese culture embraced both the two semiotic dimensions of aesthetic perfection alongside functionality in the aesthetic perception of artefacts.

On the other hand, traditional Korean gardens are characterised by the fact that they were created with less artificial elements than those in China and Japan. In his garden, Yun Seon-do selected a place with a beautiful landscape and tried to make it as unnatural as possible. Bogildo Buyong-dong Garden aimed to make the

entire island into one open garden by creating a small garden that concentrated the essence of the landscape carved by water and rocks, while Geumsa-dong Garden in Haenam created a garden space along the entire route from the valley at the bottom to the top of the mountain. This is an immortal masterpiece that has created a garden out of the natural landscape itself while minimising artificiality, not only in East Asia but also in the world of gardeners. It is not possible to understand the two aesthetic modes of perception, which seek to identify the core of East Asian garden art, namely, 'beauty that is accidentally revealed in nature' and 'beauty of perfect form achieved by human design,' as dichotomous and exclusive. On the contrary, it can be said that the two aesthetic modes of perception occur simultaneously and that there is an aspect of them that is intended to overlap. The two principles and orders are complementary, reinforcing and elevating each other, embodying the principle of yin and yang.



**Kalevi KULL**  
**University of Tartu**

**Fundamentals of Meaning-Making:  
 Semiotics in Theoretical Biology Today**

Based on our recent work together with Donald Favareau on an edited volume “Towards a Biosemiotic Theoretical Biology: Sign Processes and Meaning-making in Living Systems” which we did for the Vienna Series on Theoretical Biology, published by MIT Press in collaboration with Konrad Lorenz Institute, I shall describe the contemporary situation in the relatedness to semiotic problems among professional biologists. Although we invited twice as many researchers to participate, limited space ultimately allowed only 23 to be published: Erik Peterson, Charles Wolfe, Raymond Noble and Denis Noble, Scott F. Gilbert, Alexei Sharov, Stuart Kauffman, Matt Kalkman and Terrence Deacon, Jana Švorcová and Karel Kleisner, Richard I. Vane-Wright, Arantza Etxeberria and David Cortés-García, Tom Froese, Georgii Karelin and Takashi Ikegami, Henrik Nielsen, Mariana Vitti Rodrigues and Claus Emmeche, Federico Vega, Daniel C. Mayer-Foulkes, and Anton Markoš. From a historical perspective, I examine Conrad Hal Waddington’s influence on the semiotic trend in biology..



**Ludmila LACKOVÁ**  
**Charles University**

**Gender Ideologies and Algorithmic Bias:  
A (Bio)semiotic Perspective**

In this paper, we present an empirical study conducted by a research team from the International Semiotics Institute, examining the pervasive gender bias in AI-generated texts. Drawing inspiration from the concept of fractals as semiotic resemblances, we hypothesize that AI-generated content mirrors the prevailing ideologies within various cultures. This is rooted in the notion of “isomorphism between semiotic ideologies, on the one hand, and the texts they produce, on the other” (Leone 2025, 41). Our empirical study encompasses a comparative analysis of different AI technologies, specifically GPT and Sonnet, across four languages: Czech, Latvian, English, and Italian. This cross-linguistic and cross-cultural investigation critically assesses the extent of gender bias present in the generated texts. Our findings reveal that all four languages exhibit some level of gender bias, irrespective of their grammatical structures—Czech and Latvian possess three or four grammatical gender categories, Italian has two, and English lacks grammatical gender entirely. Notably, we unexpectedly found also instances of positive discrimination statistically favoring the feminine grammatical gender, challenging conventional perceptions of bias.

The exploration of these results leads us to extend the boundaries of our fractal analysis. At what point does the fractal spiral start? We posit that the foundation of all ideology is rooted in biology. As articulated in the recent work edited by esteemed biosemiotician Jana Švorcvoá (2024), cultural differences in gender and the ideologies surrounding them are deeply intertwined with biological understandings. The complexities of genetic and epigenetic factors blur the lines between biological sex and cultural gender, complicating traditional concepts of identity. This paper endeavors to interlace the threads of AI, biological diversity, and cultural semiotics, ultimately illuminating how gender ideology is constructed and perpetuated within our increasingly digital dis-

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course. By examining the interplay between these domains, we aspire to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender representation in AI, prompting further discourse in both academic and societal contexts.



