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Abstract:

Semiotics Unbounded (University of Toronto Press, 2006) of Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio is a grand attempt which is going to rearrange the stream of the semiotics in the 20th century by using two principles of ‘infinite semiosis’ and ‘dialogism’ referring to two giants Peirce and Bakhtin. In this paper, I want to examine the opinion and aims of this work from a special and local viewpoint of the present condition of semiotic studies in Japan. Simultaneously with it, the situation of semiotics which we are promoting in Japan will be reported, and the future of still more international semiotic activities in the world will be also foreseen.

Introduction

Now, I am in Japan and writing this text.

The feeling which is born in Japan as a Japanese and is living in the ‘Far East’ called Japan is peculiar feeling which is difficult to explain to a foreign people.

In the current globalized world, Japan keeps a kind of ‘synchronicity’ with Western countries. On television, the image of Bloomberg economic program, CNN, or MTV flows every day, and Japanese economy is synchronizing completely with the global capitalism system.

Moreover, Japanese people do not live in a traditional house any longer or do not wear traditional clothes any longer. If you walk along the central part of Tokyo, you can find a lot of the buildings of brand shops, branches of foreign banks or international companies, just same as in any big city in the world. You can also find many hamburger shops or much kind of ethnic restaurants, there. Apparently, it almost has no differences with any big cities in the United States or in Europe.

I took lunch at the Italian restaurant today, for example. On the other hand, for supper, I ate the traditional Japanese dishes and drank a little of Japanese rice wine (sake) with my colleagues. All different culture is eclectically mixed in present Japanese society. Moreover, many ‘goods’ common in the world market has overflowed here. But, if it is still

special to be living in Japan, it is mainly because we are using the very local language “Japanese”. It is a language which has the Central Asian origin just like Mongolian and Korean. It is a very special language far different from many Indo-European languages or Chinese which has been a major language in the East Asia area. And present Japanese is using four different character systems intermingled (the ideographic Chinese character, two types of Japanese phonogram and European alphabet). By combining these four characters, we have been making various texts by arranging foreign culture and have completed the original culture by publication and broadcast.

The foreigner who visits Japan will be surprised at the coexistence of various characters which are full of a town. We have been living by changing all information into the mode of Japanese culture through this flexible language of Japanese. In Japan which is a Far Eastern island country, the culture of all foreign countries has been arranged into the style of Japan through a long history. We imported Buddhism from India and the political system, literature and art were imported from China or Korea. Moreover the science and civilization of the West have been imported after the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century. However, they have been transfigured by changing into the inner mode of ‘Japanese’ rather than were introduced in an original form. Thus, we could say that the peculiarity of Japanese culture is its cultural characteristic of transfiguring an external code into the inner mode.

For example, my lunch of today was ‘Mentaiko Spaghetti’. ‘Mentaiko’ is a kind of the fish egg with seasonings, such as red pepper, and it was originally Korean traditional food and imported and rearranged into Japanese cuisine afterward. Japanese people have completed the peculiar pasta dish with taste of the Japanese style combining the spaghetti which is also an import from Italy. So ‘Mentaiko spaghetti’ is neither the Italian cuisine nor the Japanese cuisine. You can see that it would be ‘an Italian cuisine arranged into the inner mode of Japan.’ If it is true that Marco Polo brought the pasta to Europe from China, we could say there is a surprising dizzy traffic of culture on this one dish. Thus, in Japan, foreign culture has been received in the form where an external code is changed into the inner mode.

But such a ‘cultural hybridization’ may not be necessarily exceptional in the present global capitalism age. When you see the ‘sushi’ far different from Japanese one is widely sold in the many cities in Europe, cultural hybridization and eclecticism seem to be very common phenomenon in the post-modern society. However, in the case of Japan, the feature is we have been continuing such cultural acceptance from far ancient era. There is kind of cultural software in the tradition of Japan which combines heterogeneous various cultures in a peculiar form, and makes the incompatible thing live together.

