Call for papers

Framing Nature: Signs, Stories, and Ecologies of Meaning

The European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment (EASCLE) biennial conference

Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies (NIES) IX conference

Tartu, Estonia, April 29–May 3, 2014 (new dates!)

Confirmed keynote speakers:
Wendy Wheeler (London Metropolitan University)
Ernest Hess-Lüttich (University of Bern)
Steven Hartman (Mid Sweden University; Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm)
and Thomas McGovern (City University of New York)

“No meaning without a frame” – thus one might boil down the insights yielded by a century of research in the humanities. To interpret something as meaningful is to put it into a context, into a frame of reference within which it can begin to make sense. This holds not only for human signification, but also for the processes of signification that occur in the natural world, as they have been studied by biosemiotics. In a double take on its title, this conference inquires into the multiple, complex ways in which humans frame nature and are in turn framed by it. It seeks to explore the figure of the frame as an ecological concept which draws attention to the way in which meanings are embedded in and sustained by environments that are at once material and semiotic. At the same time, it invites a closer examination of the strategies of framing and contextualization that are constitutive of ecocritical research, as well as a comparison of ecocritical methodologies with those of neighbouring disciplines in the environmental humanities.

In turning their attention to the way in which natural environments and human cultures have mutually shaped each other, ecocriticism and environmental history can be said to have subverted the traditional hierarchy which subordinates the frame to that which it frames, in a manner reminiscent of Derrida’s logic of the supplement. The issue of framing immediately opens up a host of profound theoretical questions for the environmental humanities. Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of “Umwelt” can be seen as conceptualizing the way in which living organisms frame the natural world, each constituting its own environment through the limitations imposed by its perceptual apparatus. Juri Lotman described artistic texts as secondary modelling systems by demonstrating how they reassemble the subject matter according to the rules of the genre, narrative and cultural epochs – an approach with important implications for environmental mimesis. Gregory Bateson, in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, emphasised the surrounding contexts and environments that precede and surpass all frames and form the prerequisites of any signifying action.
Humans frame nature through visual representations, through the language they use to describe it, and through the stories they tell about it. Sometimes, framing nature entails attributing meanings that are alien to it, even levelling fraudulent accusations, as happened to the wolf in European fairy tales. In framing nature, human collectives also frame themselves: throughout modern history, particular landscapes were idealized as stages for the drama of national self-identification – often by eliding the material processes which had shaped them. Conflicts between different peoples or social groups over the use of natural resources are always also conflicts between different ways of framing nature, which can be told as stories of material and semiotic exclusion. In this context, the translation and transformation of nature representations across linguistic and cultural boundaries, as well as across different genres and media, gains particular salience.

Possible topics for contributions include, but are not limited to

- Agency, signs, and stories in living and non-living nature
- Local natural histories, local knowledge and nature representations
- Mapping, modelling and storytelling as ways of cognitively framing nature
- Ecotranslatology: translating nature and nature writing
- Scale effects: temporal and spatial frames in nature and nature representations
- Cultural ecology and ecosemiotics: how do cultural and natural sign systems interact?
- Comparative methodology: how do different disciplines within the environmental humanities frame their objects of study?
- The framing of environmental cognition and conduct in science and policy discourses
- The role of mass media and popular culture in shaping environmental consciousness

Submission
To submit a proposal, interested scholars should e-mail an abstract (up to 500 words) for the 20 minute presentation to the address: framing_nature@semiootika.ee. Abstract should be sent as a separate one-page file (.doc or .rtf). Preformed panels (3 presentations) are welcome. The deadline for the abstracts is October 10, 2013. The conference “Framing Nature: Signs, Stories, and Ecologies of Meaning” has an international advisory board. All presentation abstracts will be peer-reviewed.

For additional information and further updates please visit the conference website at www.ut.ee/SOSE/conference/2014_framing_nature/

Organisers
The conference "Framing Nature: Signs, Stories, and Ecologies of Meaning" is organized by The European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment (EASCLE) and Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies (NIES). The conference is hosted by the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu in cooperation with the Department of Literature and Theatre Research at the University of Tartu, Estonian Semiotics Association and the Centre for Environmental History (KAJAK).

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