**Nataša LACKOVIC**  
**University of Lancaster**

**AI: A New Religion in Higher Education**

In this talk, I tackle the rise of AI as a new religion in higher education. I do so by applying selected lenses of Piercean semiotics (e.g. the triadic sign, synechism, agapism) in combination with Woodhead's (2014) five concepts of religion.

Aligned with Woodhead's (2014) conceptualizations, I explore and speculate the uses and fascination with AI in higher education practice and media through the following constructs:

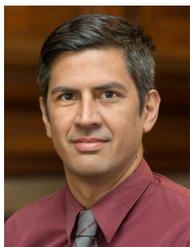
- AI as Culture
- AI as Identity
- AI as Relationship
- AI as Practice
- AI as Power

I expand the five concepts with considerations of communicative and epistemic modalities that mediate them (Lackovic and Olteanu, 2023), focusing on the role of AI in that mediation. The presentation concludes with a speculative or metaphorical model of an AI religion in higher education.



**Massimo LEONE**  
**FBK-ISR Center for Religious Studies**  
**Comparing Semiosis**

This session will bring together three leading scholars in a dialogical exploration of semiotic ideologies, focusing on their intersections and divergences across distinct intellectual traditions. Structured as an interactive dialogue between Keane and Leone instigated by Nakassis, the session will begin with a series of foundational questions posed by the latter, inviting each speaker to articulate their perspectives on the nature of semiotic ideologies and their relevance to the study of religion. This initial round will serve as a baseline, allowing the speakers to establish their conceptual approaches and theoretical foundations. In the second part of the session, the dialogue will evolve into an open exchange, with each speaker posing questions to the other, creating a dynamic and reflexive engagement. This format will not only illuminate contrasting views but also foster mutual insights, highlighting how semiotic ideologies are informed by diverse religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts. The discussion will pay special attention to the implicit theological dimensions of semiotic theories, tracing how the Protestant intellectual heritage (in figures like Locke, Saussure, and Peirce) contrasts with and complements European Catholic conceptions of the sign. By examining the ideological underpinnings of semiotic theories and their religious implications, this session will offer participants a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and transformed across cultural and intellectual landscapes.



**Constantine NAKASSIS**  
**University of Chicago**  
**Comparing Semiosis**

This session will bring together three leading scholars in a dialogical exploration of semiotic ideologies, focusing on their intersections and divergences across distinct intellectual traditions. Structured as an interactive dialogue between Keane and Leone instigated by Nakassis, the session will begin with a series of foundational questions posed by the latter, inviting each speaker to articulate their perspectives on the nature of semiotic ideologies and their relevance to the study of religion. This initial round will serve as a baseline, allowing the speakers to establish their conceptual approaches and theoretical foundations. In the second part of the session, the dialogue will evolve into an open exchange, with each speaker posing questions to the other, creating a dynamic and reflexive engagement. This format will not only illuminate contrasting views but also foster mutual insights, highlighting how semiotic ideologies are informed by diverse religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts. The discussion will pay special attention to the implicit theological dimensions of semiotic theories, tracing how the Protestant intellectual heritage (in figures like Locke, Saussure, and Peirce) contrasts with and complements European Catholic conceptions of the sign. By examining the ideological underpinnings of semiotic theories and their religious implications, this session will offer participants a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and transformed across cultural and intellectual landscapes.



**Claudio PAOLUCCI**  
**University of Bologna**

**The Representation of Disability.  
A Cognitive Semiotics' Point of View  
on Inclusion and Ideologies**

In this talk, I will attempt to outline the conditions of possibility for a semiotics of ideologies. I will begin with Eco's discussion in *A Theory of Semiotics*, which I will reinterpret through a contemporary lens, drawing on cognitive semiotics and enunciation theory. I will show how a semiotics of this kind can offer a privileged perspective on beliefs and representations, and I will present a corpus-based study on representations of disability, with particular attention to the concept of 'inclusion'.



