

Portrait of a European Scholar.

Eero Tarasti interviewed by Lina Navickaite

“To be a Finn is to be a marginal”, says sometimes Eero Tarasti, musicologist and semiotician, Professor at the University of Helsinki. It may be that such an attitude (a matter of fact?) had an impact to a rather radical cosmopolitanism of this scholar – from the studies in Paris with Jacques Février and Algirdas Julien Greimas, and the time spent in Austria and Brazil, to the lectures currently given in universities of the whole world, the organization of international congresses and the chairmanship of several international semiotic organizations. His books, such as *Myth and Music*, *Heroes of Music*, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, *Heitor Villa-Lobos*, *Signs of Music*, *Existential Semiotics* and others are translated into a few languages, and recently Tarasti also started writing novels and recording the impressions of his academic trips. The books of this type are *New Mysteries of Paris and Other Travel Stories* and *Portraits: Interpretations, Reminiscences, Stories*. Tarasti’s range of interests is so all-encompassing, and his energy so sparkling that, rather than a scholar, one is tempted to call him an artist (after all, are not the representatives of this field the privileged carriers of charisma?). Continuous change is evident also in his scholarly theories. Tarasti does not consider them as something definite: he is developing them constantly, by sometimes even discussing new, not yet fully “polished” thoughts with his students. It may be that the most interesting insights can be born out of the email-correspondence with some “existentially” oriented young philosopher, theater researcher or musicologist.

Lina NAVICKAITE, one of his Lithuanian doctoral students, talks to Prof. Eero Tarasti about semiotics and

musicology, authorities and traditions, about what has been done, and what will perhaps be the task of tomorrow.

In your lectures, you like to show sometimes some short movie on a certain great, semiotician – Greimas, Lotman, or Sebeok, for instance. It seems that it is important for you to imagine the author of the writings under study at the moment. Or, do you think it is important, for the students? Be that as it may, there were quite a few semioticians claiming that the real person, the author doesn't have anything to do with the written text.

Surely, the Russian formalists were right in saying that the real subject (say, a composer or a writer) is a completely different person from the subject in the enunciation of the text – these are two different entities. It is not by chance that this distinction has been widely accepted by all the scholars in the human sciences. But, on the other hand, it is evident that scientific theories most often are nothing but absolutizations of certain quite concrete experiences in the scholar's life. Very often, a scholar simply elevates his own experiences and world-views up to the universal dimensions and absolutizes, calls them a universal theory. But if one really looks closer, one can see that there is certain quite personal existential situation, or some cultural practice of certain given culture, that lies behind those theories.

Let us take the German speculative philosophy as an example – Hegel, Kant and so on – all this tradition that claims to be universal. But we all know that it is essentially German. Therefore, while teaching or studying semiotics, it is important to know that no theory has developed in a vacuum, completely isolated from a person, who was writing it and from the culture and community, in which it was done. The link exists inevitably, even if the authors of those theories are sometimes trying to deny it.

An evident interrelation and overlapping of theories and schools can be observed nowadays, so that clear distinctions between different cultural or national traditions seem to vanish.

Do you think that the distinct boundaries are really lost?

It depends on which sense of the "school" we do have in mind: a practical activity, or a school of a theoretical thought. On the level of arts, I would say, the globalization certainly has had a strong impact at least to the national schools. Unfortunately, the symphony orchestras throughout the world sound amazingly similar, and only in very rare, occasional cases one can still end some very characteristic sound of a certain collective. By the way, most often the encounter with such a phenomenon means that this orchestra has retained strong ties with the soil of the national culture. Let us say, the orchestras in Prague, or the whole Bohemian area – they have the centuries-long traditions of musicianship, therefore, their sound is stemming from this source.

What would you say about the specific schools of semiotics? Do they also tend to overlap, or perhaps there are some particularly distinctive branches?

For several times, I have tried to propose the idea that we are living now in the state of a so-called neo-semiotics. Such a situation does not have any longer clear profiles in the sense of the school, but, on the other hand, we have to admit that the schools of classical semiotics strongly survive and continue to live.

Recently, I have been much been in Italy – it is amazing how strongly the semiotics there is dominated by Greimas! Of course, Umberto Eco is his own strong case in Bologna, but almost anything else is Greimassian. Talking about other schools, in Estonia, Tartu, they still strongly believe in Lotman, and in America and many other places people believe in Peirce: they think that what these great men once have said or found is truth, and we only have to follow their discoveries. But I don't think science is so easy. After all, we are always going towards something new, striving to discover something.

Do you, feel you belong to any school of semiotics or musicology?

