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Symbolophobia and Pragmatomania[1]

A symbol which interests us also *as an object is distracting.*

Susanne K. Langer

Introduction

The title of this paper refers to an article by Kazimierz Twardowski *Symbolomania and pragmatophobia*, originally published in 1921, in which the author criticises the tendency to approach symbols outside their actual meaning and designation and an aversion to the things which the symbols symbolize (Twardowski 1999). The topic of the following article is concepts which express the opposite tendency, which is to desymbolize — projects that reject the category of symbol or weaken the relation of symbolization. The issue concerns symbolization as a cultural relation — when something that is perceptible represents something different on the bases of mental relations. If a thing, a feature or a state-of-affairs are symbolized, then symbolization is semantic relation. In this case one can talk about relation of reference.

The general idea of desymbolization is to remove symbolization from culture. The assumptions of this attempt are:

- linguistic nominalism — language is not a logical, structural and abstract system of expression-types; it is a vehicle carrying specific speech acts that utilize idiosyncratic expression-tokens. In a wider perspective, linguistic nominalism is cultural nominalism — the acts of interpretation are used only once and have solipsistic nature (Kmita 2000);

[1] This is a revised version of the text that was previously published in Polish in *Kultura Współczesna* 1/2012.

- the concept of reference and reference itself are unnecessary — they do not play any crucial part in explaining the relation between language and reality, but the exclusion of reference does not exclude semantics (Davidson 1977);
- a common sense and intentional relation of aboutness is enough. It is a by-product of a naturalist understanding of language behaviours (Rorty 1991);
- bringing all the relations of symbolization down to cause and effect relations is an expression of a tendency in Euro-American culture towards the third disenchantment of the world (Pałubicka 1996).

When taking into consideration the idea of culture without symbols as a syndrome of current Western culture, one should pay attention to the domination of values taken from the economy in the symbolic sphere, which is present in advertising industry. Neil Postman, who was an advocate of the triumph of techno-utilitarian culture over symbolic culture (technopoly), blamed advertising agencies exploiting symbols for the trivialisation of these. One also pays attention to the inflation of symbols — when too many symbols mean too less (Postman 1993; Klapp 1991). In this paper I will take a different perspective, although I think that the question of the future of symbols should be dealt with in the context of technological development. My goal is to represent and discuss symbolophobic concepts which refer directly to the latest technologies. To a great extent they are futuristic in nature and even belong to the realm of science fiction, which is a consequence of the taken perspective: culture without symbols is a vision of culture of the future.

Post-symbolic communication

The project of post-symbolic communication founded by Jaron Lanier is a future vision of possible communication without symbols taking place in the virtual environment. According to Lanier, a symbolic object is perceptible by senses and then used as a symbol — the non-symbolic aspect is prior to the symbolic one:

> Everything has symbolic and nonsymbolic aspects to it. A thing isn't a symbol; it's just that you can use anything as a symbol. The idea of symbol is a use for a thing, but everything is also a thing in and of itself; everything has primary thingness. (Lanier 1989, p. 119.)

The idea of symbol is a use for a perceptible object. Such an approach presupposes that experience precedes symbolization. This is the basic idea of post-symbolic communication — instead of symbolic exchange, exchange

of experience. Communication will be experiential, rather than referential (Dubber 2000). The reference of the symbols to objects is to be replaced by the creation and reprocessing of the actual objects which constitute virtual world. Marc de Groot precisely expresses the idea behind post-symbolic project:

> In the beginning, there were animals, who had nothing but their experience. Then man came along, who processes reality in metaphors. We have symbology. One thing stands for another. Verbal noises stand for experience, and we can share experience by passing his symbology back and forth. Then the Gutenberg Press happened, which was the opportunity to mass-produce symbology for the first time, and that marked a real change. And virtual reality is a real milestone too, because we're now able for the first time to mass-produce the direct experience. We've come full circle. (Rushkoff 2002, p. 30.)

