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**Semiotics of trash:
towards an ecosemiotic paradigm**

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Introduction

Global environmental problems that humans face today indicate that there must be something wrong with our relationship of nature. The accumulation of waste material constitutes one such problem – all around the world landfills fill up too soon and have to close down while it is becoming more and more difficult to open new ones as nobody is willing to have others' trash in their 'backyard'. Many authors have suggested that global environmental problems originate in the culturally constituted, particularly Western ways of classifying and understanding the surrounding world, and they have concluded that ecological knowledge alone is not sufficient to understand or solve the ecological problems, 'since these are consequences of certain deeply semiotic and cultural processes, intertwined with ecological and biological ones' (Kull 1998, 366). In my thesis I am arguing that trash – as material and as a concept – operates as an indicator of the cultural conception of nature and can be employed as means to describe the relationship between culture and nature.

The phenomenon of trash has been rarely addressed in the cultural theoretical literature save in archaeology which is the only discipline that systematically and exclusively attempts to make sense of discards. But even archaeologists do not study trash as such, for them it appears as 'data'. Human castoffs can indeed tell much about the habits of those who have left them behind, as archaeological experience suggests, but this rich source of information has been seriously underexploited so far, probably for the reason that trash is generally considered to be an undignified subject. It is not only considered undignified but also contagious, as I will demonstrate later. One cannot poke its nose into it, even if only figuratively, and keep the distance necessary for objective representation. Trash is a cultural, quite often personal matter. The study of trash is first of all a remark on ourselves, on our culture. One of the purposes of this thesis is to focus on this phenomenon, to bring it to the center from the margins of cultural theory, and to demonstrate the creative potential inherent in trash.

As a semiotician my primary object of analysis, however, is not the bulk of material discard but trash as a cultural concept. This thesis can be interpreted as an exercise in the semiotic construction of an object of analysis – the semiotic definition

of trash emerges in the course of the argument. This is also the reason why I have largely used the original terms of the referenced authors. To distinguish my own perspective I have chosen to systematically utilize ‘trash’ – *prügi* in Estonian. This choice was motivated by the intuition that these terms are most commonly used in both languages to refer to human discards in the most general, also in the metaphorical sense. According to the Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language ‘trash’ refers to – ‘1. anything worthless or useless; 2. foolish or pointless ideas, talk, or writing; nonsense. 3. a worthless or disreputable person. 4. such persons collectively. 5. literary or artistic material of poor or inferior quality. 6. broken or torn bits, as twigs, splinters, rags, or the like. 7. that which is broken or lopped off from anything in preparing it for use. 8. the refuse of sugar cane after the juice has been expressed. 9. to remove the outer leaves of (a growing sugar cane plant). 10. to free from superfluous twigs or branches’ (Webster’s 1996, 1507). I am not going to deal explicitly with the questions of terminology, or translation in this thesis since these constitute an independent topic for analysis.

When I say that my object of analysis is the concept, or to be even more precise, the process of conceptual modeling of the environment, it does not mean that the results are not applicable to ‘real’ trash. The main purpose of my thesis is to suggest a semiotic framework for further analysis of trash – to formulate an outline of a research project that could also account for the ecological dimension of trash production. This framework should form a basis for doing practical research later helping to formulate research questions and interpret the answers. It should enable the analysis of all types of texts, from everyday behavior to highly formalized cultural texts.

In my thesis I have started carrying out this project by drafting an overview of semiotically relevant approaches to trash. More space has been dedicated to two lines of argument in two different traditions of thought as they have been presented by two distinguished authors. These authors and the particular texts have been chosen to be referenced because these are the few who have explicitly addressed the problem of trash in the context of their semiotic work. Chapter I introduces the structural anthropological paradigm of dirt which was established by Mary Douglas in her study of the concepts of pollution and taboo (Douglas 2000 [1966]). Drawing from other authors, I have carried her analysis further and reformulated the structural definition of dirt in the context of Y. Lotman’s model of the semiosphere. The description of the

role of waste in consumer society in Chapter II is based exclusively on the analyses by Jean Baudrillard. His theory of consumer society occupies a central position in this chapter (Baudrillard 1998 [1979]). In Chapter III I propose the ecosemiotic paradigm as an alternative to and a broader paradigm for the analysis of trash. The ecosemiotic viewpoint emerges in the larger tradition of Peircean semiotics within which it is concentrating on the problem of semiotic relationships of culture and nature, offering a possibility to transcend the dualism of both structural and poststructural perspectives.

Despite, or perhaps, owing to the taboo people have studied trash in their daily life as well as academically. I have already mentioned archaeologists. In 1973 the archaeological method was officially adopted on the purpose of studying contemporary society. That year William Rathje initiated the Arizona Garbage Project in the University of Arizona. His students sifted through people's discards, and conducted excavations in the landfills to gather information about the U.S. American consumer behavior, landfill situation, biodegradation and the recycling of trash (see Rathje and Murphy 1993). The approach was called 'garbology' and its main aim was to study human behavior 'from the back end'. Garbologists were the first to declare and make practical use of the connection between culture and trash.

Unlike the Arizona garbologists who believed that 'to understand garbage you have to touch it, to feel it, to sort it, to smell it' (Rathje and Murphy 1993, 9), other scholars have attempted to 'sift through the trash' without getting their hands dirty. In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas discussed dirt as a category which accompanies the creation of, and helps to sustain the cultural order of perception (Douglas 2000 [1966]). Associating dirt with the ambivalent and dynamic boundary areas she discerned the innovative side of dirt. When Ilya Prigogine won the Nobel Prize for his work on the thermodynamics of nonequilibrium systems in 1977 it opened new theoretical perspectives for scholars at the edges of anthropological theory who took also interest in trash.¹ Trash served as a node which connected general systems theory with more anthropocentric approaches to culture and society. In that way trash constituted a doorway to understanding cultural processes. Michael Thompson, a

¹ Myrdene Anderson revealed in personal communication that the publication of Prigogine's theory immediately made her think about trash as a dissipative structure. Many others have had the same idea.

student of Mary Douglas, had been searching in that direction even before – in 1979 he published *Rubbish Theory* where he proposed the model of catastrophism to account for cultural dynamics (Thompson 1979). In 1990 and 1991 the inconspicuously increased interest in trash was manifested in three symposia organized on the subject *Bringing in the Trash* at the annual meetings of the Central States Anthropological Society and Semiotic Society of America.² Some of the papers from the meetings have been published in a special issue of the *American Journal of Semiotics* (vol. 11 (1/2), 1994) edited by Myrdene Anderson and Walter Randolph Adams. Although the majority of contributions deal with trash in its metaphoric sense, a conception of trash as a cultural semiotic process emerges from the issue. Drawing from Saussure's concept of sign, Adams defined trash as a 'concept without sound-image', or 'sound image without concept' (Adams 1994). He stated, among other things, that the environmental problem of the accumulation of trash requires in the first place a semiotic solution.

Quite different semiotics of trash has emerged in the perspective of critical theory. The focus at the (inter)relations of culture and production has led to interesting insights regarding modern discard practices. This perspective highlights the role and nature of the cultural ideological system in relation to human behavior, especially in contemporary Western capitalist society. The writings of Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (Baudrillard 1996 [1968]) and *The Consumer Society* (Baudrillard 1998 [1970]) in particular, express quite elusively the economic logic of (post)modern trash production. This perspective is complemented by a social historical approach by Susan Strasser (Strasser 1992, 1999). She has followed the dynamics between the modes and practices of production, distribution, consumption, and discard in the United States throughout the 20th century while trying to unveil why and how the Western society has come to face the current problems of waste.

Last but not least, the greatest number of books and papers on the subject of trash has been published in the context of waste management and nature protection. In

² Bringing in the Trash (I): Semiotics of Discard and Recycling. Symposium for the 66th Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, Cincinnati, March-April 1990; Bringing in the Trash (II): Discrimination of Incorporation and Discard in Dynamical Systems. Symposium for the 15th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, Norman, Oklahoma, October 1990; Bringing in the Trash (III): Loose Ends – From Oblivion to Opportunity. Symposium for the 67th Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, Ames, Iowa, March 1991.

the framework my present thesis these are of no particular interest here as they are rather instrumental (see for example Alexander 1993). Environmental concern is strongly present in almost all accounts on trash.

The subject of symbolism of trash in the arts is not discussed in the present thesis, although it could and should be included to the general semiotics of trash. The interest in the aesthetic recycling of trash, or making art out of trash has recently increased enormously at both, the practical and theoretical levels. Always at the front line of culture, avant-garde art is also near to trash, and engages in creative dialogue with it. Natalia Zlydneva has analyzed the cultural meanings of trash and related concepts – like that of wasteland (see for example Zlydneva 2002). Shohat and Stam have briefly but compellingly touched upon the relations between trash and art (see Shohat and Stam 1998).

I. Creative margins: dirt as cultural borderline category

In this chapter I will give an overview of the structural anthropological account of the concept of dirt. This account mostly draws from Mary Douglas' path-breaking study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (first published in 1966), but I am referencing also other authors to further illuminate some aspects that derive from this paradigm.

In the structural anthropological context the concept of dirt has the following characteristics:

- The main theoretical tool for making sense of dirt is the concept of boundary. Dirt is defined as the 'residue' of the processes of cultural perception and categorization of the world – anomalous or ambiguous phenomena that do not fit with the given system of classification. It follows that dirt is relative to a particular system of classification.
- As an in-between category dirt usually escapes attention being subject to the 'conspiracy of blindness.'
- Dirt has a vital role in the making of the socio-culturally important distinctions, for example between 'inside' and 'outside', 'us' and 'them', 'culture' and 'nature', and in the maintaining of socio-cultural identity and boundaries between social groups. The human body is an important nexus of the negotiation of categories and identities.
- Dirt is a medium of cultural dynamics. It is used for the transfer between culturally defined categories, as well as between 'culture' and 'non-culture', 'normal' and 'supernatural' spheres.

To pull together the different strands of thought suggested by the structural anthropological approach to dirt Yuri M. Lotman's model of the semiosphere is employed. The semiospheric approach – since it offers an integrated view of the structural and dynamic aspects of culture – enables to account more coherently for the semiotic features and functions of dirt in a social system.

I.1. Dirt as an anomalous category in the structural anthropological approach of Mary Douglas

Ever since the British anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote her influential book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* the (concept of) *boundary* has been the main heuristic tool for making sense of trash. Drawing from and disputing with the classical approaches to taboo and social structure by Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss Mary Douglas was the first to systematically analyze the concept of pollution across cultures and to maintain its connection with the fundamental process of cultural categorization. Douglas claimed that separating ‘pure’ from ‘impure’ and keeping a clear distinction between the two categories is a basic feature of all cultures, primitive or modern. She saw it as a fundamental distinction that contributes to the creation and maintenance of socio-cultural order. The process of creating order involves constant selection and rejection of certain elements. The elements rejected in the perceptual process fall under a common denominator, ‘dirt’.³

The structural tradition in anthropology to which Mary Douglas has contributed rests on the assumption that humans impose order to their surrounding world through structures of categories residing in the minds of people. These structures of categories symbolically represent the ‘outside’ world to humans, give meaning to, enable and orientate their daily (inter)action. Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that the seemingly limitless cultural variation nevertheless manifests and testifies to the same deep universal structure. He identified the binary opposition as the basic structural element/a fundamental logical operation/an immensely fruitful analytical tool which governs all processes of meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1963a [1958], 1963b

³ Mary Douglas has chosen to systematically use ‘dirt’ to refer to the phenomenon in question. The fact that the notion is closely associated with the social sphere can be demonstrated on the basis of the entry of ‘dirt’ in The Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary: ‘**dirt** (dûrt), n. – 1. any foul or filthy substance, as mud, grime, dust, excrement, etc. 2. earth or soil, esp. when loose. 3. something or someone vile, mean or worthless: After the last trick of hers I thought she was dirt. 4. moral filth; vileness; corruption: a sexy novel full of dirt. 5. obscene or licentious language: to talk dirt. 6. gossip esp. of a malicious nature: Give me all the dirt, dearie. 7. an element or elements of the story withheld, esp. by an official agency, usually on the purpose of protecting a person or persons, a nation or prestige, etc. 8. Mining. a. crude, broken ore or waste. b. (in placer mining) the material from which gold is separated by washing. 9. do someone dirt, Slang. To cause another to lose status, an opportunity, or the like, esp. deliberately: He had done his brother dirt just once too often. 10. eat dirt, Slang. to accept criticism or insults without complaint; humble oneself: His creditors made him eat dirt by forcing him into bankruptcy. [ME dirt, drit < Scand; cf. OIcel drit excrement; c. OE drītan].’

[1962]). Aiming to discover a pattern in the extremely varied accounts on ritual prohibition and pollution beliefs, Mary Douglas was led to broaden the question to all, not merely ritual, pollution. She maintained that in respect to the reactions to dirt, moderns are in principle no different from the ‘primitives’ (see her discussion on the validity of the term ‘primitive’ in Douglas 2000 [1966], 79-94): both react in a similar manner to anomalous elements that pose a threat to their cultural order. The modern avoidance of dirt seems to be determined solely by our knowledge of hygiene and pathogenic organisms, but as Douglas remarks, these are quite recent developments whereas humans have shunned dirt from times immemorial. She takes the habit of symbolic organization of the environment to be the universal basis for human dirt-avoidance,

When we honestly reflect on our busy scrubblings and cleanings in this light we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house. If we keep the bathroom cleaning materials away from the kitchen cleaning materials and send the men to the downstairs lavatory and the women upstairs, we are essentially doing the same thing as the Bushman wife when she arrives at a new camp. She chooses where she will place her fire and then sticks a rod in the ground. This orientates the fire and gives it a right and left side. Thus the home is divided between male and female quarters (Douglas 2000 [1966], 70).

Perception, says Douglas, is by no means ‘a matter of passively allowing an organ – say sight or hearing – to receive a ready-made impression from without’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 37). It involves selection and rejection of certain elements. ‘As perceivers we select from all the stimuli falling on our senses only those which interest us, and our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency, sometimes called schema’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 37). Each next stimulus is checked against, adapted to or rejected from the already existent pattern. Adopting a discordant element may lead to the reworking of the whole system which requires additional effort and, for a moment, destabilizes the system, so there is a tendency to rather ignore the not-so-well-fitted stimuli.