I have had three phases so far in my theoretical development. The first one was strongly Lévi-Straussian – he was, and still is, my great idol. The second one was very much influenced by Greimas, and I still feel I am a Greimassian very firmly. However, the third phase of my scholarly development is existential semiotics, which I am developing right now. I do not know yet what happens, but it seems to me that those ideas are gradually taking shape, gaining a more or less coherent contour – not that much of a doctrine, and perhaps not even yet a school or a system, but simply the shape of a new theory.

Most likely, it is a dream of every scholar to form a school. Maybe I wish it myself – to form a strong theoretical unit together with my students. But we have to admit that some people are the school-making persons, and others are not, simply. And I can openly tell that how does it happen – what practice exactly helps best to make a school – is still something rather mysterious to me.

Your teacher, Greimas, was a sort of outsider of the media in Paris, he never became “French”. Do you think it is a destiny of all the people that work and create not in their own country, or has such a situation changed by now? Can an immigrant become a “pure” insider of any country?

That is an interesting question, because we normally think that nobody is a prophet in his own land... Thus, if Greimas would have stayed in Lithuania, he may not really have become what he is now. But on the other hand, it is quite true that he was an outsider of the French media one sign of this is that there is very little, say, a filmed material on him. Also, he was nearly never on the French television, he was definitely not a public intellectual figure. But I would say that perhaps precisely because of this rather radical dissociation from the superficial media world his theory became something truly interesting, durable and valuable. It was certainly not one of those fashions that come and go very quickly.

On the other hand, the immigrants can really have a very catalyzing power in the cultural life of a certain country. Let's say, Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian, and she is so famous in France. Thus, in Greimas' case the reason for his “isolation” was not necessarily the fact that he was a Lithuanian. Rather, it was his theoretical mind, which even for the Frenchmen, who are of course very capable of assimilating new theories (and even very heavy theories), was too abstract.

But you put much value upon the theoretical heritage left by Greimas?

Yes. For instance, his idea of modalities that I have been intensely developing in my own work I consider being a great innovation in the 20th century human sciences. But

even there I immediately would like to add that if we want to keep this heritage, we have to go on from it. We must not only try to keep it, maintain it as rigorous as it was, but to develop it further – that would certainly be the best thing we could do for this theory.

I remember you saying that not so many people after all have completely understood your theory of musical semiotics, which is based on the Greimassian semiotics...

Indeed, that is rather true: it is no secret that this theory was very abstract. Its basis was formal logic, and musicians normally do not have any education in this field. Heinrich Schenker was more cunning here! He was applying a musical notation to his graphic analyses, whereas I have used a philosophical marking. I am still looking for the notation that would fit to my theory and would be more approachable to the musicians. And by the way, a most interesting application of the theory of musical semiotics was the combination of the Greimassian modalities and the Schenkerian analysis made by Thomas Pankhurst.

But I also must say that it is quite normal that the reactions one receives come only from few persons. Otherwise, that would be not a theory anymore, but rather a fashion – as it happened to Foucault, Barthes or Derrida in the United States, for instance. They have become a fashion, and it is certainly a totally different thing from what they originally are, to my mind.

Do you happen to see any promising development of your existential semiotics? This theory was already discussed in a few sessions inside the larger congresses, and then in April 2006 quite small but rather productive conference in Aix-en-Provence was devoted entirely to the existential semiotics. How do people grasp this theory, how do they apply its ideas?

First of all, you are talking like if it was some kind of compact doctrine... Rather, it is a free course of writing which is going on, a process of thinking which is in my mind and which is by no means definitive yet. I am only glad that people react to it somehow. As I have mentioned before, unfortunately, this is a very normal case in the life of a scholar – having very little response to what one is doing. But I was very lucky this time – I am very glad that so many people seem to not only adopting these ideas, but also somehow really using them in their practical work.

Moreover, I have the feeling (of course, it is very subjective) that certain ideas of existential semiotics are just speaking to the young people: let's say, the notions of the existential situation, choice, responsibility, freedom, subjectivity, even transcendence. Actually, young people were my first receivers – many of them are my students. But I really think that this theory appeals to something in the *Zeitgeist* of our time – something that especially young people seem to like, what is simply in the air nowadays. Whereas the first reactions of the older generation, those more established semioticians (especially the ones that belong to the great traditional schools), usually show some confusion and perplexity. Some of them think that this is a kind of return to the existentialism (which it certainly is not!); some might think that I am trying to change something which should not be changed. But I do not mind, I am simply waiting, and now I have noticed that even among the most faithful and conservative Greimassians there are some whose thought is going on the similar lines. For instance, Eric Landowsky, Jacques Fontanille, or Anne Rénault are moving in a very similar direction.

In which fields, you would say, the ideas of the existential semiotics are the most successfully applicable?