Mass-produced direct experience in virtual reality is considered to be a new type of external experience. It is not a new kind of introspection, because virtual reality technologies do not directly affect what happens in the brain of the user, but what his senses perceive. In post-symbolic communication collections of objects placed in a virtual container are to be substitutes of general names. Instead of understanding a general name one gets an insight into these objects and can establish their common features. It is not a general idea but a new kind of concreteness — fluid form of experiential concreteness (Lanier 2006).

The rejection of the notion of symbolization does not necessarily lead to the rejection of semantics — in this sense the latter should be understood as post-symbolic semantics (Dubber 2000). The primary aspect of a symbol as compared to the representative one negates or limits the semantic transparency principle. The problem of post-symbolic semantics is to provide satisfactory characteristics of the notion of an object. If Lanier's project principles are applied consistently, one can say that post-symbolic communication will be about sending and receiving empirical signals. Post-symbolic semantics is then a variation of monadic semantics which allows only one level of representation, namely the degree zero. Substrates of monadic semantics represent only themselves and nothing more, present themselves, but they do not represent (Bense 1980). Post-symbolic communication will not be opposed to symbolic forms. It is to be a new form which broadens the ways of interpersonal communication. According to Lanier, we use symbols because our abilities to create objects and process the physical world are rather limited. Symbols let us refer to contingencies which we cannot realize in the physical world, namely to the things which we are instantly unable to become or create (Lanier, Biocca 1992; Lanier

2006). Post-symbolic communication is supposed to improve this limited creative potential.

It is worth here to mention that the term "post-symbolic" was used by Timothy Leary — a renegade psychologist and icon of the counterculture of the 1960s. His later ideas were precursory to the ideas of transhumanism and he was also an eager enthusiast of virtual reality. It is stated in the book *Info-psychology* published in 1987 that post-symbolism is characteristic to the "stages of thinking which use digitized clusters of quanta rather than lettered words or vocal utterances" (Leary 1987, p. v).

A-signifying semiotics

In presenting his concept of a-signifying semiotics, Felix Guattari uses the terms introduced by Louis Hjelmslev: expression plane and content plane, opposition of form and substance and distinction between substance and purport. Substance is semiotically formed, purport is a presemiotic sphere (semiotically amorphous). For Guattari the substance-content difference is crucial and in this respect he introduces the following classification of the encoding types:

- non-semiotic encoding with a natural character (genetic code). It works beyond the areas of expression and content, but also between form and purport without the presence of substance;
- signifying semiologies within which there are symbolic ones working within the frameworks of content and substance and are opposed to form and substance;
- a-signifying semiotics or post-signifying semiotics — they use signifying semiologies as a tool without involving into denoting. There is a mutual effect between forms and purport without substance and recourse to signification, but still a-signifying semiotics work within the frameworks of content and expression. They function independently of the fact whether given signs represent something to someone or not. Signs and things link together independent of representation (Guattari 1984).

A-signifying semiotics, which is machinic and artificial, operates with the help of specifically understood signs — part-signs or point-signs. On the one hand, these signs belong to the semiotic order. On the other hand, they directly interfere with physical and mechanical processes. Guattari provides an example of data stored on magnetic stripes of credit cards — sign-points which give orders to start or abort an operation. A-signifying semiotics triggers informational signs machines and functions parallel

or independently of signifying and denoting (Guattari 1992). Sign-points remind signals which have a low semiotic status:

> A signal is a pertinent unit of a system that may be an expression system ordered to a content, but could also be a physical system without any semiotic purpose ... A signal can be a stimulus that does not mean anything but causes or elicits something. (Eco 1979, p. 48.)