Naming sections of the already established pattern further cements the process. ‘Names then affect the way they [objects] are perceived next time: once labeled they are more speedily slotted into the pigeon-holes in future’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 37). Through naming the order is publicly shared, so that it is beyond an

individual will to alter it. Language and other coded systems of expression (for example ritual) instead become determinative of what an individual perceives. The (culture's way of) perception is acquired already as a child through language use, learning, and participation in the communal life. Edmund Leach has described how cultural perception is accomplished through simultaneous use of language and taboo:

I postulate that the physical and social environment of a young child is perceived as a continuum. It does not contain any intrinsically separate "things". The child, in due course, is taught to impose upon this environment a kind of discriminating grid which serves to distinguish the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each labeled with a name. [...]

Now if each individual has to learn to construct his own environment in this way, it is crucially important that the basic discriminations should be clear-cut and unambiguous. There must be absolutely no doubt between *me* and *it*, or between *we* and *they*. [...] We achieve this [...] kind of perception by means of simultaneous use of language and taboo. Language gives us the names to distinguish the things; taboo inhibits the recognition of those parts of the continuum which separate the things. (Leach 1966, 34–35)

For Mary Douglas the development of an individual child models the evolution of a culture as a whole. On both, the individual and collective plane the (perceptual and also physical) organization of one's environment is at the same time the process of creating (perceptual and/or physical) dirt. Selection and rejection are two sides of one and the same process, dirt is the 'negative' pole of (any) order. 'Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (Douglas 2000 [1966], 36).

In Douglas' view it does not suffice to describe culture(s) merely in structural terms. Dirt – as it constantly keeps showing up despite all the efforts to get rid of it for good – draws attention to the processual aspect of culture. Though cultural order appears as perpetual, even rigid, it has to be constantly renewed and recreated, collectively re-enacted. Accordingly, dirt can never be completely eliminated: its tendency to corrupt the order is the driving force behind the processes of (re)organization. 'It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as stone when we get it. /-/ Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise' (Douglas 2000 [1966], 162). Purity is associated with the ideal of structural stability, but dirt with dynamic corruption and creativity.

Rather than any reward or value it tends to be rules and prohibitions that keep individual action (and perception) flowing in the conventional stream-bed. In the

structural anthropological paradigm, pollution beliefs are interpreted primarily as a mechanism of social control. Social structure is built upon perceptual structure; the system of categories is ultimately oriented to a stable functioning of communal life. In a well-known example of hers Douglas analyzes the abominations of Leviticus in the Old Testament as the Israelite culture's means of marking and dealing away with anomalous species: some animals like the pig, or the hare, are declared unclean and hence also inedible purely on the basis of their incompatibility to the given classification of animals. There is scant evidence of a physiological rationale to the Jewish exclusion of pork or the Hindu's exclusion of beef from their diets. Regulations concerning food consumption and preparation provide a practical application and an illustration to the integration of symbolic distinction with the social.

Food consumption tends to be exclusively regulated in most cultures. The distinction between 'edible' and 'inedible' is as fundamental as and closely related to the distinction between 'pure' and 'impure'. Following Durkheim, Douglas and many others who have analyzed the role of dietary rules in social systems the Finnish sociologist Pasi Falk maintains that through the act of the physical consumption of food the socially important distinctions between social groups, the categories of 'inside' and 'outside', 'me' and 'not-me' are negotiated:

This is characteristic of so-called primitive society, in which the ritual sharing of food and its physical incorporation functions simultaneously as an act in which the partaker is incorporated or 'eaten' into the community. Eating together (*com*) the same bread (*panis*) transform eaters into companions, according to the etymological roots. (Falk 1994, 15)

Community consists of people who eat together or eat the same (kind of) food. This principle can be rephrased as 'the community is created of people who abhor the same (kinds of) things.' Falk is also arguing that in the modern society the primary articulation of the *inside/outside* dichotomy lies at the boundary of an individual self whereas in traditional societies it lies at the collective boundaries. This claim opens a perspective for the analysis of differences between the modern and pre-modern conceptions of dirt. One probable inference is that the modern conception of dirt is relatively more individualized and heterogeneous – there is some space which is less strictly regulated so that it leaves space for individual choice (of lifestyle) and

creativity. It should be noted, however, that globalization is also liable for the homogenization of both, the material contents of the trashcan as well as the conception of that what accounts for as trash — through communication of values across cultural boundaries. It is also likely that the modern conception and production of dirt is mainly regulated by structures of another kind. I will address some of these suggestions in Chapter II in relation to Baudrillard's analysis of the consumer society below. In the present context the most significant claim is that food consumption and dirt production alike are at a very fundamental level related to the creation and (re)presentation of (individual or collective) self.

Structural anthropology derives from the ideas of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and heavily relies on language as the primary system of cultural representation. De Saussure postulated that linguistic representation is unmotivated by outside reality, but constitutes a system in itself, created and maintained by the language speaking community (de Saussure 1916). Douglas treats culture upon the linguistic model as a conventional system of (linguistic) representation(s) through which the outside world is given to the members of this culture. Reality in its limitless variety and dynamism is captured in the system of categories only partially and cannot account for all its aspects. The arbitrariness of the system of categories is a result of selective processes at multiple levels. Dirt can exemplify this arbitrariness at any moment as it assembles elements which are not in accord with that system. Therefore contacts with anomalies are culturally sanctioned, except under specific conditions as I will discuss in the next section. As the analysis of different belief systems suggests, the rules and prohibitions do not concern categories themselves but the principle of discrimination itself which forms the basis of all order.

Dirt is an anomalous category itself belonging, on the one hand, to the same series with other cultural categories but on the other hand lacking any positive definition – it is a leftover category for the leftovers of the categorizing process. As a category it appears to be primary and universal emerging from the original act of distinction, but it is also the last resort of cultural signification for items that are excluded from the cultural scheme. At the same time dirt is particular to a given culture. Arising from a specific system of classification that what is considered to be dirty in a given culture may appear to be totally arbitrary and unsystematic to an outside observer. For the analyst dirt appears in a double perspective – as natural

(since she is member of a culture) and arbitrary (since she is an outsider). It is at the same time universal and particular, articulate and unarticulated – as such it evinces a dynamic between stable categories and invites to reflect more profoundly on the processes of cultural categorizing.

I.2. Dealing with dynamism – dirt in ritual context

Douglas has distinguished five types of measures developed by cultures to protect the discriminations and deal with ambiguity: it can be 1) reduced by settling for one or the other interpretation, 2) physically controlled (destroyed, eliminated), 3) perceived ‘positively’ as affirming and strengthening the definitions that it does not conform to, 4) labeled dangerous, or 5) used in ritual for the same end as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence (Douglas 2000 [1966], 39). Under normal conditions dirt is avoided, feared and/or rendered harmless but on specific occasions (certain) people may deliberately seek contact with it. Dirt is not simply dangerous; it is vested with (supernatural) powers. It is connected to the origins of order providing the resource out of which everything has been and can be created. Dirt is incorporated in ritual, healing, witchcraft – people turn to it when the structure has to be rearranged in some aspect, it operates as a medium to contact the original supernatural powers. Its creative potential has been recognized ‘in a great many cosmogonic myths, according to which the world is brought into being through primordial defecation – whether in “vulgar, primitive” accounts of a god’s anal birthing of the universe “along the straight path”, or else in more “civilized” versions that involve creation from dirt or mud’ (Dickson 1994, 164). Unstructured, unlimited, unspecified – it lends itself to a dynamics between the opposites: unclean but sacred, feared but desired, destructive but creative.

Only specific individuals on specific occasions are entitled to get in contact with dirt. Ambiguity and anomaly are embraced in a ritual context, out of the sphere of the normal. One could interpret ritual as just another means for dealing away with dirt, keeping it out of the normal order, in its place. But there is more to ritual than mere reaffirmation of the existent order. Ritual liquidates the fixed and stable cultural categories/meanings enabling culture to account for the dynamism of life processes. The ritual process ‘appears as the operational mode through which the static category

oppositions of the cultural code are transformed, dissolved, and maintained' (Munn 1973, 599). In other words, it is a mechanism that allows, recognizes and regulates change (in meaning).

Victor Turner has analyzed the transformative nature and ritual symbolism of rites of passage (Turner 1967; 1969). The term originates with van Gennep

who saw the dynamic processes of ritual and social life as if they were projected on stage set of static social and temporal categorizations yielding fixed boundaries much like "a house divided into rooms and corridors". The dynamism of life processes requires transition across the boundaries (e.g. from one status to another, from one temporal category or phase to another etc.); this can be effected primarily by ritual action that dramatizes transition and thus articulates the various life processes requiring change with the static, positional ordering of sociocultural categories. In effect ritual is seen as a kind of adjustive procedure for settling the disturbance caused by the diachronic play of life as change or movement across that backdrop of a structurally compartmented sociocultural space. (Munn 1973, 602)

There are important transitions in the life of an individual that tend to be ritualized in all cultures: these include birth, puberty, marriage and death. But also the occasions of acceding to or resigning from an office, or changing from the state of peace into the state of war can be ritually marked. Individuals or groups can undergo the rites of passage. Turner agrees with van Gennep in that ritual as a process should be opposed to the fixed social 'states', or structure. Van Gennep has maintained that all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation,

the first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming stage; in the third phase the passage is consummated. (Turner 1967, 94)

Turner is particularly interested in the intermediary phase of liminality therefore he has studied more closely tribal initiation rites as these have a well-developed liminal phase. 'The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner 1969, 95). The initiates are 'structurally invisible' and often they are

also physically secluded or hidden. Their names could be taken from them and they can be commonly referred to as 'initiates' or 'neophytes'. They have nothing, 'no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship, position: nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows' (Turner 1967, 98). In societies where sex distinctions have great structural importance neophytes are often treated or symbolically represented as sexless or androgynous. Neophytes are completely subordinated to authority of their instructor who is the representative of the society. The liminal phase has its own symbolism which tends to be the same irrespective of the particular 'states' in between which the transfer occurs:

the symbols that represent them are in many societies drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism and other physical processes that have a negative tinge, such as menstruation./-/ The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing, *inter alia*, the dead, or worse still, the un-dead. The metaphor of dissolution is often applied to neophytes; they are allowed to go filthy and identified with the earth, the generalized matter into which every specific individual is rendered down. (Turner 1967, 96)

Turner notes that many symbols of the ritual are ambiguous as they represent at the same time the 'logically antithetical' processes of growth and decay. As an example he mentions 'huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), bear symbolism (for the bear dies in autumn and is 'reborn' in spring), nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and corpse prepared for burial)' (Turner 1967, 99). The ambiguity of the symbols in ritual conveys the dynamism of natural and/or life cycle whereby birth and growth alternate with death and decomposition, each being a precondition for and a result of the other. In the social sphere the transformation and reformulation of old elements into new patterns at the level of an individual or culture as a whole requires the undoing and dissolution of the old structure. Turner like Mary Douglas recognizes the creative potential of dirt. The aim of the liminal phase is to liberate a person not only from the external attributes of her previous social role but also from the corresponding point of view to the world. On the other hand she is thus prepared to accept the knowledge and perception necessary for the undertaking of the new role. In

between, the previously unambiguous system of reference is liquidated; through the use of ambiguous symbols neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. It is a stage of reflection where they are introduced to the cultural metaphysics. Mary Douglas has asserted that 'reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death' (Douglas 2000[1966], 6).

Rites of passage do not simply encompass the decomposing and recomposing of social symbols, the transformation is accompanied with the heightened consciousness towards the origins and the very nature of symbolism/culture/society. It involves reflection on the very principles upon which the cultural order and representation are created, and at the same time it is a symbolic expression of this quandary. On the one hand it is the birthplace of symbolism: it is when and where symbols copulate, when the anti-structure/dirt is embraced in order to fertilize cultural perception. 'The generalizing power of ritual symbolisms lies in their capacity to free a wide range of meanings from their primary matrices in particular situational contexts and to make them into a condensed coinage that can circulate as social communication' (Munn 1973, 588). On the other hand it is the birthplace of society. Through the use of common symbols individuals are introduced and subjected to the common rules and common perception. Turner has claimed that the people who undergo the rites of passage together develop a strong emotional relationship with each other – an egalitarian feeling of *communitas* which constitutes an alternative to the hierarchical mode of interrelationship of individuals in the society (Turner 1969). He has maintained that without this essential generic human bond there would be no society:

a certain life crises, such as adolescence, the attainment of elderhood, and death, varying in significance from culture to culture, the passage from one structural status to another may be accompanied by a strong sentiment of 'humankindness', a sense of generic social bond between all members of society – even in some cases transcending tribal or national boundaries – regardless of their subgroup affiliations or incumbency of structural positions. (Turner 1969, 116)

Liminality puts humans in contact with their human nature: 'betwixt and between' culture and nature, stability and change, temporal and eternal. Liminal rites are seen

as culture's way of accounting to and effecting dynamism. On the one hand they regularly mark and bring about change, on the other hand they reinforce established order.

Rites of passage comprise just one type of ritual, a very significant type whereby individuals or groups are transported across the boundaries of social categories. This is a type of ritual that embraces and (sometimes literally) puts people in contact with dirt. Other types of ritual behavior could be oriented to the separation and/or maintenance of the boundaries of significant sociocultural categories. Drawing from Hubert and Mauss (Hubert and Mauss 1964), Nancy Munn has discussed the sacrifice as a procedure which on the one hand establishes a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds but on the other hand symbolically keeps these worlds apart. The destruction of the victim, 'an icon of the problematic state betwixt and between, functions to establish anew the separation of the two spheres' (Munn 1973, 601). Prescriptions and prohibitions (taboos) constitute a means of ritual preservation of socioculturally important boundaries. These boundaries are often systematically represented and communicated via myths.

Ritual behavior is not confined to religious contexts, but as already demonstrated, it is related to culture as a conventional symbolic system. Thus our behavior in modern contexts could also be analyzed in terms of ritual. Quoting O'Donnell (O'Donnell 1991) Walter Randolph Adams has discussed the ritual aspect of the commonplace practice of putting the refuse into a plastic garbage bag whereby one's refuse is symbolically separated from her and disappears as if through magic (Adams 1994). It amounts to another interesting anthropological project concerning trash to exhibit the modern myths and rituals of dirt, especially if it will be done in the manner of Horace Miner's illustrious piece 'Body ritual among the Nacirema' (Miner 1956).