As I mentioned above, it is thought that there was also a similar ‘code conversion’ in the process of acceptance of the ‘semiotics’ in Japan. It was in 1928 that Hideo Kobayashi first translated “Course in general linguistics” of Ferdinand de Saussure into Japan. This is the first translation of Saussure's writings in the world. And when introduction of Roland Barthes's writings by the French literary researchers started in the 1960s, many people got interest in the Saussurien semiology again. The studies such as text theory, semiotics, and post-structuralist philosophy came to be translated in large quantities in the 1970s by specialists of literary theory and cultural anthropology. In the 70s, the magazine ‘Episteme’ and in the 80s, ‘Contemporary Thought (*Gendai Shiso*)’ also brought broad popularity together and semiotics became to ‘a boom’ in Japan.

In such a stream, Japanese association of Semiotic Studies (JASS) was founded in 1980. As the founders of it, there were various types of people such as philosophers, cultural anthropologists, linguists, musicologists, sociologists, architects, visual artists, film directors and computer scientists. Those who dominated the central part were the group of the Saussurien semiology and text theory, specialists of Roman Jakobson and Russian-Slav semiotics, and cultural anthropologists and philosophers. There were a few specialists of American philosophers like Peirce and Morris, but for most of them were logicians insisting on very narrow discipline, they did not become the mainstream of the association. In Japan at that time, the study of American philosophy was still more minor than anything. Around JASS therefore, the Saussurien semiology and the Slav semiotics via Tzvetan Todorov or Julia Kristeva became a big stream. The works of Mikhail Bakhtin and the Tartu school were also broadly introduced from the 70s.

But, because they were each led by the foreign language culture introducers for example such as a specialist of French literature, the local trend in the region like Italy or Spain where there were very few numbers of specialists in Japan had not been reported so much. For example, *The Theory of Semiotics* of Umberto Eco was translated via English, but rather an introduction of his novel goes ahead except few writings such as *Opera Aperta*, and it may be said that he was a comparatively minor object of study among Japanese semiotics researchers

Since 1990s, around the International Association of Semiotic Studies, many people had become interested in rereading Peircien semiotics, and also in *zoosemiotics* or *biosemiotics*. It was mainly by the excellent editorial talent of Thomas A. Sebeok. However, such movement had not been so much imported in Japan. Although these trends were made by the English texts produced mainly in Europe, the Japanese introducers of the

British-American culture which mainly treated the text in English had turned their main concern to *Deconstruction* or *Feminism* in the 80s and in the 90s to the *British Cultural Studies*. They thought that semiotics had been already old-fashioned. As the result, very few scholars had not been interested in the achievement of Sebeok, reexamination of Peircien semiotics or Biosemiotics in Japan at that time.

As a reason that became like this, we could say that the researchers of foreign culture who have each language like French and German as their specialties have separately performed a cultural import in Japan. In addition, it could be said that after finishing the cold war, global standardization of English have advanced very quickly and the influence of the United States became overwhelming. From the universities in Japan, department of French literature or the department of German literature once being very popular was rapidly abolished after the 90s. Other regional studies were reduced further, and came not to be able to exist besides a few elite universities.

However, the reason is not only this.

The other extremely important reason is that two excellent thinkers, Keizaburo Maruyama and Masao Yamaguchi, have characterized the semiotics study in Japan. Those two thinkers' influence was extremely strong and they made the directionality of a Japanese semiotic study at that time.

Keizaburo Maruyama (1933-93) was a specialist of Saussure, and his *Saussure's thought* (Iwanami Shoten) was published in 1981. This was a project of drawing out the true intention of Saussure who had not been written in *Course of General linguistics*, his study was based on the manuscript of Saussure and transcript of a lecture with edit and proofreading of Robert Godel and Rudolf Engler.

Maruyama took an example of Saussure's 'Study of Anagram', and assumed that an original concern of Saussure was not 'langue' as a synchronic system but 'language' diachronically and dynamically changing. From there, he claimed that the semiotics of *signifiance* instead of the semiotics of signification was more important. Through the writings such as *Culture and fetishism* (Keiso Shobo, 1984) and *Life and Excess* (Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1987), Maruyama distinguished the articulation of the world by body (body-articulated structure) and the articulation by language (language-articulated structure), and he proposed an idea of 'life as excess' by noting that only the unconscious '*Trieb*' can penetrate this two articulations. Here he assumed that the culture is a kind of 'restrictions' fatally given to the living thing of human, and emphasized the power of 'life' which overcomes various repressive systems made by the 'fetishism' which is produced by the illusion which takes 'substance' for what is only a 'sign'. This denied the view on language as a 'system of the negative difference made arbitrarily' which is assumed Saussure's idea in

general. Moreover, a past view on Saussure was definitely overturned by his assertion that there was the Peircien 'infinite semiosis' itself exactly in a central principle of Saussurian linguistics. And not only it but also the later Maruyama built 'anti-semiotics' as his original 'life philosophy'.