It is pretty hard to say. Of course, musicology is a privileged field because most of my students in Helsinki are musicologists, and I myself am always writing the applications on that field. But also some other areas are extremely fascinating, like theatre or general philosophy. I do not see any special field, which we would be able to consider as the most suitable.

I always remember the question of my young student, a playwright Pärttyli Rinne, who wanted to know whether the existential semiotics is more a science, or a philosophy. Certainly, this theory first of all is moving in the area of philosophy, dealing with the big, essential questions. Thus, it is related to a very abstract level of epistemology. But then I always want to bring it back to the empiria down to earth – and in that sense it becomes a scientific practice.

Nice that you mention that: I was always curious, what is “more” semiotics to your mind? Do you think it should be more empirical, or it can also stay on a very abstract, purely theoretical level?

Well, on the level of different scholars it is just a question of temperament and mentality. There are purely theoretical types, the ones that think theoretically. And then there are very empirical persons, who think in concrete terms. To my mind, it is very good – these two types complete, enrich each other by their work. For instance, if you belong to any particular field in human sciences, normally a theory or an epistemology alone is not sufficient; in order to test your theory and its validity you have to put it in touch with some kind of empirical data.

On the other hand, I have the feeling that very few people nowadays are even trying to develop any new theories of semiotics. People most likely are, sad to say, satisfied enough with what has been done, and they feel comfortable in only following those old traces, without ever re-thinking the epistemological foundations of their own ideas. That is certainly not very positive. I think we must go always back to the theory, and that is why we need the congresses of semiotics that are just focusing on the concepts and methods of this science.

In one of the seminars, we have been discussing “hard theories” and “soft approaches”...

Actually, this idea of “hard/soft” is rather old, related more to the situation when we were dealing with all those generative grammars and similar things. Even Greimas was extremely “hard”, nearly computerized. But most of the people have given up already this kind of approach. Instead, if we still like dichotomies, I would rather speak about the “profound” and “superficial” semiotics. So, the profound theories are trying to go into depth, and there are also theories that are satisfied with the surface. Of course, if you focus on the surface you are not necessarily superficial. It is another thing. In that case you are focusing on what the Germans call “Schein”. There is also an English word “Shine”, which means “splendour”, and that means yet another thing. I am right now writing an essay which is entitled “From Schein to Shine”. So, it means that when we choose as our starting point the surface, we develop it so that it starts shining, it becomes something splendid. This distinction, to my mind, would be more up to date.

Talking about the up-to-date things. We very often hear nowadays such notions as resistance, nationalism, anti-globalization. How, do you think, the “small” cultures are able to resist to the more and more globalized culture, to the rules imposed by the “great” ones? And do those little cultures really have anything significant to offer?

That is an extremely topical and relevant question in the present world – the state of the small cultures and languages that are disappearing. Alarming signs occur from everywhere. In the last Imatra winter school we have just discussed the fate of the Finno-Ugrian population. They are vanishing, all those riches that this population presents in their language and mythology. The same has happened already many times in history. That is a very big problem, and I think that it is very important not only regretting about this and being upset, but theoretically very sharply analyzing what is happening, trying to find the concepts and models that would be helpful in such a situation. I strongly believe that only with such theoretical weapons we can go back to the reality and try to improve it. And that is why the semioticians’ work is really needed.

I have recently published a very theoretical essay on the semiotics of resistance, in which I name three main forces: *being, memory, and history*. To my mind, such ideas like memory, the ability to see what might have happened, what might have been the possibilities, and the ability to get liberated from the constraints of the reality in which we live now are very important for any culture. If we do not see what else this reality could have been, if we do not remember earlier alternatives and choices, if we do not have the history, we can not see what will be the future.

Knowing your universality and flexibility in wandering through different topics and theories, there is no doubt that we WILL yet hear one day about some brand new conceptual model of yours. But talking about the things that have been done so far – analysis of myth, a theory of musical semiotics, existential semiotics and other things – what do you consider, so to say, the dearest child of yours?

Well, it is quite impossible to answer to the question that is so much too fast in the time...

At the moment, actually, I feel that I am living in a particularly happy period. I must say that as a Finnish scholar I have for a long time felt being in a kind of margin. To be a Finn is to be a marginal, absolutely, and I have faced this situation so many times in the international circles. But on the other hand, I have always tried to be if not a universal scholar, then at least such one who has something to say independently from his cultural background.

And I should say that I feel particularly happy at the moment seeing how the ideas of the existential semiotics are getting somehow more and more foot-hold. Moreover, my second novel, a large book of 600 pages that I have been writing for ten years, is ready. After having heard the commentaries of a few test-readers, I decided to go on with this and to publish the book. The French translation is ready, and the Italian, English are going on – hopefully soon also the Polish one.