I.3. Topology of dirt

The body boundaries

The body is a locus of negotiation of a number of basic categories, for example culture and nature, inside and outside, individual and society. Substances that cross the body boundary – come out from or go into the body – tend to be surrounded by

ritual in all cultures. Blood, excreta, pus, snot, spit, vomit, clippings, dead bodies or body parts, just to mention a few, under normal circumstances are treated as unclean and tend to be tabooed, but on certain occasions or in the hands of ritual specialists these substances spread magical power: they are used on ritual ends – for witchcraft and/or healing. In her article ‘Sacred waste: Human body parts as universal sacraments’ Phyllis Passariello has argued that recycled human body parts and fluids have been cross-culturally used on communicative purposes with the supernatural. ‘The uses vary on a continuum from direct physical re-use (as in blood transfusions, organ donation, cannibalism, etc.) to indirect, symbolic re-use (as in saints’ reliquaries, placenta rituals, body worship, etc.)’ (Passariello 1994, 110). For example, the sacrament of the holy communion of the Christian church – where the bond with the divinity is renewed through the (symbolic) consumption of the blood and body of Christ – combines physical and symbolic consummation.

Mary Douglas interprets the tendency to ritually mark body boundaries on the basis of universal symbolism: ‘what is being carved in human flesh is an image of society’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 117). Following the Durkheimian tradition of social thought she maintains that the body lends itself to analogy with the society: different body parts can be associated with different groups and/or functions that have to be performed in the society. Pressures and anxieties related to the maintenance of social boundaries find expression in the heightened attention to body boundaries. Douglas thus associates the strict rules of the Hindu Brahmins – to take daily baths, to not accept cooked food from lower castes and sexual regulations concerning Brahmin women – with the threats to caste purity.

At the same time she and Michael Thompson have derived from a description of V. S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness*,

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. /-/ These squatting figures – to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin’s Thinker – are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. They might be regarded as a part of permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist. A collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world. They are required by their religion to take a bath

every day. This is crucial and they have devised minute rules to protect themselves from every conceivable contamination. There is only one pure way to defecate; in lovemaking only the left hand is to be used; food is to be taken only with the right. It has all been regulated and purified. To observe the squatters is therefore distorting; it is to fail to see through the truth. (quoted in Thompson 1979, 4)

The description has inspired Michael Thompson to identify a specific type of behavior – conspiracy of blindness – that is exercised towards negatively valued things in culture (Thompson 1979). The convention not to perceive dirt works for those who have subscribed to it and serves as a resolution to the tension between perception and rejection. The conspiracy of blindness towards dangerous matter is by no means limited to pre-modern societies. One simply has to recall how we fail to see the trash and pollution we create, personally and collectively. Our culture has created trashcans, municipal garbage removal, flowing water, drainage, flushing toilets, disposable diapers, dishes, handkerchiefs – everything is done to keep our dirt out of sight. Or think about the social norms that prescribe to ignore dirt, beggars and scavengers in the street rather than to deal with them, or consider Michael Thompson's insight into how orderly people quite unreflectively carry their snot around in their pockets.

Mary Douglas claims that in each case the particular behavior becomes comprehensible in relation to the particular sociocultural structure. The Indian caste system ensures that the people from higher castes do not have to deal with dirt: the jobs that require contact with dirt, like washing clothes, cutting hair, dressing corpses, have been entitled to the lowest castes. 'The whole system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and praying and the most despised parts carry away waste matter' (Douglas 2000 [1966], 124). The higher castes have set up rules to protect themselves from pollution arising from contact with the lower castes and waste matter that is more polluting to them than to the lower castes. The cooking and serving of food is ritually very strongly marked because 'food is produced by the combined efforts of several castes of varying degrees of purity. Before being admitted to the body, some clear symbolic break is needed to express food's separation from necessary but impure contexts. The cooking process, entrusted to pure hands, provides this ritual break' (Douglas 2000 [1966], 128). Food

constitutes a social code, what is edible under which circumstances for whom (see for example Counihan and Van Esterik 1997).

Sexual intercourse is another realm that tends to be extensively marked and regulated. Douglas describes how in some Hindu tribes high caste women are married off or ritually married to furnishings even before puberty to ensure caste purity. The castes constitute closed local subsystems in the community and the clear-cut boundaries are maintained with the help of strict marital/sexual regulation. As children inherit their caste from the mother, women are seen as an entrance to the caste and their purity has to be guaranteed – they have to be made inaccessible to the men from the wrong group. Although less severely, also male sexuality is regulated, ‘both male and female physiology lend themselves to the analogy with the vessel which must not pour away or dilute its vital fluids’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 127). Pollution ideas related to the body are interpreted in the light of social pollution: the greater the social pressures to group boundaries, the more attention is paid to bodily distinction. Douglas has observed that the societies where social categorization is not structurally explicitly regulated, e.g. legally, are more concerned with ritual purity. Pollution ideas constitute a power by which the structure is expected to protect itself.

The elaborateness of cultural (cognitive) distinction and correspondingly great number of accompanying rules and prohibitions is positively correlated to status, ‘the person who protects himself most anxiously from various forms of defilement is also the person who enjoys the greatest prestige and who has the advantage over others’ (Bataille 1993 [1976], 67). Quite in accord with Douglas’ reason, Bataille has argued that status is measured in distance from dirt/nature, in the case of individuals as well as of societies. Drawing upon Lévi-Strauss he claims that the origins of culture are tied to the negation of nature; the distinction between nature and culture is maintained through prohibitions, first of all the prohibition of incest. Anything that relates man to his natural origins is suppressed, concealed, surrounded with prohibitions. The bodily functions of (re)production are concurrently withdrawn to darkness and secrecy, disgust towards the (by)products of bodily functioning is learned in the course of socialization. Bataille argues that children do not share the grown-ups’ horror of dirt – ‘What are children if not animals becoming humans,’ he reflects (Bataille 1993 [1976], 65), ‘we tear them away from nature by washing them then by dressing them’ (Bataille 1993 [1976], 63). It is through the control and command of her body that an individual is grown into a member of the society.

In *Discipline and Punish* and in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault has argued that individuals are included into systems of power and production through their bodies (Foucault 1976; 1979). The public performances of torture and execution inscribing the social order to the individual body have been replaced in the modern era with discourses and disciplines that shape the body in accord with the ‘machine-image’ of the society. The discourses on the body are efficient in creating identities whereby social control of the body becomes ‘internalized’. The body is constructed as a boundary area, a filter, a screen and a site/medium of communication between individual and society/discourse.

In her analysis Mary Douglas has stated that ‘the body is a model that can stand for any bounded system’ (Douglas 2000 [1966], 116), but also, that the body itself is constructed along the lines of social structure. Douglas did not engage in discussion about the special status of the body further than that. But the body can be identified as a nexus where the theoretical threads cross, or originate. The body can be used as a model for and a primary locus of dirt production.

The body presents us with dilemmas: it is the site of distinction and violation of these distinctions. It is dirt and sacred vessel. Everything that has been stated about anomaly and ambiguity so far applies to the body and arises from the body. The body is a site of (re)production of culture and society. Its (re)creative powers and dynamics are constantly turned into and imprisoned as signs which at the same time obscure and evoke their origins. It is chiasmic – as already mentioned it is the place of negotiation of most important distinctions: self and other, inside and outside, here and there, nature and culture, private and public, form and matter.

It was most firmly established in the phenomenological tradition of thought that being in the world is embodied. One’s body is the medium of perception and action in the environment, and the zero-point of orientation (see Husserl 1999, Merleau-Ponty 1999 [1962], Holenstein 1999 [1985]).⁴ The body is a medium of experiencing the unity of being in/of the world, but also the means of separation. It is one’s body surface that separates him/her from and puts him/her in contact with the environment through the senses. But also the body itself is immediately split: on the one hand into the ‘lived’ and ‘perceived’, ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, *Leib und Körper* (Husserl), and on the other hand into ‘surface’ and ‘visceral’, ‘visible’ and

⁴ I have been unable to identify the original year of publication of the text by Husserl.

‘invisible’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘flesh and blood’ (see Leder 1999 [1990]). Upon observing, touching and seeing one’s own body, the relationship with the ‘outside’ world is constituted – the world is modeled upon the body. Analogously to the body, objects are assumed to have a perceivable and cognizable surface, and ‘invisible inside’, a spatial and material ‘being’. The sensory, physical contact with objects on the other hand carves out the perceiving subject, establishing her difference from the rest of the world. One’s body is at the same time ‘me’ and ‘not me’, a material object related to other objects in the world (part of material and energetic processes), but also the medium which determines that and how the external world appears (to ‘me’). The body surface, or flesh, is in between, delimiting the self from and planting her in the world. The in-betweenness of flesh (‘a thing ‘inserted’ between the rest of material world and the ‘subjective’ sphere’ Husserl 1999, 36) could be one of the reasons why it has been so often ‘trashed’. And probably for the same reason even more so the materials that transcend the boundaries and channels through which the exchange with the outside world occurs.

The body also constitutes an entrance to the specifically human, symbolic world. Jacques Lacan demonstrated that the development of a human self and acquiring sensory-motor control over one’s body is critically related to perceiving oneself as a whole. With one’s body becoming an object of (visual) perception, a self recognizes itself in the image, yet maintains its difference from it. At about the same age, between 6-18 months, or the so-called mirror phase, an infant learns to refer to herself by the personal pronoun ‘I’. Linguistic naming gives the perceived object, permanence and identity so that it is recognized in its sameness across different acts of perception over time. The image of her body provides a person with a door to the cultural realm of the Symbolic. Self-consciousness emerges together with and from the differentiation between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, and is accomplished and fixed in language use.

Dirt as a category at the boundary of the semiosphere

To pull together the different strands of thought suggested by the structural anthropological approach to dirt I will employ Yuri M. Lotman’s model of the semiosphere (see Lotman 1990; 1992; 1999). The semiospheric approach – since it offers an integrated view of the structural and dynamic aspects of culture – enables to

account more coherently for the semiotic features and functions of dirt in a social system.

By the term ‘semiosphere’ Lotman refers to semiotic entities/selves/spaces that are distinct from their environment. One of its most distinctive features is the existence of boundary that both separates and unites the semiosphere with its surroundings. The boundary is not described as a rigid barrier but rather as a filter or a membrane (like a membrane of a cell) that selectively allows exchange between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ realms. Lotman takes the boundary to be an *area* of fervent semiotic activity where one type of semiosis – a set of texts generated on the basis of the same algorithm – comes into contact with an alien type of semiosis – with texts that are created on the basis of a different algorithm and that cannot be decoded from the point of view of the first. In other words, texts of an alien semiotic do not make sense and could therefore be (mis)treated as not texts at all.

Boundary areas are exceptional and differ from the ‘normal’ cultural sphere in many respects. Since these are the places where different types of semiosis meet and mingle boundary areas have to be at least double-coded. It means that boundary structures ‘make sense’ from the point of view of at least two different algorithms/systems of coding. The double-codedness enables transfer and translation between different codes and spheres. The exchange and introduction of new texts constitutes one of the main mechanisms of cultural dynamics.

On the one hand, the totality of human culture as distinguished from (the rest of) nature can be treated as ‘the semiosphere’ by analogy with the biosphere.⁵ On the other hand, each entity which is separated from its environment by a boundary and is characterized by inner heterogeneity (contains more than one code) constitutes an independent semiosphere, part of ‘the semiosphere’.⁶ I will not be able to delve deep into the principles of the semiospheric model here, but I would instead like to emphasize some aspects that help to shape my argument about the semiotic status of dirt. First, the semiosphere is also described in terms of a ‘semiotic subject’ that has its own subjective ‘sense of self’ – an ‘idea’ of itself as a separate and homogenous

⁵ The similarities and dissimilarities, the influence of Vernadsky’s concept of biosphere to Lotman’s model of the semiosphere have been discussed for example by Kotov 2002.

⁶ In the Peircean tradition of semiotics semiosphere is seen to include also the whole of biosphere. Jesper Hoffmeyer even goes so far as to say: “[F]rom a biosemiotic point of view, the biosphere appears as a reductionist category which will have to be understood in the light of the yet more comprehensive category of the semiosphere” (Hoffmeyer 1997: 934). This argument is developed in greater detail in Chapter III.

entity. Therefore, we can for example address individual subjects, cultural groups, or national cultures in terms of semiosphere. Moreover, there are no boundaries, or entities, that are ‘objectively’ given but they always appear to observers in a particular context and perspective (which may sometimes be termed as ‘objective’):

An important criterion here is the question of who is perceived as the subject in a given system, for example, the subject of the law in legal texts of the given culture, or the ‘personality’ of a particular system of socio-cultural encoding. The notion of ‘personality’ is only identified with a physical individual in certain cultural and semiotic conditions. Otherwise it may be a group, it may or may not include property, it may be associated with a certain social, religious or moral position. The boundary of a personality is a semiotic boundary. For instance, a wife, children, slaves, vassals may in some systems be included in the personality of the master, patriarch, husband, patron, suzerain, and not possess any individual status of their own; whereas in other systems they are treated as separate individuals. (Lotman 1990, 138)

So, secondly it should be noted that the location of the boundary (between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’) depends on the position of the observer. Disturbances arise when different methods of encoding disagree. It follows from the previous points that the semiosphere can also be described as a mesh of boundaries upon which homogeneity is imposed through (self-)description.

In addition to contact and exchange with an ‘outside’, a constant flux of structures also occurs inside the semiosphere – over a number of internal boundaries. The inside of the semiosphere is so organized that the structures considered to be most important from the point of view of the culture’s self-description comprise the center, while less important structures remain at its periphery. However, central structures face stagnation and are gradually replaced by new structures that are born and move in from the ‘creative margins’. The dynamics in culture is achieved by two processes: structural drift within the semiosphere and permanent flow over the external boundaries of the semiosphere.