Sign-points carry out material function — functions like a signal or release mechanism — with its own energy, action threshold and consistency (Guattari, Stivale 1985). Gary Genosko suggests rejecting the view which localises signals below the semantic horizon of cultural interpretation. He claims that machinic properties of signals should not be considered their negative features but a positive quality of their characteristics. Signals directly transmit information without the need to provide semantic content. Genosko admits that the character of sign-points fits very well into quasi-automatised network of current infocapitalism and its tendency to maximise machinic force, to speed up, improve mobility and miniaturisation. These signs are dynamic and productive and at the same time drastically limited. The meaning is not crucial to their activity, but what is essential are specific codes, algorithms and standards. Sign-points emerge from a flexible, unshaped and amorphous signaletic matter. It is not neutral and not passive to form. Sign-points are flexible, intense and function beyond the myth of representation which injects and stimulates the passiveness of signs in the process of semiosis. They are not directed backward to obtain an anchored meaning but they move onward. Information precedes signification. With a-signifying semiotics we enter the level of post-human — a human becoming more and more artificial (Genosko 2008).

Guattari strongly states the following: "Semanticism or significance will be tolerated only temporarily, and the expectation is always that they will be reduced with the advance of technological and scientific progress" (Guattari 1984, p. 155). This reduction can imply bringing symbols down to signals and semantics will be replaced with an information machine of sign-points. Jean Baudrillard also draws attention to the importance of the meaning of signal within the context of rejecting reference. He replaces symbolization with simulation and a symbol is replaced with a one-dimensional *simulacrum*. Hyper-reality of autoreferential simulations is the rule of the metaphysics of the code:

> Digitality is its metaphysical principle ..., and DNA is its prophet. In fact, it is in the genetic code that the 'genesis of simulacra' today finds its completed form. At the limits of an ever more forceful extermination of references and finalities, of loss of semblances and designators, we find

> the digital, programmatic sign, which has purely *tactical* value, at the intersection of other signals. (Baudrillard 1993, p. 57.)

Lem as an anti-semiote

In an essay *Confessions of an Anti-Semiote*, Stanislaw Lem criticises a logical and structuralist attitude to language. His criticism is mainly directed at atomic concepts which investigate particular expressions in isolation without the dynamic aspect of language and also at the strong belief in structuralist concepts and treating works of literature within the framework of language as a system. According to Lem,

> . . . language is not a relational system stretched between the functions of designating, denoting and operating with concepts. It is about convenient constructs . . . , practical divisions which orderly and separately make available to us the things which, in fact, the language makes continually and simultatively. (Lem 1975, p. 59.)

To Lem, language is an open and potentially infinite system in which given signs exist alongside signs which appear virtually. A perceptible sign means something due to the coexistence of indirectly undetectable virtual signs. The conventional character of semiotic categories makes any study of language an inevitable interference with the language itself. This interference is defined by assumptions and its analysis through the prism of language categories is at stake due to self-reflexivity and antinomy. Lem suggests a different vision of language:

> We perceive language samples through language lens, but what we should do is to look at language from a code perspective, a code comprehensively reminding language but not being a purely human invention such as speech. There is such a code — heredity. (Lem 1975, p. 46.)

Lem's observations in *Confessions of an Anti-Semiote* relate to some of his ideas presented in *Summa technologiae*, namely the ideas of a megabit bomb and information farming. Originally, megabit bomb referred to the exponential increase of scientific information; Later it also referred to the continuous flow of any information on the Internet. Information farming is an idea which is supposed to prevent from the effects of a megabit bomb explosion. Lem suggests another type of information revolution, namely extracting information from Nature itself without the vehicle of a human brain or electronic devices:

> Information should emerge from information, as well as organisms should emerge from organisms. They should inseminate one another, cross and undergo "mutations" ..., and also radical rebuilding unknown to genetics. (Lem 1984, p. 211.)
>
> . . . "information farming" was supposed to lead to the creation of a "automatised self-creator of scientific theories." (Lem 1996. p. 82.)

Not only did Lem want to look at language through genetic code, but also 'hire' this code to create new 'scientific theories'. Such theories would be formulated neither via natural nor artificial language. They would not be symbolic constructs, but in a sense 'post-symbolic'. This idea is a result of Lem's fascination with genetic code — to be able to capture this code and technology of life. He also thought about 'code transgression' which implies deciphering genetic code and treating it as a pattern to create another biological code able to create different life. The background of the idea of information farming is an inversion of evolutionary strategy:

> The fact that evolution itself would constitute a kind of "information farming" situated in genes as matrix-projects ... turned in my mind after some time into "reversal" of meaning. ... I just thought that if a rule "only the best adaptable to the environment survives" was replaced by a rule "only the best EXPRESSIBLE survives," we would be on the verge of such an automatisation of perception processes (episteme) as the processes taking place for four billions of years that created biosphere and the humans. (Lem 1996. p. 209.)