**Jamin PELKEY**  
**Toronto Metropolitan University**  
**Bodily Semiotic Origins of Religious**  
**Ideology and Spiritual Ecstasy**

Could ideology and ecstasy spring from the same source? In the words of James the brother of Jesus, “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” Massimo Leone notes in his tour de force on semiotic ideology that “deep-seated habits of interpretation underlie even the most trivial daily operations” (2025: 23). Leone argues that this happens in ways that are fractal scalable through both visual and conceptual patterns. Building on this work, I suggest that no such habits are more deeply seated than those that originate in the memory-based experiential modeling system of the human body plan (Umwelt) and its implicit manifestations in the lived human imaginaries of culture and creative practice (Lebenswelt). Paying attention to habits at this primal level is crucial for understanding the nature of ideology in religion and elsewhere from the politics of gender to the performance of justice, just as it is crucial for understanding the human ability to transcend ideology through wonder, love, and rapture or healing ruptures of spiritual ecstasy. This is the focal argument of the presentation, supported by a cognitive poetic analysis and semiotic comparison of four works of art, two verbal and two visual. As I have argued extensively elsewhere, the originary patterns of movement in question grow out of the reorganization of our anatomical planes relative to other vertebrates through the evolution of habitual upright posture (Pelkey 2017, 2018, 2024, 2025). The profound relational relevance of the critical and creative abilities this stance has afforded are oriented to a new front-facing mode of being relative to the transverse plane with left-right oppositional asymmetries forging the grounds of ideology (from politics to religion) and upper-lower oppositional analogies forging the grounds of ecstasy (from humour to rapture). To demonstrate these patterns at work across cultural belief systems and counter-cultural visions separated by thousands of miles and years, I offer a comparative analysis of two poetic texts, one in Koine

Greek from the Christian New Testament, the Final Judgement passage in Matthew 25, and another in Persian from Hāfez Shirazi (c.1380): *sālhā del talab*, 'for years my heart demanded'. I then compare the patterns in these two texts with visual patterns in two works of visual art, one from 18th century England and another from medieval Tibet. The Tibetan Bhavachakra or "Wheel of Life" paintings are didactic Thangka murals found on Lama Buddhist monestary walls depicting doctrines of karma and the six realms of samsara or 'rebirth. "David Delivered out of Many Waters" is a painting by William Blake depicting an episode of ecstatic rapture drawn from an experiential interpretation of a passage from Psalm 18 in the Jewish Telhilim. Comparing Matthew's Final Judgement with the Tibetan Bhavachakra and Blake's David Delivered with Hāfez's *sālhā*, demonstrates how the oppositional certainty of religious ideology stands in relation to the oppositional blending of spiritual ecstasy, in spite of the fact that both spring from the same source. Understanding this mystery may help unlock practical and theoretical puzzles alike, with implications for cognitive semiotics, biosemiotics, religious studies, and much more besides, not the least of which may be therapeutic recoveries of meaning in ordinary life.



**Stéphanie WALSH MATTHEWS**  
**Toronto Metropolitan University**  
**Superstitions, Rumors, AI: Oh My!**  
**Semiotic Fittedness for Today**

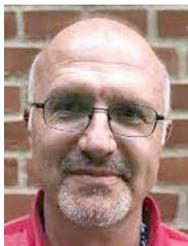
Superstitions provide devious insights into the way our cognitive processes have developed over time to allow for imagination, social networks, and institutional structures to take shape. In similar ways, analyzing the ways in which rumors emerge, operationalize beliefs, and problematize current systems, gives additional insights into how the very cognitive processes enabling the ability to access truth also allows for it to be problematized further. Contemporary research on the effects and affects of Artificial Intelligence show that AI is not only usurping discourse trends, but it also mimics and alters cognitive architectures from which they are born.

Superstition and rumors seem to be easy targets for AI. Ideal for the pervasive spreading of misinformation, and the fervent growth of problematic ideologies. This is true. However, superstition and rumors are also fundamental to the growth of a critical semiotic fittedness required for the critical protection against them too. This paper provides the trajectory of both superstition and the social exchange of rumor as a fundamental element of semiotic fittedness, and how, if simulated by AI, can also serve to be its demise.



**Frederik STJERNFELT**  
**Aalborg University Copenhagen**  
**Peirce as a Philosopher of AI**

It may surprise that Charles Peirce, the father of pragmatism and semiotics, also counts as an early philosopher of AI. As a logician, Peirce was interested in automatizing inference such as was attempted at the time with mechanical computers, and he was even the first to propose a computer built from electrical circuits. This also took him into a series of considerations as to the principal abilities of computers, predicting ambitious automatized theorem provers at the same time as he predicted certain limits to the creativity and self-control of computers.