In the context of the semiospheric model dirt can be defined as a category marking the boundary of the semiosphere. The characterization of dirt in the structural anthropological paradigm is compatible with the description of the role and function of the boundary of the semiosphere. Dirt is related to the minimal, yet fundamental distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. It is a category that does not conform to the rules of ‘normal’ cultural space. Dirt is characterized by maximum

heterogeneity on the one hand, and minimal distinction on the other, as it assembles most diverse phenomena under a single label.⁷ Everything is potentially dirt and dirt has enormous potential. Located in the area of most fervent semiotizing processes – the area of contact between different types of coding – dirt is constantly contested. What seems to be dirt (or the boundary) from one perspective does not necessarily appear so in another. Every semiotic entity has a tendency to put (its) dirt to its outer limits.

The act of differentiation (of ‘inside’ from ‘outside’ and ‘self’ from ‘other’) is at the same time an act of organizing space. The North-American social historian Susan Strasser has pointed out that the activities of sorting and classification by which trash is created have a spatial dimension: this goes here, that goes there:

Nontrash belongs in the house; trash goes outside. Marginal categories get stored in marginal places (attics, basements, and outbuildings), eventually to be used, sold, or given away. Douglas calls special attention to the boundaries and margins – especially the boundaries of the body and, by analogy, those of the household and the city – as locations for purifying activities. Indeed, disposal takes place in the intersection between the private and the public, the borderland where the household meets the city, the threshold between the male and female ‘spheres’ of the nineteenth century. (Strasser 1999, 6)

She describes many practices that demonstrate the importance of physical margins to the history of trashmaking and disposal. The habits of throwing garbage out of the door and emptying the dishwasher out of the window have been forgotten for about a century now, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to find locations for new landfills and trash incinerators. Nobody wants to have trash, not to speak of others’ trash, in their ‘backyard’ any more. NIMBY – ‘Not In My Back Yard’ – has become a widely spread acronym in the English speaking world referring to the attitude, or the people who seek to keep some dangerous or unpleasant feature (landfill, incinerator, rehabilitation center for criminals or drug addicts etc) out of their neighborhood. In today’s world of global economy getting rid of waste materials has become an issue of money and power:

⁷ The more recent developments in terminology and practices of distinguishing between and separating different ‘kinds’ of trash in relation to recycling processes refer to changes in this concept. The actual division of/within the category relativizes (at least some of the) discards enabling to perceive them as a possible resource and a part of the production cycle. I will give some consideration to the aspect of change in the contemporary conception of trash in Chapter III.

American cities and towns no longer operate swill yards or piggeries at the city limits, but they do maintain landfills and incinerators in places that are out of the way of all but the poorest citizens. The rural/urban cusp – the site for bales of recyclable paper awaiting a market and for abandoned cars squashed for scrap or organized in junkyards – has grown over time. Larger institutions and more complex technologies have enabled cities to move garbage and sewage farther from their points of origin, even to export toxic wastes to ‘underdeveloped’ countries. (Strasser 1999, 7)

Attempting to reconstruct the sociocultural world of the distant past from the random scraps that have somehow preserved to our day, the archaeologists have actually put the principle – of identifying the boundaries of socially and culturally important categories according to their habits of trash disposal – into practical use:

In the central European Neolithic there is a shift through time from the deposition of refuse in pits along the sides of houses to discard away from houses towards the edges of the settlements. The deposition of ‘dirt’ marks salient social and cultural boundaries between clean and dirty, culture and nature, us and them. The change in discard behavior in the European Neolithic is associated with the increased definition of group boundaries beyond the household level. It seems that as larger groups were increasingly well demarcated, so refuse ‘dirt’, initially used to mark the boundaries around the house, was used to help define larger entities. (Hodder 1986, 76)

Lotman has pointed out how boundary places tend to be inhabited by socially marginalized groups – the spatial and social boundaries coincide:

When the semiosphere involves real territorial features as well, the boundary is spatial in the literal sense. The isomorphism between different kinds of human settlement – from archaic ones to Renaissance and Enlightenment plans for ideal cities – and ideas about the structure of the cosmos have often been remarked on. Hence the appeal of the centre for the most important cultic and administrative buildings. Less valued social groups are settled on the periphery. Those who are below any social value are settled on the frontier of the outskirts (the etymology of the Russian word for outskirts [predmest’*e*] means ‘before the place’ [pered mestom] i.e. before the city, on its boundaries), by the city gate, in the suburbs. If we think of this on a vertical scale then these ‘outskirts’ will be lofts and cellars, and in the modern city the metro. If the centre for ‘normal’ life is the flat, then the boundary space between *home* and *non-home* is the staircase and entrance. And these are the spaces which marginalized social groups make ‘their own’: the homeless, the drug addicts, young people. Other boundary places are public places such as stadia and cemeteries. There is a significant change in the accepted norms of behavior when moving from the boundary to center. (Lotman 1990, 140).

Dirt has a tendency to accumulate in marginal places and marginalize places where it accumulates. All these examples indicate that every trash deposit – in both its literal and metaphoric senses – marks a semiotic boundary.

In the context of my thesis it is important to observe that dirt also appears at the borderline of nature and culture.

Since the boundary is a necessary part of the semiosphere and there can be no ‘us’ if there is no ‘them’, culture creates not only its own type of internal organization but also its own type of external ‘disorganization’. (Lotman 1990, 142)

Within the structuralist paradigm nature only emerges as a cultural interpretation of its ‘outside’. When the semiosphere is adopted to denote the total sphere of human culture, nature is constructed as the universal ‘Other’. Dirt becomes, on the one hand, a means for the separation of the two spheres, but on the other hand, it can also serve as a means of communication between those spheres as it happens in ritual. The ritual and cleaning practices related to the human body symbolically separate the cultural being from the biological organism while this distinction is maintained by tabooing body dirt. On special occasions that I have described above in greater detail people are supposed to go filthy to get in contact with the ‘outside’ sphere.

The category of dirt also plays a significant role from the perspective of cultural dynamics. It is a means for pushing unwanted elements into semiotic periphery, and beyond. By labeling something as ‘dirt’ (also ‘trash’, ‘rubbish’, ‘shit’ etc) the semiotic status of the object is changed radically. The object is stripped of its function, name and distinction – it loses all its worth. In addition to the semiotic relocation it could also be replaced in space (by physical discard).

Describing the dynamics of semiosphere, Lotman provides an extensive analysis of the processes of incorporating ‘external’ structures into the ‘internal’ sphere – of translation and transformation of texts. He is somewhat less explicit about the opposite movement from center to periphery, from the internal to the external sphere which is however equally important from the point of view of cultural dynamics. The concept of recycling illustrates this double movement: dirt is marginalized and/or externalized, so that it could become subject to re-coding in a new context later and re-enter the cultural sphere. Recycling is thus a double process

of translation entailing double movement across the boundary. Recycling in this context is first and foremost a semiotic process of re-coding.

Lotman has addressed the importance of semiotic discard, or forgetting, to cultural dynamics in his article about cultural memory (Lotman 1992 [1985]). He discusses various examples from cultural history which demonstrate how texts that have purposefully expelled from the cultural sphere have been 'discovered' as new a few centuries later. When the cultural paradigm of remembering and forgetting is transformed the once rejected texts resurface – sometimes in the literal sense of the word – and are recoded in a new cultural context, they can become a source of cultural innovation for example the re-emergence of Aristotle's works in the Middle Ages.

II. Valuable waste: Jean Baudrillard on the symbolic function of discard in consumer society

The purpose of this chapter is to take a closer look at the functionality of waste in consumer society as it has been explained by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1998 [1970]).⁸

Baudrillard maintains that

- Waste is a basic structural-functional aspect of consumer society. It comprises a mechanism for generating social hierarchy and communicating one's social status. Waste in this context functions as a sign of affluence – the more you can afford to waste the better off you seemingly are.
- Since in consumer society 'real' structural differences (of class and status) have been replaced by the process of communication of difference – of creating distinction arbitrarily with the help of visible signs – the need to participate in the social scene constitutes the mechanism for creating the market and inducing economic growth. The constant need for new sign-objects for the communication of socio-economic distinctions provides us with the rationale to define growth society – the society that is based on lack and poverty – as the opposite of affluent society.
- The humans' need for distinction and communication has been put to the service of maintaining the system of production. Inducing growth, therefore also wasting, has become the highest virtue in consumer society. The articulate egalitarian values and responsibility towards others and nature are overruled by the ethics of consumption. Consumption – as a play of arbitrary differences, of signs – has become a means of social control.
- The combination of articulate and inarticulate levels has created a system (of production) that automatically reproduces itself. Individual will plays no role in this system, and there are no ways to break free from it. All controversies are dealt away by turning them into signs and inserting them into discourse.

⁸ The translator of Baudrillard's text into English has chosen to systematically translate the French *déchets* as 'waste'. I have retained this word as it conveys nicely also the more abstract principle of waste that lies at the bottom of consumer society.

- No solution to the environmental problems can be discerned in this paradigm. Nature and natural catastrophes are also turned into signs that are re-cycled to correspond to the goals of consumer society – to create and communicate social distinction. Humans' total control over nature is declared in the creation of artificial materials.

Baudrillard's approach has been complemented with an argument from Susan Strasser who observes the links between 'waste' and 'want' indicating that the change towards consumer culture is induced partly by the transformation of the relationship between waste and want in the common consciousness.

II.1. Consumption as a code

The structural model lays a foundation for the understanding of trash, but it does not account for many aspects of the phenomenon related particularly to (post)modern culture and society. Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumer society on the one hand relies on the tradition of French structuralism and on the other hand on the presumption of a radical break between the modern and pre-modern societies. His aim is to describe no more, no less, than the operational logic of contemporary society which is governed by 'the structural law of value'. Values and social relations in this type of society have been replaced by sign processes. Apart from its performing the function of inducing growth in the capitalist economy, waste in this society functions as a sign of specific nature. In his analysis Baudrillard concentrates on the functionality of waste at the symbolic level. His conception of waste is structural and emerges from his general theory of consumer society.

To understand Baudrillard's point of view, his definition of 'consumption' has to be specified. Consumption for Baudrillard does not primarily consist in 'a frenzy of buying a profusion of commodities' (Ritzer 1998, 15), as connoted in everyday speech, but it rather denotes a symbolic system/process. Consumption is a process whereby objects are turned into signs (i.e., they are treated as signifiers for something else, for example of social status) and inserted into a culturally determined series of other sign-objects. What is consumed then are the relations of the sign to other signs,

in other words, its meaning. Baudrillard defines consumption as an unlimited semiosis where signifiers endlessly refer to other signifiers.

To become object of consumption, an object must first become a sign. That is to say: it must become external, in a sense, to a relationship that it now merely signifies. It is thus *arbitrary* – and not inconsistent with that concrete relationship: it derives its consistency, and hence its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign-objects. Only in this context can it be ‘personalized’, can it become part of the series, and so on; only thus can it be consumed, never in its materiality, but in its *difference*. (Baudrillard 1996 [1968], 200)

Baudrillard analyzes consumption in its two aspects: the semiotic and the social. As a process of signification and communication, consumption appears as ‘a system of exchange, and the equivalent of a language’ and becomes thus subject to structural analysis (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 60). In the social dimension consumption functions as ‘a process of classification and social differentiation in which sign-objects are ordered not merely as significant differences in a code but as status values in a hierarchy’ (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 60). The two dimensions are in fact intertwined in consumption, as social status in the (post)modern society is a matter of communication rather than of any ‘real’ difference.

Before I proceed with the discussion of consumer society, it is necessary at the outset to touch upon the question of transition from modernity to postmodernity in relation to Baudrillard’s writings. In popular consciousness Baudrillard is often treated as *the* postmodern theorist. It is generally agreed by his critics and/or adherents, that his first three major works – *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society* (1970), *For the Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), although they address a change in the social logic, do not themselves yet break with the logic of modernity (about discussions on Baudrillard’s writings and the transition from modernity to postmodernity, see for example: Best and Kellner 1991; Kellner 1994; Ritzer 1998; Poster 2001). Baudrillard’s becoming a postmodernist is related to his parting of ways with and his criticism of the Marxist theory in *The Mirror of Production* (1973). The break is observable when we consider Baudrillard’s style of writing and method of analysis that becomes increasingly metaphoric and fragmented in the 1980s, likening his texts more to literary than academic writing. No real disruption, however, is recognizable in the subject matter of his analyses. The issues of commodification, disappearance and replacement of reality by signs, and the

domination of the code, are already central to Baudrillard's earlier writings and are only fully elaborated in his later creations. It would be appropriate to argue, then, that the transition from modern to postmodern consciousness takes place in and through the writings of Baudrillard (and some other authors). While Baudrillard is observing a change in the social logic and struggling to fit it into old conceptual structures for analytic purposes in his earlier writings (*The Consumer Society* included), he later decides to abandon the conceptual tools belonging to the previous era and acquires a language characteristic to and appropriate for the description of the current situation. His theory of the consumer society in this light could be viewed as a part of and a reflection upon an ongoing transition. Especially in more recent writings, Baudrillard relies on the aspect of discontinuity between the modern and postmodern conditions. He takes the rupture between the modern and postmodern societies to be as great as the break between the modern and pre-modern ones (see Kellner 1994). In his view, modern societies operated upon the logic of production whereas postmodern societies are dominated by the logic of simulation (see for example Baudrillard 1983). 'Consumption' is a concept that marks the conversion from one type of logic to another by its virtue of belonging to both—to the logic of production (as a part of the vicious circle of growth) as well as to the emerging logic of simulation.

Although consumption is defined primarily as a code, 'the code by which the entire society communicates and converses' (Baudrillard 1998 [1970] 79), it is at the service of social differentiation and social control. The basis for social inequality has shifted from the material sphere to the symbolic sphere of consumption. Differences between social groups do not reside in the quantity of objects they possess but in the 'style' of consumption, in following the fashion and displaying the right brand names – in the unstable realm of signs. Baudrillard maintains that, contrary to the popular ideology of the homogenizing effects of consumption, it instead reinforces social inequality. Social inequality reproduces the desire to distinguish oneself or to rise in the social hierarchy through increasing consumption which boosts up the cycle of production. In other words, 'lack' and 'poverty' appear as structural features of the consumer society in Baudrillard's analysis:

Before being a society productive of goods, it is in fact a society productive of privileges. Now, there is a necessary, sociologically definable relationship between *privilege* and *penury*. There could not (in any society whatever) be privilege without penury. The two are structurally linked.