Post-symbolic communication may be possible in hundred years, but post-symbolic information farming, if at all viable, is a much further perspective. However, one cannot exclude the fact that the development of nanotechnology will make the realization of some of Lem's information farming ideas possible.

Post-information age

In *The Third Wave* Alvin Toffler describes demassification process of mass media, culture and intellectuality. In the social aspect, it is a replacement of 'social mass', the members of which receive and exchange the same messages, with the multiplicity of small social groups exchanging their ideas and views. An important aspect of demassification is its fragmentation and lability of those ideas and views. In this respect, Toffler writes about blip culture being a result of an explosion of an information bomb striking with pieces of ideas and views, which can be treated as a symptom of entering the

stage of information society. Demassification also refers to culture symbols because it

> . . . shatters the standardized image of the word propagated by Second Wave communications technologies, and pumps a diversity of images, ideas, symbols, and values into society. Not only we are using customized products, we are using diverse symbols to customize our view to the world. (Toffler 1980, p. 255.)

The above remarks make one come to conclusions that third wave culture is not a culture without symbols. Rather it is a culture of local symbolism. The situation becomes more complicated when one takes into consideration the concepts and predictions referring to the coming of post-information age. Nicholas Negroponte proclaimed its coming as early as in the mid 1990s:

> In the post-information age, we often have an audience the size of one. Everything is made to order, and information is extremely personalized. A widely held assumption is that individualization is the extrapolation of narrowcasting — you go from a large to a small to a smaller group, ultimately to the individual. . . . Thinking of the post-information age as infinitesimal demographics or ultrafocused narrowcasting is about as personalized as Burger King's "Have It Your Way." True personalization is now upon us. . . . The post-information age is about acquaintance over time: machines' understanding individualas with the same degree of subtlety (or more than) we can expect from other human beings . . . All of these are based on a model of you as an individual, not as part of a group. (Negroponte 1995, pp. 164-165.)

Post-information individualisation is the radicalisation of demassification. Individuals use devices which provide them with information backup on the basis of their individual models. It is even possible to claim that the software of these devices can understand our needs, expectations and interests better than other humans. Software agents can be paradigmatic examples of this. It is important to mention the more common use of such mobile devices as smartphones and Ambient Intelligence systems are a crucial realization of this idea. Information and communication technologies become parts of objects and devices of everyday use and the presence of computers in these is hardly noticeable because they are fully integrated with one another. Negroponte uses the term "post-information age" because the pieces of information provided by intelligent devices to individuals are fully individualised and tailored to their idiosyncratic profiles of their convictions and needs. Such a situation can be called 'information solipsism.' The full realization of the post-information age will be mobile ubiquitous network environment. This means content everywhere paradigm and total

mobility in accessing information — access anytime, anywhere by anyone with anything. Post-information society is based on computerless (invisible computers), wireless communication and is impossible to be developed without some new kind of human (Ruzic 2008).

Kazimierz Krzysztofek describes the process of information individualisation as a tendency towards algorithmic society. The next generation will be dealing with pieces of information separated from the direct surroundings. Data will be obtained from anonymous and remotely accessible databases operated by unknown people. Set in objects of everyday use, multifunctional mobile devices and electronic implants, this data will provide behaviour algorithms. People will no longer look for analogue information sources and become more solitary, automatised and alienated, which leads to the simplification of communication code (Krzysztofek 2007). This would be a symptom of the aforementioned information solipsism.