**Jordan ZLATEV**  
**Lund University**  
**Cognitive Semiotics is a Humanism**

By echoing a famous text by Jean-Paul Sartre in the title, I am not implying that I agree with his understanding of humanism, nor with his claim that existentialism is a good example of it. In fact, I am in greater agreement with one of his critics (Hardré 1952), that while it is hard to define what exactly humanism is, it involves at commitments to: (a) human nature is essentially distinct from that of other animals, (b) reason and communion are essential aspects of this, (c) a hierarchy of values, and that human beings, despite all setbacks, can aim for betterment. But I do agree that Sartre's existentialism could indeed be “a” humanism, since it least upholds (a).

Today, humanism is considered quite outmoded and claimed by post-humanists to be nothing but a form of “anthropocentrism”, at fault both for its claims to truth and ethical implications (cf. Talis 2012 for a critical discussion). This is perhaps understandable, due to the sorry state of the world that we find ourselves in, which is not that different from the time when Sartre wrote his manifesto after the Second-World War. But if existentialism could proclaim itself to be a kind of humanism, is it not rather absurd if semiotics should turn post-humanist? For this is a tendency that we can see from at least two sides: (1) representatives of biosemiotics, who claim that that there is nothing unique about human semiosis and, even more extremely (2) those who do not see essential differences between the “sign processes” of machines and those of human beings. Liberal interpretations of Peircean semiotics are often used for both claims.

In contrast, cognitive semiotics in the tradition of the late Göran Sonesson, is opposed to claims like (1-2), aiming to reign in interpretations of Peirce with the help of Husserlian phenomenology (e.g. Sonesson 2012). Relying on my work in this tradition (e.g., Zlatev 2018) I will argue in my presentation that (i) only embodied subjects capable of intrinsic intentionality are semiotic agents, (ii)

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only human beings are sign users by nature, while other animals can in some cases be at best enculturated into this and (iii) language constitutes the highest form of semiosis, on our planet at least, and that when properly constrained by humanistic values, can be used for betterment. Thus, cognitive semiotics is indeed not only “a humanism”, but a much more prototypical example of humanism than that of Sartre.



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## HOW TO REACH US

### **On foot**

It takes less than 15 minutes to walk from the train station.

### **By taxi**

Taxi service is right outside the Railway station (Tel. +39 0461 235383 or Radio Taxi service Tel. +39 0461930002).

### **By bus**

All routes pass close to the train station, leaving every 15 to 30 minutes from about 5 a.m. to about 10 p.m. Tickets (€ 1.20 ) must be purchased at a tobacconist or a newspaper shop before boarding the bus and must be validated after getting on the bus. There are lots of buses that go to our head offices (President's office, Religious Studies, Italian-German Historical Institute, and FBK's humanities libraries). The most frequent are the 3 and 8, but any bus that stops at Piazza Fiera will work. When you get off, walk in the opposite direction of the old city wall.

## FONDAZIONE BRUNO KESSLER (FBK)

FBK is a research institute specializing in the fields of technology, innovation, humanities and social sciences, based in Trento.

Established by law by the Autonomous Province of Trento, FBK is a private entity whose mission is to promote and contribute to the advancement of knowledge with a focus on the fields of science and technology that allow for greater and faster economic and social benefits.

Active since 2007, FBK takes up the legacy of the Istituto Trentino di Cultura, founded in 1962 by Bruno Kessler. It is a research infrastructure that from the year of its establishment to the present has grown to accommodate a staff of more than 600 researchers and support staff, 170 PhDs, 200 visiting professors and doctoral candidates, and 700 affiliates and accredited students.

There are more than 70 foreign researchers at FBK and they come not only from major European countries but also from non-European countries such as the United States, China and India, Brazil and Argentina, Algeria, Iran, Pakistan, Australia and Russia.

## THE CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES (ISR)

The Centre for Religious Studies conducts research of the highest quality and to promote frontier studies on religion and ethics, on the sole basis of scientific excellence, with the aim of contributing to the persistence of religion as an inspiring matrix of values to promote peace, provide freedom, achieve sustainable development, combat social exclusion and discrimination, and respect cultural diversity.

The Centre focuses on a few key areas of contemporary religious studies in order to respond to the social demand for knowledge on religion and ethics, map its role in cultural and social transformations, exert an assessable positive impact on major religious and ethical challenges, and adopt a long-term sustainability strategy based on the accumulation of research and impact.