Growth is, therefore, by its social *logic*, paradoxically defined by the reproduction of a structural penury. That penury no longer has the same sense as primary penury (a dearth of *goods*): that could be regarded as provisional and it is, in part, overcome in our societies, but the structural penury which substitutes for it is definitive since it is *systematized* as a booster function and power-strategy in the very logic of the order of growth. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 66)

Together with the shift of privilege into the symbolic realm new types of penury arise:

The ascendancy of the urban and industrial milieu is producing new examples of shortage: shortages of space and time, fresh air, greenery, water, silence. Certain goods, which were once free and abundantly available, are becoming luxuries accessible only to the privileged, while manufactured goods or services are offered on a mass scale. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 57)

‘The new segregations’ are formed at the basis of type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture, participation in decision-making, place of habitation, the amount of and ways of spending one’s leisure. As Baudrillard alertly remarks, the questions of rights to something (like the right to space, clean air) only arises when there is not enough to suffice for everyone any more. Arguments about rights then rather refer to disparity than equality. ‘The “right to clean air” signifies the loss of clean air as a natural good, its transition to commodity status and its inegalitarian social redistribution’ (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 58). That is why Baudrillard claims that ‘growth society’ is in fact the opposite of the ‘affluent society’. When there is an equal distribution of something it loses its differentiating effect, its meaning. The capitalist system is productive of and operates on the principle of (social) differentiation:

This process of status differentiation, which is a fundamental social process by which everyone takes their place within society, has a lived aspect and a structural aspect, the one conscious, the other unconscious, the one ethical, the other structural. One is permanently governed by a code whose rules and meaning-constraints – like those of language – are, for the most part, beyond the grasp of individuals. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 61)

Baudrillard’s analysis of the consumer society is based on the discrimination between the logic of the capitalist system of production that remains beyond the consciousness of individuals but nevertheless conducts their behaviour, and the articulate level of ideology that serves the system and constitutes ‘the common consciousness’. The

system of values to which individuals unconsciously subscribe already by socialization constitute a code – a code for individual behavior, for the interpretation of the behavior of others, a code upon which it is possible to relate to others, a code for being a ‘virtuous person’, a moral code.

‘Code’ is one of those notions that acquire a special meaning and a special status in Baudrillard’s theoretical system. In *The Consumer Society* it is used in its more traditional sense being synonymous with ‘system of signification’. However, unlike ‘language’ or ‘system of signification’, the notion of ‘code’ implies an aspect of control that a social system exercises over individuals. The idea of relating social control increasingly with the sphere of signification is already emerging. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, code is already described as a mechanism of total control (see Baudrillard 1983).

II.2. Ethics of the capitalist system of production

Although it is not conceived of as such by individuals at the conscious level, consumption (as manipulation with sign-objects on the purpose of creating and communicating social distinction) asserts itself as the highest virtue in consumer society. As Baudrillard vividly demonstrates the pronounced moral objectives may often contradict with the objectives of economic growth. In his view, there is no doubt which goals prevail:

The automobile and traffic provide the classic example of all these contradictions: unlimited promotion of individual consumption sits alongside desperate calls for collective responsibility and social morality and increasingly severe constraints. The paradox is as follows: one cannot both repeat to the individual that ‘the level of consumption is the just measure of social merit’ and demand of him another kind of social responsibility since, in his individual consumption efforts, he is already taking on that social responsibility fully. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 84)

The individual, he argues, has a ‘logistic function’ in the capitalist system of production: he ‘is required and is practically irreplaceable as a consumer’ (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 83).

The moral aspect of the consumer society serves as an ideal connection to the more concrete subject of trash. Trash became a matter of public concern when the

connection between sanitation and disease was discovered. As a moral and aesthetic issue it had distressed city dwellers centuries before. The emergence of global environmental concerns added a completely new dimension to the predicament of refuse. Apart from the ongoing search for a solution in the realm of technological innovation, many authors have argued that finding a way out rather depends on a change in mentality, in other words, culture. In Baudrillard's view, that could only happen together with a revolution at a deeper level – the change of cultural forms is dependent on the change in the form of material production. Worse still, in the current era where the mechanisms of social control have transcended from the realm of material production into the symbolic realm of the code, no real revolutions are possible – ‘no revolution is possible at the level of a code – or, alternatively, revolutions take place every day at that level, but they are “fashion revolutions”, which are harmless and foil the other kind’ (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 94). Fashion revolutions belong to the logic of and serve economic growth. By the transmission of the function of social control to the subconscious level of the code, the reproduction of the system of production has become automatic.

Baudrillard's idea is clear: the production of massive amounts of trash is encoded in the system and is not a question of individual (ir)responsibility. Analogously to other moral concerns, there is a contradiction between public (ideological) egalitarian values and the basic principles of market society. The basic strategy for managing such contradictions is to turn the controversial appearances into signs (or spectacles with the help of mass media) and present them in a manner supportive of the system. In a more recent essay, ‘Catastrophe management’ (Baudrillard 1994), Baudrillard describes how the First World symbolically prelates on the catastrophes-turned-into-spectacles of the Third World. Moreover, it is the First World that has produced the catastrophes and reproduces them through the media for its own ends – not so much for evil pleasure and cynical enjoyment as for convincing itself of its moral superiority, for the justification of its mode of existence. Early examples of this strain of thought appear also in *The Consumer Society*:

In order for the contradiction between puritanical and hedonistic morality to be resolved, this tranquility of the private sphere has to appear as a value preserved only with great difficulty, constantly under threat and beset by the dangers of a catastrophic destiny. The violence and inhumanity of the outside world are needed not just so that security may be experienced more

deeply as security (in economy or enjoyment), but also so that it should be felt justifiable at every moment as an option (in the economy of the morality of salvation). (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 35)

Ecological issues are exploited and dealt away with in a similar manner. Forums of global issues (including the hazards of air and water pollution, and the accumulation of solid waste) in this light appear as mere discursive play. As a fairly recent example to support this pessimistic view is the refusal of the United States to sign the Kyoto Protocol on the reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases in fear that it would affect its economic growth.

II.3. Functionality of waste

Excessive production of trash is not simply a feature of the consumer society; it is its basic structural-functional aspect. Consistently with his general approach, Baudrillard's analysis of waste is based on the distinction between the explicit moral discourse on waste and its real function in the consumer society. At the articulate level, he argues, waste 'is considered as a kind of madness, of insanity, of instinctual dysfunction' whereas at the subconscious level it is fully functional. Baudrillard is not talking so much about the material function of promoting economic growth here; instead he concentrates on the symbolic aspect of waste as 'it is by "wasteful expenditure" that the aristocratic classes have asserted their pre-eminence down the ages' (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 43).

A number of indigenous cultures are known to regularly engage in a ritual destruction of precious goods, a practice known as potlatching. Individuals literally exchange objects for social prestige and in a collective feast the social organization is renewed. (About Baudrillard's privileging of primitive societies over modern ones and the influences of Mauss', Malinowski's, and Sahlins' work in his theory, see Lane 2000; also Ritzer 1998, 10-11.) In consumer society the destruction of goods fulfills another function. At both, the social and individual levels, wasteful behavior (and the growing piles of garbage) acts as a sign of affluence. The consumer society presents a pathetic caricature of the ritual of the creation of value.

Destruction is one way for indicating that there exists a surplus, something extra beyond immediate necessity. This is a necessary condition for the definition of affluence:

For this to become a *value*, there has to be not simply enough, but *too much*. A significant difference has to be maintained and manifested between the necessary and the superfluous. This is the function of waste at all levels. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 45)

All societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of the surplus, of a superfluity that the individual – and society – feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 43)

Waste therefore surpasses the particular limitations of the consumer society and appears as a universal condition for culture. But only the consumer society where real affluence has been replaced by its signs has become totally dependent on the destruction of objects:

What is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an eye to its death... /-[T]he order of production only survives by paying the price of this extermination, this perpetual calculated ‘suicide’ of the mass of objects, and that this operation is based on technological ‘sabotage’ or organized obsolescence under cover of fashion. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 46)

II.4. Social history of trash

So far I have ignored the question of terminology. In *The Consumer Society* ‘waste’ is used interchangeably as a verb and noun. Baudrillard is first of all concerned with the abstract structural principle which is manifest in human behaviour as well as in the resulting objects. In this sense the study by an American social historian Susan Strasser (Strasser 1992; 1999) finely complements Baudrillard’s analysis.

Strasser observes the links between ‘waste’ and ‘want’, as established in an old English proverb ‘Waste not, want not’, as an introduction to her inquiry into the interdependent historical constructs of waste and consumer culture:

The proverb juxtaposes two words rich in meaning in both verb and noun forms. 'Waste' suggests not only useless consumption – squandering, extravagance, and indulgence – but dissipation, destruction and death; the last verb form often associated with the American war in Vietnam, where 'to waste' meant 'to kill'. Waste means decline, as in 'wasting away'. As a noun, waste is just one among many terms for the topic of my historical inquiry: garbage, debris, refuse, rubbish, trash. 'Want' branches out in two directions: on the one hand, it connotes craving, desire, yearning; on the other, lack need, poverty. Waste not, want not, then suggests many links in addition to the one between indulgence and privation. (Strasser 1992, 5)

Baudrillard has incorporated most of the associations indicated by this brief sketch in his analysis. In his argument that the growth society is based on lack and need rather than proliferation, which defines it as the opposite to the affluent society, Baudrillard redefines the cultural maxim in his own theoretical framework and reveals himself as a moralist. Strasser's argument is that the change towards the consumer culture was induced partly by the alteration of the relationship between waste and want in the common consciousness.

In addition to urbanization and population growth at the turn of the 20th century, two important developments endorsed the shift towards consumer mentality. Industrial packaging introduced as early as 1880s and disposable products, 'inaugurated with paper shirt cuffs and paper collars, which first appeared during the cotton shortage of the Civil War' (Strasser 1992, 18), formed a completely new type of trash and 'both signified and contributed to a shift in attitudes towards thrift and convenience' (Strasser 1992). The concept of disposability soon extended beyond paper products. Also, 'the introduction of these products coincided with the passing of the old systems of recycling. Sanitary reformers did away with scavenger pigs' (Strasser 1992, 18). Even the times of scarcity during The Great Depression and World War II did not halt the expansion of consumer culture and its concomitant trash. Strasser argues that while the conservation drives, the campaigns to collect scrap metals, grease, paper, and rubber and charities for the poor on the one hand revived the ideas of recycling and reuse, on the other hand 'they encouraged individuals to discard things, not to value them' (Strasser 1992, 19).

The growth of dumps accelerated when the concept of disposability was supplemented by the invention of non-degradable materials. Although Strasser has not addressed this fact in her brief lecture this gap in her analysis could be filled by a

reflection of Baudrillard's in the chapter on the orders of simulacra from *Symbolic Exchange and Death*:

Is it not man's miracle to have invented, with plastic, a non-degradable material, interrupting thus the cycle which, by corruption and death, turns all the earth's substances ceaselessly one into another? /-/ There is something incredible about it, this simulacrum where you can see in a condensed form the ambition of a universal semiotic. (Baudrillard 1983, 91)

Baudrillard interprets this invention primarily as symptomatic to the hegemonic project through the control of meaning. Power in this context means control over relationships between certain signifiers and certain signifieds (as signifieds are constantly replaced by other signifiers, then simply control over the manner in which signifiers are related to each other in the society or a social group). The idea of transition of authority from the economic sphere to the symbolic sphere is central to all Baudrillard's writings. In case of non-degradable materials, their symbolizing human's triumph over nature is more substantial for Baudrillard than their technological advantages and consequences. The symbolic overriding of natural laws reveals, in his words, the ambition of total control and the desire to freeze current order. The ambition is at the same time attributed to no-one in particular, yet to everyone participating in this discourse. It is the ambition of the system. The strange paradox – that first of all objects that will be disposed of soonest after their acquisition (that are produced 'with an eye on their death') like packages, disposables, and advertising catalogues are made out of most durable materials finds an explanation here. The symbolic functions of waste and non-degradable materials conjoined assist the project of establishing the current productive, social, and symbolic order for perpetuity. The attempts to develop a new 'environmentalist' discourse that perceives human communities in a complementary relationship with their environment are somewhat consistent with this logic. Any discursive reconciliation of 'nature' and 'culture' is at the same time an attempt to overthrow the logic that Baudrillard is describing. In his theoretical framework any such attempt is doomed to failure, but on the other hand, if we generally agree with his view, our future is totally dependent on such efforts.

The notion of 'value' should occupy a more prominent place in this chapter inasmuch the question of waste and the consumer society has generally been

addressed as the question of value. Strasser is suggesting that the more general changes in the society are related to a change in valuing objects. Baudrillard is trying to disentangle the economic and linguistic theories of value. He is arguing that in the (post)modern society, value is a matter of structural play (see for example Baudrillard 2001, 122- 151). The commonsense definition of trash is that of something that has lost its value, in both the economic and semiotic sense. In becoming trash objects have lost their distinction, or difference. Their meaning has come down to that of mere 'trash'. They have been pushed to the cultural margins. Nostalgia for the lost value is traced back to Walter Benjamin's influential essay on art and mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1968 [1932]). Using the example of a work of art, Benjamin attempted to discern the effects of a technological innovation on culture more widely. He concluded among other things that mechanical reproduction flung quantities of identical things to the market and brought about a change in valuing objects.

On the other hand, the habit of collecting that Benjamin often addresses in his writings and that he is known to have possessed can be treated as a form of resistance and a counter-practice to consumption. 'To renew the old world—that is the collectors deepest desire' (Benjamin 1968 [1932], 63). By 'the old world' he is referring to the semiotic situation before the era of mechanical reproduction that was characterized by coherent order and stable configurations from which things obtained their value. In the condition of general disjunction of old configurations and overall fragmentation brought about by mechanical reproduction, the collector tries to 'save' objects from doom, from discard and forgetting, by giving them new life and new meaning in the context of his collection. The collector is a semiotic scavenger and recycler.