On the other hand, Masao Yamaguchi(1931-) was a well-known cultural anthropologist from 70's, and there were *Culture and Ambiguity* (Iwanami Shoten, 1975) and *Folklore of Clown*(Tikuma Shobo, 1975) in his best books.

He caught culture with the opposite concepts of 'center' and 'margin', and built the model of 'culture' as an structural equipment where the ambivalence or dichotomy 'activates' the whole. And he discussed the role of the clown as a 'cultural trickster' who plays an important role in such a model of culture. Many readers accepted such his cultural theory enthusiastically, and it became to be thought that Yamaguchi's theory was the representative of semiotics in general in Japan. And in this cultural model, naturally carnival or festival would play important roles. So Yamaguchi has also much mentioned Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory very early.

In 80's, Yamaguchi started rearranging various currents of Europe (Russian Formalism, phenomenology, Panofsky, and Warburg school, etc.) in 1920's as 'Intersection of knowledge' from a new aspect. He introduced energetically the Slav movement of semiotics from Bakhtin to the Tartu school there.

Moreover, Yamaguchi applied his theory to Japanese cultural studies, and wrote many books about various popular culture, literary criticism and sovereignty theory, etc., and his interdisciplinary activity attracted many readers. Furthermore, Yamaguchi traveled around the world and he made close relationship with Thomas A. Sebeok, Thomas Wiener, Umberto Eco, v.v. Iwanov and Paul Bouissac etc. So he made a big contribution connecting International Association and Japanese Association of Semiotic Studies.

Thus, the semiotic studies of Japan have been initiated and guided by those influential thinkers, Maruyama and Yamaguchi. The characteristic of two persons is that they regarded semiotics as a basic theory for explaining the formation of the human 'culture' itself. Maruyama developed existential life philosophy and Yamaguchi developed the concrete historical research on such assumption. So to speak, for both of two, 'semiotics' itself is like a 'scaffold' and never will be the main object or purpose of study. Moreover, each of them was so to speak hybrid thinkers who have played an active part centered on journalism or magazines rather than the academic world from the beginning, the semiotic studies in Japan have been supported by the researchers and amateur of miscellaneous and various domains rather than specialists. After all, 'department of semiotics' was not made at the universities in Japan. It might be by their influence that the Japanese Association of Semiotic Studies is still

a group of free-lance people basically.

Reading *Semiotics Unbounded*

By the way, the original purpose of this text is discussing on *Semiotic Unbounded* by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio. What does this book bring to us in Japan, from such a condition?

In the first half of this book, the achievements of the people who have made up the history of the 20th century semiotics, such as Peirce, Welby, Bakhtin, Morris, Sebeok, Rossi-Landi and Eco are reexamined. This could be said to be a grand and precise reexamination of the history of semiotic thinking. The thinkers regarded the most important among them are Peirce and Bakhtin. The various conceptual devices of Peirce, especially the view of “infinite semiosis” as the essential of sign, and Bakhtin's ‘dialogism’ and the view of ‘otherness’, are considered as the keyword of this book for recombination of the 20th century semiotics.

Authors are going to advocate the infinite validity of the semiotics as a basic science of all sciences as ‘semiotics unbounded’ by rearranging ‘semiotics’ itself which had tended to be caught ‘analysis of a synchronic sign system’ under the big influence of Saussurien semiology, and they rearranged it by using the concepts of Peirce and Bakhtin.

In that case, the ideas of ‘animal semiotics’ and ‘biosemiotics’ which Sebeok introduced into the field of semiotics and also the concept of ‘modeling’ introduced by him will give us a very important guidance. That is, the authors are trying to locate the field of semiotics in the ‘Semiospere’ in which the all life is built, and to enlarge all the biosemiotics, animal semiotics and cultural semiotics toward a vast ‘open network of signs’ and the ‘global semiotics’ here.

