

Göran Sonesson

1951–2023

in memoriam

Colleagues all over the world were moved and shocked by the news that Göran Sonesson, professor emeritus of semiotics at Lund University, passed away on March 17 2023. Few outside his closest circle of family and friends expected this to happen. Although gravely ill, Göran seemed to be as active as ever. During 2022, seven scholarly articles and book chapters were published by him as the single author, and he helped organize the 15th world congress of semiotics in Thessaloniki. Göran's publication list is immense and contains texts written in the four European languages that he spoke and wrote with ease: Swedish, French, Spanish and English. He spoke all four with the unmistakable southern Scandinavian accent of a person born and raised in Malmö. But he could certainly understand a range of other tongues as well: trained as a linguist, Göran's life and work revolved around the exploration of natural language and other semiotic systems. He leaves an intellectual heritage that, now being translated and disseminated on a steady basis, will be of lasting significance.

In the Nordic countries, Göran was unique in his field. He was the first, and hitherto the only, scholar to receive the title of professor of semiotics in Sweden. The appointment came as a recognition of some 25 years of scholarship and leadership that prepared for the special branch of semiotics of which Göran was one of the leading founders: Cognitive semiotics, or semiotics as a joint effort of linguistics, cognitive psychology and evolutionary theory. The Center for Cognitive Semiotics, led by Göran and originally a project fund-



Göran Sonesson in Sofia, Bulgaria.

ed by the research foundation of the Swedish central bank (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond), has been a permanent division of the Centre for Languages and Literature (SOL) at Lund University since 2014. After Göran's retirement in 2018, his close colleague Jordan Zlatev, professor of linguistics, has led the centre.

At Lund University, it is not only his colleagues from the language departments that have reason, however, to remember Göran and his four decades of continuous presence at the university. For a long time, he was closely affiliated with the department of art history, and his work on visual semiotics was constantly referred to in debates on the identity and methodology of *konstvetenskap* (*Kunsthistorie*, Art Studies) in Sweden. The idea that art history could benefit from the interdisciplinary knowledge of Göran originally came from Sven Sandström, then holder of one of the Lund University chairs of art history, with a specialization in studies of contemporary art and society (*nutidens konst och samhällsliv*). From 1982 until 2008, Göran had a working space at the department of art history, and continuously received external funding for his individual research and writing projects. In 1986, he established

his weekly seminar in cultural semiotics that continued until 2009, when it was replaced with the current seminar in cognitive semiotics.

Before his contact with the art historians in Lund, Göran had been a student of the influential linguist and narratologist Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992) at EHESS in Paris. With Greimas as supervisor, he defended his doctoral thesis in 1978. The central doctrine of Greimas and his “school” was that all meaning must be regarded as arbitrary or conventional until the opposite is proved: even in representations seemingly based on natural and perceptual recognition, as for example in pictures, the “reality effect” must be accounted for as a function of arbitrary codes at a structural “deep level”. The objective of the workshop for visual semiotics, founded by Greimas and supervised by him in 1970s and 1980s, was to reveal the structure of these codes and develop the new terminology necessary for their description. With the work of Jean-Marie Floch, Felix Thürlemann and other members of the workshop, the textual or “structuralist” approach to the semiotic analysis of pictures was established. This approach fundamentally involves Greimas’ distinction between two layers of meaning or “language” in any picture: the figurative language (creating depiction) and the plastic language (also called “planar language”), the latter being the meaning still carried by the picture when all depictive content is reduced or mentally ignored. It is important that the term used by the Greimas workshop to designate the semiotics of depiction was “figurative language”, not “iconic language”, because in the conventionalist doctrine of Greimas there was no room for iconicity or iconic signs.

There is reason to believe that Göran soon felt that many of these structuralist assumptions and pretensions were quite contrary to his own intuitions. His interest in the structure of action in everyday life led him into the phenomenological tradition and the reading of Edmund Husserl’s investigations of the relationship between world and consciousness. Husserl’s conception of the Lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), and his method for introspective re-examination of any notion or perception that we tend to take for granted, have clear connections to the psychology of visual perception that was starting to emerge in Germany during his lifetime. Both Husserl and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, whose semiotic legacy was largely ignored by the Greimas “school”, were to guide Göran in his conviction that neither perception, nor the semiotic “icon” of Peirce, can be overlooked in a non-dogmatic study

of pictorial meaning. New cultural experiences also contributed to his development: during 1979–1981, before his return to Sweden, he worked in Mexico City as a guest researcher, studying the language and pictorial writing system of the Mayans. While his teacher Greimas could readily discredit the whole idea of the iconicity of visual images with the sweeping argument that alphabetic script is visual but certainly not iconic, the same claim could hardly be made for Mayan script. During his Mexican period, Göran embarked upon the extensive examination and criticism of earlier and current theories of visual semiotics that was to be collected in his magisterial work *Pictorial Concepts* (Lund University Press, 1989). In Mexico, Göran also met his wife, the dancer and dance pedagogue Ana Tejera Sonesson.