II.5. Recycling nature

Baudrillard stresses totally different associations in relation to recycling (*le recyclage*):

In fact the term 'recycling' prompts a number of thoughts: it inevitably brings to mind the 'cycle' of fashion: in that field, too, everyone must be 'with-it' and must 'recycle themselves' – their clothes, their belongings, their cars – on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis. If they do not, they are not true citizens of the consumer society. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 100)

His perspective on recycling indicates among other things that the environmentalist agenda to recycle discards could itself be part of this *cultural recycling*, a passing whim of fashion serving really the reproduction of the cultural forms and thus also industrial growth. Recycling for Baudrillard means first of all the re-cycling of signs. The interrupting of natural cycles and their replacement with the cycles of (sign) production as described above in relation with the semiotics of non-degradable materials, involves the recycling of Nature:

[T]he very 'rediscovery' of Nature, in the form of a countryside trimmed down to the dimensions of mere sample, surrounded on all sides by the vast fabric of the city, carefully policed, and served up 'at room temperature' as parkland, nature reserve or background scenery for second homes, is, in fact, a recycling of Nature. It is no longer an original, specific presence at all, standing in symbolic opposition to culture, but a *simulation* a 'consommé' of the signs of nature set back in circulation – in short nature *recycled*. (Baudrillard 1998 [1970], 101)

By discarding nature and making it into a recyclable non-degradable sign also people are turned into waste-products needing to be re-cycled as signs, as Baudrillard indicates in one of his more recent essays 'Maleficent ecology' (Baudrillard 1994 [1992], 78-88).

Is it the total(itarian) logic of Baudrillard's or the logic he is describing which determines the world becoming a dump and humans becoming a residue? If it is discourse that constitutes the world, could we then hope to adopt an entirely different theoretical framework where terms could be reorganized and determination would take a different trajectory? Or, if our theories take their course while the world takes its own (which in the dominant discourse of science is a more reasonable assumption), what is Baudrillard describing? If he represents the mere logic of a discourse, how does it relate to the world? Trash has been culturally re-cycled – turned into a sign and inserted into the play of non-degradable recyclable signs. Does it mean that it has been 'dealt away with' – discarded by doing so? Or is there still trash beyond discourse? Are these questions the questions of the semiotics of trash? And in this light, is the criticism launched at Baudrillard for not having 'explored and resolved the relationship between material and non-material phenomena' (Ritzer 1998, 19; and many others) justified? I will address some of these questions in a broader framework in Chapter III.

III. Discussion: an outline of the ecosemiotic perspective of trash

In this chapter I suggest an outline for a research program of trash in the ecosemiotic paradigm. The ecosemiotic approach amounts to the resolving of the dualist scheme of opposition that underlies structural and post-structural analysis by problematizing structurally defined boundaries. It therefore contests also the consequent idea of trash. Describing the world in terms of dynamic (sign-)relations between a subject and its environment the ecosemiotic approach demonstrates that

- Trash is dynamically defined by the subject in the process of mutual exchange with its environment. The structural opposition between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ is dissolved as the atomistic concept of nature is replaced with a relational concept of ‘environment’.
- The production of trash is not distinctive to humans but all living organisms engage in processes of selection, rejection and excretion that result with trash. Some higher organisms also display through their behavior the recognition of rejected material as such.
- The concept of entropy in the context of the theory of dissipative structures suggests that the release of trash is not even limited to organic systems but constitutes a crucial aspect in the evolution and maintenance of complex systems.
- The ecosemiotic definition of trash is broad and dynamic transcending traditional dichotomies and disciplinary borderlines. Such a definition, on the one hand, presents trash in an evolutionary and continuous perspective but on the other hand compels us to create new typologies of trash deriving from particular contexts. In the context of global ecological problems it is functional to adopt accumulation as the criterion for the typology of trash.
- The ecosemiotic paradigm can contribute to the solving of global environmental problems by offering a framework for the reconceptualization of human-environment relations.

I conclude the chapter with eight theses that establish a foundation for the ecosemiotic study of trash.

III.1. Natural trash?

In the structural anthropological approach, trash is conceptualized as a cultural universal that emerges as a by-product of the process of cultural organizing of one's environment. Emerging from the primary act of differentiation the category of trash becomes a threshold between culture and nature.

In the perspective of critical theory trash is treated as a historical concept that transforms together with the changes in the modes of production. A connection between technological progress and global environmental problems is established. The postmodern negotiation of social identities and hierarchies through extended consumption leads to the exhaustion of the Earth's resources, extensive pollution of the environment, and fast accumulation of garbage. On the one hand, technological progress physically alters the environment, but on the other hand also modifies the cultural perception of the world so that the soiling of the physical environment in this context appears as natural and inevitable.

Both discourses on trash approach the boundary of culture and nature – as the subject of trash puts one in contact with the margins, edges, and limits of culture – but leave it unaffected. The advance towards a better understanding of trash, and may-be also towards finding a solution to our problems that relate to it, requires transcending the boundary and asking the question about trash and nature: is there trash in nature, or is it a specifically human phenomenon; is the production of trash inevitable, i.e. natural, or are there ways to regulate it?

In accordance with the definition of trash as a (by)product of organizing one's environment many higher animals actively engage in the physical reorganization of their surroundings, and even in what can only be referred to as cleaning activities: certain birds, mammals, and even insects (bees, ants) clean their nests by throwing out old material. These examples suggest that animals 'categorize' their environment and act selectively towards it. Moreover, some higher species use their excreta as a means of communicating and marking the their territories. Bataille has argued that it

constitutes a fundamental difference between humans and other animals that the latter do not express repugnance towards dirt and excrement (Bataille 1993 [1976]). However, many animals do not defecate near food or their nests. My friend has a cat who scrapes at dirty dishes when they have been left on the living room floor, but she does not react when they are placed near the kitchen sink. This proves that at least some animals possess the category of dirt as ‘matter out of place’. Animals certainly establish and communicate boundaries and behave in manners that can be interpreted as reactions to dirt.

Not only animals but all living organisms need to get rid of the residues of their metabolism. While discharge of unwanted material from the organism is in many cases quite mechanical – like the shedding of hairs or skin – ingestion, for example, often requires sophisticated selective activity. Unwanted material is mostly eliminated at the outset the selection occurring at multiple levels: many aspects of the environment already escape perception, others are rejected for different reasons, quite few are actually ingested. In biosemiotic terms this process can be referred to as the negative selection oriented at the maintenance of existing discriminations. It is inseparable from and an inevitable result of all selective processes. As such it appears to be inherent to all living nature.⁹

The thermodynamics of nonequilibrium systems, or, the theory of dissipative structures as described by Prigogine and Stengers (Prigogine and Stengers 1984) suggested a possibility for an even more general approach to trash: it can be defined in terms of entropy (see for example Artigiani 1994, Anderson 2001). Prigogine and Stengers demonstrated that the laws of classical physics only describe a small fraction of the physical universe – linear, reversible processes which occur in closed/isolated systems, whereas most systems in nature are open, nonlinear and irreversible dynamic processes. Open systems, or dissipative structures, range from chemical processes to living organisms, whole ecosystems, the biosphere, social and cultural processes. Unlike closed or isolated systems that have limited or no exchange with their environments, open systems constantly exchange matter/energy and information with their environments, drawing their resources from and releasing their waste products into it. Isolated and closed systems either use up their available energy or fill with

⁹ It is worth mentioning at this point that a number of words that signify refuse, like Estonian ‘prügi’ or ‘saast’, were originally related to natural objects, to bits of stone and wool grease, or others, like Estonian ‘risu’, are only associated with ‘natural’ trash – fallen tree branches – today; or ‘varis’ that is a term in ecology signifying organic material fallen on the ground.

their own waste products – sooner or later they reach the state of thermodynamic death. Open systems are characterized as non-equilibrium. Being sensitive to changes in the environment, the disturbances may lead to the internal reorganization of the whole system. Prigogine and Stengers maintain that systems evolve to levels of greater complexity in qualitative leaps. In states far from equilibrium even minor external influences may be amplified and have unexpected, enormous effects: the laws that describe near equilibrium conditions do not apply any more, and the process could take several trajectories at once. The chaotic situation results in either a new type of organization at a greater level of complexity, or a dissolution of the system. Evolving to levels of greater complexity increases entropy production as more complex systems use more energy for their maintenance. Open systems only survive at the cost of increase in entropy elsewhere.

The production of entropy inevitably accompanies the persistence of open systems. However, as the universe could be the only closed system we know of trash as entropy does not really constitute a problem – it can always be relocated. If it is not removed it can perturb the balance of the system and lead to its reorganization. Walter Randolph Adams (Adams 1994) has indicated that the cultural reconceptualization and reevaluation of trash, as a reaction to its accumulation, constitutes precisely such reorganization of the cultural system of categories, and should lead also to the reduction of the buildup.

III.2. Ecology of trash: accumulation and recycling

The biosemiotic and thermodynamic definitions establish continuity between the natural processes and the human production of trash but it is not possible within these limits to account for the differences ‘that make a difference’, or the levels of trash production. Adopting the perspective of continuity between natural and cultural processes it would be possible to imagine and write the natural history of trash, to identify the decisive moments, or bifurcation points, and developments that made a difference to the production and/or accumulation of trash. Some of these turning-points could be related to self-organization in chemical processes, the emergence of life, the appearance of social life and culture. Crucial moments in the development of cultural systems involve the custom of burial, the introduction of sedentary life-style

and agricultural modification of the environment, the rise of cities, the emergence of documenting, the mechanization of production, the ‘discovery’ of hygiene, the introduction of packaging, the phenomenon of fashion, the invention of artificial fibers, disposable products, branding, and advertising to name just a few.

In this perspective also the question of terminology re-emerges: whether it is functional to employ the same, a rather arbitrary term, which is derived from a particular historical context for referring to the variety of approaches, attitudes, and practices of discard. The historical perspective on trash must be integrated with linguistic analysis that addresses the development of vocabulary, the differentiation of contexts and types of discard. The development of a specialized vocabulary is an aspect of a larger cultural process: the institutionalization of trash. Other important moments in this process include, for example, the designation of specific places – sanitary landfills – and containers – garbage cans and bags – for storing discard material and the development of public services – sewage, garbage removal, street cleaning. Among the latest developments in this area are special businesses that come and clean up after your pets in your home and yard.

The transition to the information society could be marked by the introduction of concepts of ‘mental’ (see Lasn 1999) and ‘semiotic pollution’ (Posner 2000). These concepts have been inspired by an analogy between physical and informational processes and are still preliminary. However, they underscore the fact that the human environment is not merely physical, and pollution need not necessarily be defined in terms of matter/energy.

An important characteristic of the trash of modern humans is its accumulation. The products of other organisms disappear (and reappear, and disappear again): they continue their paths in the ecological cycle, without a persistent accumulation. Relying on this experience, for a long time people have thrown also their trash out – into nature – expecting it to vanish there in the same manner. The practice of burying is a more sophisticated version of the same type of behavior: rejected material is sent ‘back’ to where it came from. Putting dirt out of sight makes it disappear from the cultural point of view. However, as a result of implementing various technological innovations in producing new materials and the processes of globalization that distributed them, people were more and more forced to face their trash up to the point of realization that it has not really disappeared but, on the contrary, preserved

surprisingly well.¹⁰ The Earth's biosphere is materially closed: 'it took more than two billion years for the biosphere to stabilize the carbon cycle and the chemical composition of the atmosphere, removing large amounts of carbon from use. Humans, during two centuries, are turning the situation rapidly back at least half a billion years, with the burning of fossil fuels' (Kull 1998, 365). The humans' introduction of new material in the ecosystem is threatening to disturb the balance of the Earth's biosphere.

Against this background human material discard can be divided into two types: that which is common to all (living) systems, and that which is specific to humans. It is particularly the latter kind that accumulates since there are either no decomposers for these products in nature, or their decomposition takes very long time. It is interesting to notice at this point that the institutionalization of trash has happened exactly due to its accumulation: being forced first to face it, then to smell it, and finally become in physical contact with it, people had to develop concepts, terminology, and means for dealing with it. The differentiation between natural and artificial, organic and inorganic applies, and has been applied in green practices, to trash itself. Becoming aware of this distinction enables to understand that artificially produced materials also have to be recycled artificially and we cannot expect them to decompose in the natural cycle.

The realization that the biosphere is a closed system and that the resources of the Earth are limited started to change the perception and relationship of the Western postindustrial culture to its physical environment. The concept of 'nature' which refers to something essential, pre-existent, self-sufficient, and is dualistically opposed to 'culture', became increasingly replaced by or used interchangeably with 'environment' – a relational term presupposing a subject whose environment it is. The idea of mutual relation of dependence and influence between the subject and her environment became more common.

The British anthropologist Tim Ingold has summed up, quite in accord with the semiotic view, the main difference between the concepts (see Ingold 2000). He states, first, that 'environment is a relative term – 'relative, that is, to the being whose environment it is. Thus *my* environment is the world as it exists and takes on meaning in relation to me, and in that sense it came into existence and undergoes development

¹⁰ The excavations of Rathje revealed among other things that the processes of biodegradation in the landfills do not occur in the extent that has been supposed (see Rathje and Murphy 1993).

with me and around me' (Ingold 2000, 20). In that sense the organism and its environment form an indivisible totality. Secondly, he underscores, that 'this totality is not a bounded entity but a process in real time: a process that is of growth and development' (Ingold 2000, 20). In the third place, he maintains that the concept of environment should not be confused with that of nature,

For the world can exist as nature only for a being that does not belong there, and that can look upon it, in a manner of the detached scientist, from such a safe distance that it is easy to connive in the illusion that it is unaffected by his presence. Thus the distinction between environment and nature corresponds to the difference in perspective between seeing ourselves as beings within a world and as beings without it. Moreover, we tend to think of nature as external not only to humanity, as I have already observed, but also to history, as though the natural environment provided an enduring backdrop to the conduct of human affairs. Yet environments, since they continually become into being in the process of our lives – since we shape them as they shape us – are themselves fundamentally historical. (Ingold 2000, 20)

Bateson thought that mind should be seen as immanent in the whole system of organism-environment relations in which we humans are necessarily enmeshed, rather than confined within our individual bodies *as against* a world of nature 'out there'. (Ingold 2000, 16)

Beside other ecological disciplines and discourses, an ecosemiotic approach that conceptualizes the relationship in semiotic terms has been proposed (Kull 1998; Nöth 1998; Nöth and Kull 2000; Nöth 2001). By definition 'eco-semiotics is the study of environmental semioses, i.e., the study of sign processes which relate organisms to their natural environment' (Nöth 2001, 71). The ecosemiotic point of view emerges in the context of the semiotic tradition that interprets the world in terms of sign processes.