What is the book about?

It is about the Europe. Linking to the plot, I gave it the title *Europe/Perhaps (Europa forse che; L'Europe peut-être)* with a literal reference to the novel of an Italian writer d'Annunzio *Forse che si, forse che no*. My main heroes are three Italian brothers, who

have adventures first in Estonia, then in Paris, Brasil and then in Siberia at the end. And this is all written by a young Russian girl. It is a historical novel about Europe, the story starting in the year 1939 in an Estonian manor Villa Nevski, right before the II World War break. Several European cultures are portrayed in the book, and seven languages are spoken there. I would say, the novel has two levels. One is rather humorous: I have tried to write in such a manner that it would be very easily readable and funny; on the other hand, it has also some tragedies inside. It certainly depends on the reader, which side is emphasized. Be that as it may, I have already completed it, and now I can not have any power on its further destiny (laughing). And even if nobody would read it in the future, it is important to me that this story iwas written, that it exists.

There are rather many authors in literature that have been using some musical elements in their writings – one only needs to remember Nietzsche and Beethoven, Proust and Wagner... What is the role of music in your fiction books?

A strong connection with music in the last novel is due to the fact that one of the brothers is a composer. I am even planning to publish two compositions as the annex of the novel – they are written by me. These are indeed the existing musical pieces, thus they are not fictitious, as, say, the compositions by Vinteuil in the novel by Marcel Proust, or music of Adrian Leverkühn in the work by Thomas Mann. The first piece is called *Sudenkorentojen laulu (The song of the dragonflies)*, and it was a part of my opera plan to the libretto by Eino Leino, a Finnish poet, to his drama *Tuonelan joutsen*. I wrote that music at the age of 22, with all the clumsiness of a young musician... But it fits here well, since my protagonist, composer Paolo, is of the same age. The second one – atonal and serial *Lala's song* – was written later. Lala is a Parisian girl, and this musical piece is linked with the life in Paris after the war. Its text is quoted by permission from Kari Aronpuro, our avant-garde and semiotic poet. So, I thought why not to be so radical as to put those two musical compositions at the end. I do not know any other novel, which would have musical notes in addition to a verbal text.

But also your previous novel, *Le secret du professeur Amfortas*, was based on a musical structure...

Indeed, the whole structure of that novel was based on Lévi-Strauss's classical analysis of Ravels *Bolero* – on its idea about oscillating between two opposed poles, with the modulation at the end. My idea was to oppose two schools of semiotics – Northfield and Southfield, the two campuses of the novel. So, the plot is all the time going between those two. And the so-called modulation of the novel is a journey to Finland.

So what is now the status of semiotics in this Northern school, Finland?

In Finland, semiotics is truly flourishing with the work of the Network University of Semiotics, a lot is done also in the International Semiotics Institute in Imatra. Yet, it is good to remember now that semiotics was not so easily recognized in the beginning as something innovative, international and crossing over borderlines, promoting all kinds of progressive ideas – we had to fight for that.

You are not only a semiotician, but also a musicologist, the head of the Department of Musicology in the University of Helsinki. How would you compare the situation of these two disciplines at the University?

As a science, musicology is clearly fascinating, perhaps the most difficult discipline in the humanities. It requires a double competence: you have to be a musician, to see music from the inside, to be able to play, to perform it. And, at the same time, you have to master the humanities – to be able to write. Combining these two things is an extremely demanding task, which takes years of preparation. That is why it is very sad that we have to conform to the Bologna reform, which is diminishing the amount of credits. People need a lot of time in order to become really good musicologists.

Still, the relationship between musicology and musical semiotics seem to be as based on mutual understanding. In some conservative mainstream musicological centres, as Germany, or Great Britain, they would still ask, what this musical semiotics can offer to us, how can we use it? What would be your answer to such a question?

Well, the answer is certainly that this is the fate of anything new that one tries to bring to any science. All the novelties always encounter the resistance from the people who are more conservative, or the ones who just want to keep the tradition. Which, of course, is also necessary, no doubt about that. But I see it only as a question of time – already now we can see how the semiotic ideas have been adopted even by the traditional-minded musicologists, like Carl Dahlhaus, for instance, who had taken some ideas from semiotics and structuralism. But, of course, in some countries conservative skeptical approaches are very strong, like in Germany. Vladimir Karbusicky was quite alone in Hamburg, for a long time the only music semiotician there.

On the other hand, the borders between semiotics and, say, hermeneutics and phenomenology, are not so abrupt. I think these approaches, at least in the Europe, belong to the same field and are very closely linked.