As a growing number of scholars will probably realize, Göran’s close acquaintance with art history and a range of other humanistic disciplines makes his work relevant also for students of iconography. The preface of his *Pictorial Concepts* opens with a reference to E. H. Gombrich. Regarding the origins of the concept of “sign” in Western philosophy, he writes that, “[...] to those who still remain with the idea that semiotics is an ahistorical science, we will suggest that semiotics is best viewed as a particular intellectual tradition, which hands down a series of connected problems through the centuries”. And he continues:

As it happens, these problems are roughly the same as those treated by the French ‘ideological’ school [at the end of the 18th century], to which semiotics is historically connected, as well as by the participants in the discussion about the Geisteswissenschaften, which means that they are the basic questions common to the human sciences and to all social practise; but semiotics takes a more empirical approach to these questions – or rather, it tries to bring wide-ranging theories in somewhat closer connection to what we have, and can produce, from empirical evidence.

As we who participated in Göran’s seminars in Lund can testify, this program was consistently put into practise there. It provided a stark contrast to the conception of semiotics usually held at the time by art historians turned semioticians, as exemplified by Mieke Bal’s and Norman Bryson’s much quoted essay “Semiotics and art history” (1991), in which the authors describe the semiotic alternative as essentially anti-empirical and anti-realist.

Göran was extremely fond of exposing and refuting myths and misconceptions of semiotic research, and there were certainly many of those. A piece of

criticism with immediate bearing on the methodology of modern iconography is the section in *Pictorial Concepts* (pp. 119–125, later repeated in Swedish in *Bildbetydelser* from 1992) in which he refutes Jean-Marie Floch's and Peter Larsen's claim that Panofsky's distinction between pre-iconographical and iconographical meaning is identical to Roland Barthes's famous identification of "denotation" and "connotation" in his analysis of an advertisement for spaghetti. Göran shows that the comparison is untenable for several interconnected reasons. Firstly, Barthes and most of his followers in visual semiotics have completely misunderstood what the term "connotation" means in linguistics. Secondly, if pictures have something similar to a linguistic connotation, it would mean that the level called pre-iconographical by Panofsky and "denotation" by Barthes would be fully coded and conventional (in the spirit of Greimas or of Bal and Bryson). But Barthes contradicts himself when he writes, in an outright abuse of the linguistic definition of "denotation", that the visual denotation is natural, or a "message without a code". For Panofsky, who didn't pretend to establish a linguistics of art, the pre-iconographical level is merely "factual". Then, thirdly, the "tendencies of the human mind" that Panofsky wants to reveal on the third or "iconological" plane are clearly dependent on the recognition of a common human "Lifeworld" of objects and ideas in pictorial representation. Barthes, however, excludes in a contradictory manner the possibility of this common experience (which Peirce referred to as "commons"). For that reason, there can be no equivalent of Panofsky's third plane in his model. The two analytic models turn out to be based on rather different conceptions of the aims and scope of visual culture studies.

As a teacher and seminar leader, Göran was as steadfast and committed to text reading and text commentary as in his research. His manner of teaching and supervising was not based on any high-pitched persuasion or charismatic lecturing. His seminars were a patient examination, page by page, of the philosophical or scientific work presently under scrutiny. Those who could not adapt themselves to the slow pace or who were probably more interested in pursuing their own personal agendas than in reading the texts at face value, soon realized that they had to go somewhere else. With his enormous learning, Göran naturally had his major share of speaking time, except at seminars with invited lecturers; but one always felt that one could comment and reply at any time, and that he would never silence criticism. Although his own comments could

be devastating, and his opinions on competing theorists and theories quite dismissive, we mostly realized that his sceptical attitudes were well founded.

As a co-founder and long-time president of the International Association for Visual Semiotics (AISV/IAVS) and the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies (NASS), furthermore as leader of the Center for Cognitive Semiotics (CCS) in Lund, and as organizer and editor of numerous conferences, anthologies and journal issues, Göran managed to coordinate and balance the multitude of competing and individualistic vocations that he once characterised as the "Babylonianism" of semiotics.

There are no words, or pictures, to express how much he is missed.

Fred Andersson

Note: Most of Göran Sonesson's publications are available on Lund University's website (https://www.lu.se/search/goran_sonesson), many of them are open access.