III.3. Semiosis in nature and culture – continuity and discontinuity

The tradition of non-anthropocentric semiotics is dated back to the philosophical ideas of Aristotle and Locke, its most well-known modern forefathers were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and the Baltic-German theoretical biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944). Peirce's assumption that the whole

universe is semiotic in nature, and Uexküll's theory of the functional compatibility between organisms and their environments opened up new perspectives for sciences that have not yet been fully realized.

In 1984 a group of leading semioticians – Myrdene Anderson, John Deely, Martin Krampen, Joseph Ransdell, Thomas A. Sebeok and Thure von Uexküll – proposed the semiotic perspective, as a new paradigm for the sciences (Anderson et al. 1984). 'This conceptual revolution transcends a dichotomous Cartesian, analytic view of the world, in the direction of a view embracing the whole, representing complexity, and fostering synthesis' (Anderson et al. 1984, 7). The authors were following the project to adopt a science of signs as a common basis to the sciences and humanities, suggesting that Peircean philosophy exemplified such common ground. Describing the sign in terms of dynamic relations between an agent and its surroundings that can become habitual, Peirce adopted a processual and evolutionary perspective that provided a connection to the life sciences. The challenge of the theory was accepted, most notably by Thomas Sebeok, and developed into a discipline of biosemiotics, studying semiosis in/of all living systems (see for example Emmeche, Kull, Stjernfelt 2002). But, 'the concept of evolution taken generically designates the processes of continuity and change in any dynamical system, including but not limited to biological systems' (Anderson et al. 1984, 17). Peircean semiotic thus has affinities with general systems theory (see Nöth 1990b), and especially with the theory of dissipative structures as outlined by Prigogine and Stengers (1984) which has helped to unsettle the dualistic and deterministic viewpoint underlying (most of) modern science. From this perspective, organisms/subjects are treated as dissipative structures that may self-organize on the basis of signs/signals that they receive from their environment. Culture can self-reflexively initiate and influence its own transformations, appearing to itself as an outside/environment. The semiotic paradigm also disturbs the division of labour in the sciences, especially between the sciences and humanities: human culture in this view appears as a complex systemic process intertwining and continuous with other semiotic processes, it is not viewed in isolation, in opposition with, or independently of 'natural' processes:

They [cultures – R. K.] are nonlinear, interrelated, unpredictable. Their virtual brownian motion is the result of the dependency of every part on every other part, and if deterministic laws there be, they are beyond the pale of human cerebral capacities. Cultures are processes, never products; they

are codependently arising becoming, not cause-and effect sequences; they are events, not things moving along like trains on the track; they are perpetually self-organizing into unseen and unseeable wholes, rather than predictable wholes and their parts in terms of static and statistical averages. They are semiosis at its best, though, unfortunately, occasionally at its worst. (Merrell 2001, 400)

Consistently with the Peircean semiotic although he was not acquainted with it, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) developed a theory according to which each organism has a different perspective of the world, a species-specific Umwelt, shaped and limited mainly by its biological constitution. An organism is physiologically only capable to perceive or distinguish those aspects of its environment that make a difference to its survival, towards which it can act selectively. Consequently, the organism's relation with its environment is not described in dualistic terms of physical causal relations with the organism appearing as a passive receiver of the physical stimuli to which it mechanically responds, but in terms of mutual influence, indeterminacy, and communication. The organism's action in their physical environment is guided and mediated by an inner representation that it has of its surroundings and is therefore truly semiotic:

In a semiotic interaction, the organism experiences its environment no longer in its immediacy as a brute fact, but interprets it with reference to a third, not only a 'meaning', but more generally a purpose, a goal, or a law which transcends the immediate environmental situation. Such triadic relationships of semiosis are characteristic of cognitive processes, goal-directed behavior, and more generally mental activity. /-/ Semiosis in this sense is by no means restricted to processes in higher organisms, to culture and social convention. Any primitive biological organism already interacts semiotically with its environment when it selects or avoids energetic or material objects in its environment for the purpose of its own survival. Such triadic interactions of the organisms with its environment constitutes a semiotic threshold from the nonsemiotic to the semiotic world. (Nöth 1999, 78)

Moreover, Peirce's concept of semiosis is so broad that it does not only enable to describe all life processes in semiotic terms – from the cellular level to the level of ecosystems, and the biosphere – but 'even processes in the physical or chemical nature, under certain conditions, can and must be defined as processes of semiosis' (Nöth 1999, 81).

Human semiosis, or anthroposemiosis, although continuous with physico- and biosemiosis, has its specificity. Drawing upon Uexküll's theory, Ernst Cassirer suggested that the relation of humans to their environment, or the human Umwelt, is qualitatively different from the Umwelten of other organisms as in addition to sensory perception it is shaped by symbolic systems, such as myth, religion, language, and art (Cassirer 1944). Conventional symbolic systems introduce a break between the biological and cultural modes of being. The aspects of continuity and discontinuity of the human Umwelt with the biological systems of modeling have been further discussed for example by John Deely (Deely 1991).

Deely first discusses the philosophical consequences of the idea of semiotic modeling. He describes the emergence of Umwelt, or the 'real world of experience', as a semiotic process through which the physical world is 'objectified' and the objective world is embodied. The semiotic approach necessitates a subjectivity, though not indispensably a human one, that constitutes the position from which the world is perceived and described, and that is itself located in the world. In the concept of the world as semiosis the traditional dichotomies of mind and matter, stability and change, subject and object, dissolve, appear to be relative and continuous. Innumerable and irreducible to each other, or to the physical world, 'objective worlds of experience' – or Umwelten of the many life forms – 'are like so many soap bubbles cascading about on the physical surface of the earth' (Deely 1991, 536). But Umwelten are neither 'closed' nor isolated, 'ideal' entities: embodiment enables them to reflect, interact with, and constitute each other. From a semiotic point of view the world appears as a web of interrelations:

... we have a trichotomy where the subject stands at the center of the web of relations comprising precisely an objective world, within which the subject sustaining the web is, through the web, entangled in other webs subjectively sustained and spun but objective in what their skeins catch and hold up for scrutiny, itself already a kind of thing in that it – this subject – too has a cognizing organism a bodily dimension through which it exists as an element active in the physical environment below and beyond the ways in which the subject experiences that environment and reconstitutes it structurally as an objective world sharable with some others. (Deely 1991, 534)

Umwelt has sometimes been referred to as a 'primary modeling system' which is to a great extent determined by the biological constitution of the species. The human species-specific Umwelt differs from the Umwelten of other species in the respect that

the secondary modeling system – language – enables to transcend the perceptual limits and the immediate physical context ‘opening a perspective to possible worlds different from the actual one of the Umwelt here and now’.

As a result the Umwelt as it is structured by linguistically mediated social interaction becomes freed from overdetermination by biological heritage enabling the formation of what I have called the post linguistic (or ‘tertiary’ modeling) system, the semiotic equivalent of what anthropologists heretofore have termed simply culture’ (Deely 1991, 537).

Anthroposemiosis is based on the abstraction of the relation of signification from its immediate perceptual contexts and opened a way to textual representation, a new dimension of freedom and choice, to fantasy and ‘fiction’. The human reality is grounded upon an abstracted and conventional code of relations, embodied in texts, qualitatively different from animal reality, and relatively much freer in its relations with the physical world. The capacity to imagine other possible worlds provides human culture with flexibility and transformative power.

III.4. Towards an ecosemiotic paradigm of trash

Ecosemiotics as a paradigm is axiomatic, describing a self-reflexive relation: how culture in the human Umwelt appears as a part of a greater whole – its environment – that is (in its turn) culturally defined. To escape the contradiction a distinction has been made between *cultural ecosemiotics* and *biological ecosemiotics* (Nöth and Kull 2000; Nöth 2001). In the tradition of cultural ecosemiotics ‘nature enters the semiotic scene only as a *referent* (or content substance) of language. Structures of nature are investigated as content structures of texts, in particular of mythical texts’ (Nöth 2001, 73). Biological ecosemiotics relies on the assumption that semiosis occurs in nature irrespective of the knowledge of it. In my opinion, the ecosemiotic view only emerges at the crossing of the two perspectives; irreducible to either of them it transcends the linear, dichotomous logic.

Like other organisms humans’ are confined to their species-specific Umwelt, their relationship with their physical environment is mediated through signs. It follows, that also the sciences describe the world not as it is but as it is perceived by humans. Unlike other organisms humans can become aware of sign relations, and the

awareness endows them with a capacity of textual representation, in other words, culture. Unlike the *Umwelten* of other organisms the human *Umwelt* is intersubjective, collective. Quite paradoxically the awareness of semiosis, and of its confinements endows culture with an extra degree of freedom: being a self-conscious semiotic subject (see for example Lotman 1990), culture can initiate and influence its own transformations.

The extending of the semiosphere to all (living) nature that follows from the ecosemiotic approach, redefines the former boundaries between semiotic and non-semiotic realms, inside and outside, Self and Other, enabling to perceive continuity between and the interrelatedness of culture and nature. The former barriers become mere thresholds. The humans' monologue on the subject of nature can be replaced with a dialogue, since nature is endowed with communicative capacities. In the semiotic context the global environmental problems can be interpreted as miscommunication between humans and nature (see Oelschlaeger 2001). In this perspective, the ecosemiotic paradigm establishes a common ground for communication between culture and nature, thus making a step toward solving the environmental problems:

Ecosemiotics offers a radical and relevant approach to so-called global environmental crisis. There are no environmental fixes within the dominant code, since that code overdetermines the future, thereby perpetuating ecologically untenable cultural forms. The possibility of a sustainability transition (the attempt to overcome destitution and avoid ecocatastrophe) becomes real when mediated by and through ecosemiotics. In short, reflexive awareness of humankind's linguisticity is a necessary condition for transforming ecologically maladaptive cultural forms. As a multidisciplinary research program integrating the human and natural sciences, ecosemiotic inquiry closes the gap between biophysical ecology and human ecology. (Oelschlaeger 2001, 219)

Drawing on the previous discussion, the outline for the ecosemiotic paradigm of trash can be presented in the form of eight theses that both incorporate and transcend the structuralist and post-structuralist approach to trash introduced in previous chapters. As such they constitute the basis for the future elaboration of the concept of trash within the dynamics of a specific system:

1. The ecosemiotic view relies on the assumption that *there is a semiotic relationship between organisms/subjects and their surroundings.*
2. *The relationship of humans with their environment is culturally mediated and culturally conceptualized.*
3. *The ecosemiotic view prerequisites inhabiting two contradictory positions at once: first, assuming that life/living nature is semiotic in itself; and second, that it can only be stated/perceived from the perspective of the human Umwelt.*
4. *The ecosemiotic perspective is holistic and ecological, describing the world as a web of semiotic interrelations.*
5. *The ecosemiotic view has affinities with systems approach, addressing the semiotic dynamic processes between organism/subject and its environment. It defines organisms/subjects and environment in terms of these processes.*
6. *Trash can be semiotically conceptualized as a process whereby the boundary (of a semiosphere) is maintained and marked.*
7. *The assumption that the semiosphere coincides with the biosphere leads to a the cultural reconceptualization and transformation of the relations between culture and its natural environment.*
8. *In the ecosemiotic paradigm it is possible to see a solution to environmental problems.*

Since at least the publication of Lynn White's classical article 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis' (White 1967), it has been widely accepted, that environmental problems are related to the cultural perception of the world and the location of humans in this picture. Also, at least ever since, many environmental activists and philosophers have attempted to find a solution to the predicament, how to initiate a transformation in the Umwelt of the (post) modern Westerners so that they would be more attentive and caring toward their natural environment. A planned transformation presupposes an understanding of cultural concepts as well as of the dynamics of cultural processes. So the human sciences have increasingly been integrated in the process of disentangling the problem. In order to transcend the worldview which is largely based on the assumption that nature is passive Other, and inferior to culture, the sciences have to review their very own foundations, since the dominance of such a

view is often related to the rise of modern science in the 17th century. The sciences' transcending of their own boundaries/foundations can be understood in terms of evolving to a next qualitative level through self-organization, and/or in terms of scientific revolution as proposed by Kuhn (Kuhn 1962). The ecosemiotic paradigm in itself constitutes a possibility for the reconceptualization and transformation of human-environment relations by obtaining a viewpoint of an organism/subject situated in its environment.

Conclusion

This thesis conceptualizes trash mainly through the categories of and the relationship between culture and nature.

Chapter I gives an overview of the structural anthropological concept of dirt mostly drawing from the analyses by Mary Douglas. In the context of Y. Lotman's theory of the semiosphere the definition of dirt as a phenomenon marking the boundary of the semiosphere is suggested. Since the semiospheric model can be applied to account for individuation processes at very different levels, boundary areas of different orders – the body boundary, the household boundary, the boundary between public and private spheres, rural and urban types of settlement – have been rendered as the sites of dirt production and accumulation. Dirt in this context also appears as the means for constructing and keeping apart the categories of 'nature' and 'culture'. On certain occasions, however, it can serve as a means of communication between those spheres. From the ecosemiotic point of view, in the structuralist tradition of semiotics 'nature enters the semiotic scene only as a *referent* (or content substance) of language' (Nöth 2001, 73). The structuralist paradigm only enables to analyze that how human culture constructs and interprets nature.

Chapter II takes a closer look at the functionality of waste in consumer society as it has been explicated by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard has argued that the excessive production of trash is the operational principle of consumer society – it is the mechanism for creating markets and inducing economic growth. At the level of articulation, waste is functioning as a sign of wealth and a means for creating and communicating social hierarchies. Nature in this context is subjugated to human control through different technologies. The most effective technology for the control of nature is its domestication as a sign and its insertion into the order of discourse. Nature in consumer society is turned into a scene and a spectacle, but first of all into a resource in the service of the satisfaction of human needs. Analogously to the structuralist viewpoint, nature in the poststructuralist perspective has the status of a mere cultural construct, but unlike in the structuralist approach, nature from the poststructuralist point of view has neither independent existence nor a space of its

own, so that no real contact, communication, or exchange is possible with it. It can thus be said that consumer society is trashing nature – in both, material and symbolic senses – for its own ends.