Moreover, in the part two, suggested by the concept of Von Uexkull's ‘Umwelt’, the authors are trying to connect the two concepts of ‘semiosphere’ (Sebeok) and ‘Otherness’ (Levinas). It should be noted that here the authors uses the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas or Maurice Merleau-Ponty to extend their argument. That is, in the authors' view, semiotics should include all the science. Moreover, since all human beings' thought itself must be a semiotic process, the range of the argument does not stop at the domain of so-called semiotics. In the part three, they are also using a way of saying, such as semiotics as ‘ontology’, as ‘transcendental logic’ or as ‘constitutive phenomenology’. Authors catch the today's world as the age of ‘global capitalism’ and of ‘global communication’ supported by the advanced communications technology at the same time and they assert the

importance of semiotic thinking in such an age.

It is very interesting here that the authors who think that it is important to expand the open dialogic network of infinite semiosis are talking about the design of 'semioethics.' To interrupt the interpretative and dialogic network of signs must be to decrease function of the semiosphere of the life, so it must be basically 'badness' . Therefore, it is necessary to promote the infinite interpretation and to liberate the otherness. And it is important to produce such an open network where infinite process of dialogic interpretation is working on. Although it is regrettable that this part looks a little too abstract discussion, but I think this is an extremely important point.

Now, if I say how I felt such authors' opinions, in the first place, it is important to having been able to touch on the much new knowledge for the first time about the reappraisal of the Peircean semiotics from the present viewpoint and the works of Victoria Welby who had a deep relation with Peirce. About Peirce, in present Japan, it cannot be said that the concern about him is so high. Moreover, the review of semiotics of Morris, which was forgotten as old-fashioned philosopher in Japan except among few specialists of American philosophy, was similarly interesting. And the introduction of the Italian thinker Rossi-Landi who had begun his study with the translation of Morris and left the very unique work which is going to read the economic activity in semiotic perspectives was also very interesting to me, for his name was hardly known in Japan until now.

And, I renewed my recognition about the role of Thomas A. Sebeok in his re-systematization of the vein of semiotics. What he brought to the world of semiotics were so large beyond anticipation, such as re-introducing the Peircean semiotics, expanding the concept of semiosis even to the animal world, and the life further, and evaluating the biosemiotics of Jesper Hoffmeyer very early.

For us, Japanese researchers, it is already familiar proposition that it is important to release semiotics from the name of Saussure and to detach ourselves from the view of language as an arbitrary synchronic system which is decisively separated from the nature especially. Moreover, as for 'biosemiotics' , it was already introduced into Japan and the magazine of JASS has published the special issues for that several times. In such meaning, this book has so many points with which we can resonate.

For me the strategies of authors of reorganizing semiotics by connecting the Peircean semiotics and Bakhtin's dialogism were personally very interesting. Especially I felt the newness with the process in which they are connecting the trilogical concepts of Peirce, the idea of 'infinite semiosis' and Bakhtin's 'dialogism' and further lead to the philosophy of the 'otherness' of Levinas.

Moreover, I had the impression that the authors' view of piling up the 'biosphere'

and the 'semiosphere' under the concept of 'the open network of signs' has a strong resemblance to the activities of 'informatics' or the 'informatic cultural theory' which we have been developing in Japan since 90s. In Japan, instead of semiotics which could not become any academic section in the universities, there exists a lot of faculties or departments of the 'information sciences' including the computer sciences, cognitive science, informatic sociology or philosophy of civilization in many universities. And the 'informatics' which Toru Nishigaki of Tokyo University and I have advocated has taken the position of catching the 'life' as the 'dialogic and complex system of information', and is very close to the concept of 'the semiotics unbounded' which authors assert in this book. In our plan, we think it would be better to use the concept of 'information' which has more generality than 'sign', and the 'informatics' would be more appropriate than semiotics to the age of global communication in order to appeal to the wider audiences. And, we are aiming at further development of 'Informatics' as a general communication theory.

After reading this book, I had an impression that it will be very important to analyze the mechanism of 'openness' of the network of signs, and the mechanism of 'closeness' by which it is interrupted and where the dialog and 'otherness' are suppressed by another power. Then, though it becomes anxious what kind of 'openness' or 'closeness' will be produced by the extension of capitalism and the age of the global communication, this book doesn't answer such doubt so much to our regret. However, it is doubtless that this book might be an epoch-making book which enables a rich possibility applying a new lighting to semiotics, and the one to produce a new development of an international semiotic research.