It is not possible to discern a solution to the global environmental problems related with the violation of nature and the accumulation of trash within the structuralist or poststructuralist paradigms. Chapter III suggests ecosemiotics as an alternative paradigm for the semiotic analysis and reconceptualization of nature-culture relations. The ecosemiotic view draws from the tradition of Peircean semiotics which extends the semiosphere so as to include all life, endowing thus nature with communicative capacity and establishing continuity between the two spheres. The atomistic concept of nature in the ecosemiotic perspective is replaced with the relational concept of environment – that is to the being whose environment it is. Organism/subject and its environment are seen to be mutually constitutive of each other through the processes of communication and exchange, they form an indivisible totality.

The humans' relationship with their environment is similar yet different from that of other organisms. Since their relationship with their environment is mediated by abstracted systems of signification, the awareness of semiosis and the capacity to imagine other possible worlds provides humans with a greater degree of freedom from their immediate contexts and greater transformative powers. Culture can not only modify its environment drastically but it can also initiate its own transformations. The adoption of the ecosemiotic viewpoint could be considered as such a transformation since it offers a common paradigm for the analysis of natural and cultural phenomena creating thus a possibility for the reconceptualization of humans' relationship with their environment. The ecosemiotic paradigm enables to see a solution to environmental problems in the dynamic redefinition of cultural categories. The definition of trash in the ecosemiotic paradigm is context-dependent and becomes subject to semiotic recycling.

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Resümees

Prügi ökosemioloogilise käsitluse poole

Globaalsed keskkonnaprobleemid osutavad, et suhted inimühiskonna ja looduskeskkonna vahel on tasakaalust väljas. Oluline osa globaalsetest keskkonnaprobleemidest on seotud reostumisega, mürgiste ainete kontsentreerumisega keskkonnas ning jäätmete massiivse tootmisega. Mitmed autorid on väitnud, et keskkonnaprobleemide tekkepõhjusi tuleks otsida muuhulgas (lääne) kultuuri viisist maailma klassifitseerida ja kirjeldada. Kaasaegse lääneliku maailmapildi aluseks on kultuuri ja looduse sfääride fundamentaalne eristamine ja nende teineteisele vastandamine, mis avaldub juba kasvõi teaduste jaotamises loodus- ja humanitaarteadusteks. Seetõttu on näiteks Kalevi Kull väitnud, et üksnes ökoloogia-alastest teadmistest keskkonnaprobleemide lahendamiseks ei piisa, kuivõrd need on bioloogiliste ja ökoloogiliste protsessidega sügavalt põimunud semiootiliste ja kultuuriliste protsesside tagajärg, ning seega eeldab keskkonnaprobleemide lahendamine teadmisi ühekorraga nii bioloogiast kui kultuurist (Kull 1998, 366).

Käesolev magistr töö toob prügi kultuuriteooria ääremailt tähelepanu keskmesse ja annab ülevaate prügi senisest käsitlemisest kultuurisemiootilises perspektiivis. Seni on prügi kultuurisemiootilise analüüsi objektina esinenud eelkõige kahe tuntud autori, kultuurantropoloog Mary Douglase ja poststrukturealism teoretiku Jean Baudrillard'i töödes, kelle käsitlustel ma ka pikemalt peatun. Magistr töö eesmärgiks on ökosemioloogilise vaatekoha näol pakkuda sellist teoreetilist raamistikku prügi edasiseks semiootiliseks analüüsiks, mis võimaldaks hõlmata ka prügi tekitamise ökoloogilisi aspekte.

Semiootikuna ei ole minu esmaseks uurimisobjektiks mitte prügi oma esemelises mitmekesisuses, vaid mentaalse kontseptina. Oma töös püüan ma prügi kontsepti semiootiliselt määratleda ja kirjeldada, kuivõrd seda pole keegi siiani teinud ja prügi kultuuriline ja semiootiline teooria on tekkinud teiste objektide analüüsi kõrvalproduktina. Objekti määratlemine ja piiritlemine on antud töö üks keskseid probleeme, kuivõrd tavaelus kutsub mõiste 'prügi' esile konkreetse (üksik)esemelise

ettekujutluse, mina aga püüan leida üldist, mis lubab seda lõpmatult mitmekesisest (üksik)esemelisust ühisnimetaja alla viia. Seega tuleb ka minu valitud terminisse 'prügi' (ingl k *trash*) suhtuda reservatsioonidega, kuna see tähistab tavaarusaamast mõnevõrra erinevat kontseptsiooni. Samas loodan ma, et nihestatus sõna tähenduses heidab valgust tavakäitumisele ja -arusaamale prügist. Prügi määratlemine sõltub tugevalt selle loomuliku keele süsteemist, milles analüüsi läbi viiakse: minu poolt välja pakutud prügi teooria funktsioneerib seega kõige adekvaatsemalt inglise keele keskkonnas, kuigi pretendeerib siiski tunduvalt laiemale üldistustasandile.

Esimene peatükk tutvustab prügi strukturaalantropoloogilist kontseptsiooni, tuginedes Mary Douglase teosele *Puhtus ja hädaoht: saaste ja tabu kontseptide analüüs (Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo; Douglas 2000 [1966])*. Douglas kirjeldab prügi (ingl k. *dirt*) kultuuriuniversaalse kategooriana, mis koondab kultuuri klassifikatsioonisüsteemiga kokkusobimatuid mõisteid ja nähtusi – klassifikatsiooniprintsiipidele mittealluvad fenomenid ümbritsetakse piirangute ja rituaalse käitumisega, kuivõrd need ohustavad kultuurile omast korrastatust. Struktuurantropoloogia paradigmas käsitletakse prügi piirinähtusena, mis hägustab kultuuriliste kategooriate vahelisi selgeid eristusi ja võimaldab üleminekuid ühest kategooriast teise, nii nagu see toimub näiteks üleminekuriituste puhul, kui ühest sotsiaalsest kategooriast teise liikujad peavad vahepeal (liminaalses faasis) kokku puutama muidu keelatud ja tabuks peetavate nähtustega. Prügi ilmneb sotsiokultuuriliselt oluliste kategooriate, nagu mina-mitte mina, kultuur-mittekultuur, kultuur-loodus, üleminekualadel ning on seotud nende kategooriate 'puhtuse' säilitamisega. Ilmneb, et see mida prügiks peetakse, on suhteline, sõltudes nii kategooriate süsteemi ülesehitusest kui ka hindaja positsioonist (sotsiokultuurilises süsteemis). Prügi strukturaalantropoloogilist käsitlust sobib hästi täiendada ja lahti mõtestama Juri Lotmani semiosfääri mudel, milles piiril on oluline osa kultuuri dünaamika ja uuenemise tagamisel – prügi võib selles kontekstis käsitleda kui tõlkemehhanismi, mis aitab mittevajalikud elemendid kultuuri sfäärist välja viia.

Lähtuvalt Jean Baudrillard'i tarbimisühiskonna käsitlest teoses *Tarbimisühiskond: müüdid ja struktuurid (inglisekeelses tõlkes The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures; Baudrillard 1998 [1970])* vaatleb teine peatükk prügi (ingl k. *waste*) tekitamise loogikat lääne tarbimisühiskonnas. Baudrillard näeb tarbimises eelkõige keelt või koodi, mille kaudu inimesed väljendavad oma positsiooni

sotsiaalses hierarhias: mida rohkem, kallimalt ja kaubamärgitundlikumalt tarbitakse, seda kõrgemat staatust sotsiaal-majanduslikus hierarhias sellega väljendatakse. Baudrillard väidab, et kaasaegses, nn arenenud ühiskonnas ei ole inimeste majanduslikud võimalused üksteisest märkimisväärselt erinevad, kuna kõigile on tagatud baasvajaduste rahuldamine ning veel palju enamgi, seetõttu on hierarhia loomult pigem sümboliline ja sõltub eelkõige kommunikatsioonist. Asjade äraviskamine omab siin samasugust märgilist funktsiooni: suur raiskamine ja kasvavad prügimäed näivad ühemõtteliselt osutavat (asjade) (üle)küllusele ja heaolule. Baudrillard'i meelest on tegelikult täpselt vastupidi, nn külluseühiskond põhineb tegelikult uute vajaduste tekitamisel ja sellel, et inimesed tunnevad millestki pidevalt puudust. Raiskamine, nagu ka peagi peale liinilt tulekut prügimäele jõudvate asjade tootmine, osutub olevat hädavajalik majanduskasvu tekitamise ja säilitamise seisukohalt. Seetõttu ei näe Baudrillard ka mingit lootust sellise raiskamise ja tarbimise ohjeldamiseks, vastupidi, näiteks mood kui nähtus on täielikult rakendatud tootmis- ja tarbimistsükli käiguhoidmise ja kiirendamise teenistusse. Baudrillard'i süsteemsele nägemusele sekundeerib Susan Strasseri ajalooline lähenemine, milles tarbimisühiskonna teket seostatakse muutustega inimeste väärtushinnangutes: masstootmise ajajärgul pole esemetel enam ei sellist väärtust ega kestvust nagu varem.

Nii strukturaalantropoloogilises kui ka poststrukturealistlikus käsitluses seostub prügi kultuuri ja looduse kontseptuaalse vastandamisega. Struktuurantropoloogia kontekstis on prügi vahendiks kultuuri ja looduse kategooriate konstrueerimisel ja nende vahelise eristuse alalhoidmisel. Poststrukturealistliku tingimustes saab prügiks muutmisest vahend looduse kontrollimisel. See toimub kahel tasandil: majandus kasutab loodust toorainena asjade (peatse prügi) tootmiseks, diskursuse tasandil käsitletakse loodust aga üksnes keelemärgina, mille sisu võib lähtuvalt ideoloogiast ümber töödelda. Erinevalt strukturaalantropoloogilisest mõistest ei omistata loodusele poststrukturealistlikus käsitluses ei iseseisvat eksistentsi ega omaette olemisruumi. Kontakt või kommunikatsioon Teise või looduse sfääriga osutub selles kontekstis juba teoreetiliselt võimatuks. Mitte kummagi teoreetilise diskursuse raames, mis eeldavad kultuuri ja looduse sfääride diskreetsust ning milles loodus ilmneb vaid kui keelemärgi referent, pole võimalik näha lahendusi globaalsetele keskkonnaprobleemidele. Kolmas peatükk visandab ökosemiootilise perspektiivi kui

alternatiivse paradigma prügi semiootiliseks analüüsiks ning ühiskonna ja keskkonna vaheliste suhete ümbermõtestamiseks.

Organismi ja tema keskkonna vahelisi märgilisi suhteid käsitlev ökosemiootiline lähenemine saab võimalikuks laiemas peirceanlikus semiootikatradsioonis, mis peab semioosi omaseks kogu elusale. See traditsioon, kirjeldades elu- ja kultuurinähtusi järjepidevaina ühtsel üldsemiootilisel alusel, lubab ületada kultuuri ja looduse ning humanitaar- ja loodusteaduste dualistliku vastandamise, ning näha elu- ja kultuuriprotsesse nende arengulises perspektiivis. Kontseptsioon, mis asetab looduse väljapoole kultuuri sfääri, taandub arusaama ees, mille kohaselt organism ja keskkond konstitueerivad ja mõjutavad teineteist vastastikku, moodustades lahutamatu (kontseptuaalse) terviku. Nii nagu kõik teisedki bioloogilised organismid modelleerib inimene oma keskkonda tajuorganite vahendusel, kuid meelelise taju poolt antu korrastatakse konventsionaalsete märgisüsteemide abil, mis seovad individuaalse kogemuse mingi grupi jaoks ühise jagatud ettekujutlusega maailmast. Vahetust individuaalsest kogemusest saab tekstuaalselt vahendatud representatsioon. Nii on ka inimese suhe keskkonnaga kultuuri poolt vahendatud. Tekstuaalse representatsiooni võime lubab peale vahetult tajutava ette kujutada ka seda, mida pole vahetult antud: inimeste suutlikkus ühiselt ette kujutada võimalikke maailmu annab inimühiskonnale võimaluse sihipäraselt kujundada ja muuta oma keskkonda lõpmatult suuremal määral, kui seda suudab teha ükski teine organismiliik. Siiski eeldab (öko)semiootiline käsitlus, et tegelikkus ja selle tekstuaalne esitus on erinevad asjad – keskkonnaprobleeme võib vaadelda ühe sümptomina, mis osutab tõsiasjale, et looduses tegelikult toimuv ei allu täielikult inimese kontrollile. Kuni eeldatakse, et loodus pea täielikult vastab kultuurilisele ettekujutlusele sellest, võtab inimene endale ka voli toimetada sellega oma tahte kohaselt. Ökosemiootilises perspektiivis on aga kommunikatsioonivõime omane kogu (elus)loodusele ja kommunikatsioon inimese ja tema keskkonna vahel tõeline – vastastikune sõnumite vahetus, mis ei toimi, kui üks pool keeldub teise poole sõnumeid tähenduslikuks pidamast.

Ökosemiootiline lähenemine toob esile järjepidevuse kultuurilise prügi tekitamise ja analoogsete protsesside vahel looduses: kõikide organismide elutegevuse käigus tekivad jäägid. Teatud reservatsioonidega saame prügist rääkida ka avatud süsteemide teooria kontekstis, kuna komplekssete süsteemide säilimine ja evolveerumine toimub välise entroopia kasvu arvel. Prügi mõiste seesugune

laiendamine näitab ühelt poolt selle loomulikku päritolu ja prügi tekke paratamatust, teiselt poolt aga aitab mõista erinevust loodusliku – ainerings ümbertöödeldava, ja sünteetilise, akumuleraiva prügi vahel. Viimast saab hoida ringluses vaid tööstusliku ümbertöötlemise või kunstliku lagundamise kaudu, samuti on prügi institutsionaliseerimine seotud just selle akumuleraumisega. Ökosemiootilises perspektiivis nähakse prügi süsteemi ja protsessi osana, üleminekukategooriana, mis kuulub nii füüsiliselt kui semiootiliselt ümbertöötlemisele. Prügi muutub sellises käsitluses dünaamiliseks ja relatiivseks, sõltudes nii määratlejast kui määratlemise kontekstist, ja lakkab olemast absoluutne, staatiline süsteemiväline nähtus.

Magistritöös visandatud teoreetiline programm loob aluse edaspidiseks prügi semiootiliseks analüüsiks ja tegeleb kontseptuaalse lahenduse otsimisega globaalsetele keskkonnaprobleemidele.