According to one of the prognoses based on the concept of waves of technological innovations, it is claimed that information and communication revolution has ended, and the application of information technologies is nearly finished. In the developed countries information technologies have become an integral part of everyday life. However, this does not imply the replacement of computers by something else, but the most revolutionary ideas for life will come from other areas. The leading fields of science will be biomedicine, biotechnology, genetic engineering and nanotechnology. Post-information revolution will considerably influence humans. This will be the age of direct connections between machines and living organisms, cyborgisation and transhumanism. Electronic links between human brains can become a new form of communication (Šmihula 2010).

In the course of these considerations it is important to mention the concept of post-information age proclaimed by American futurists — Ryan Mathews and Watts Wacker. They describe post-information age of uncertainty in variabilistic categories — as an age of a relentless and overwhelming change. The idea of the abolition of context is also crucial, which can be described as an inability of individuals and the society to find commonly agreed-upon reference points. Post-information age is an age without empirically perceptible, traditionally and commonly agreed social context — individuals must create their own microcontexts. In technological sense, the leading paradigm will be neither production (industrial age) nor communication (information age), but creation — biotechnology and sentient software. In the information age the speed and purity of data transfer is crucial, whereas in the post-information age — the ability to translate data points into information, and media messages will be directed towards the future. The important thing is what will just happen. The abolition of context also refers

to common language — instead of playing symbolic catch-up with society and culture, the language provides more cultural icons (advertising phrases, jargons, neologisms and acronyms connected with new technologies). The means of communication reduce language to collections of set phrases of the code and quickly become simplified. Common language does no longer function as 'social glue'. The authors use a metaphor of post-it notes. Words do not obtain their meaning from commonly agreed standards but from physical or verbal idiosyncratic clues (Mathews, Wacker 2002). However, Mathews and Wacker are not consequent when writing about symbols. On the one hand, they draw attention to the desymbolization processes of common language, which comes from the idea of the abolition of context. On the other hand, they write about the domination of digital code and point out the fact that the meaning is trapped between barrage of symbols and eroding of linguistic denotations. The latter aspect is the problem of desymbolization. Being consequent would require the replacement of the concept of symbol with the concept of signal in this context. It is about the flow of digital signals and the progression of digitalisation.

Desymbolization — moderate or radical

Symbolophobia can have two forms depending on moderate or radical desymbolization tendency. In the moderate version, one does not use symbolization based on commonly accepted convictions but instead uses diverse sets of symbols functioning locally. Moderate desymbolization is in fact local symbolism and demassification. In the radical version

> . . . we erase the relations of symbolization and stick to 'metonymic' ones, whereas into the place of relations of symbolization and semantic representation we 'casually' submit the replacement of one nominalist *signifiant* with other . . . *signifiants* nominalistically understood. (Kmita 1997, p. 104.)

Signifiants will also change. It is about what will be left of them (series of signals, streams of impulses) or what is created on their basis (simulations, interactive stereograms). The visions and prognoses of post-information age show a tendency convergent with radical desymbolization. Abolition of context is an idea very similar to linguistic nominalism — the speech in the form of a collection of particular, idiosyncratic and physical sounds devoid of any subject references is comprehensible only in unique physical and verbal microcontexts. Cyborgisation and transhumanism in the semiotic context are ideas close to a-sygnifying semiotics and sign-points are directed onward, just as future messages will be.

Lanier is opposed to transhumanists' views. However, he would agree with the views according to which devices based on software agents are of alienating character. The project of post-symbolic communication is supposed to counteract alienation. In this respect Lanier ponders upon the fact concerning what is primary — information or experience? He supports experience, which is expressed in a famous *dictum*: information is alienated experience (Lanier 1995). Lanier's post-symbolism would be a post-information form but in the sense opposed to Negroponte's vision, in which machines will understand the needs of individuals better than other humans and perhaps even better than the individuals themselves. Lanier would say that this does not prove machines to be cleverer, but this shows people becoming less intelligent and less human. The visions of post-information age and desymbolization projects exhibit some common tendencies but still they are internally diversified. However, the key issue is how future digital technologies will influence the shape of *homo symbolicus*.

Symbol/signal — language/code

Desymbolization projects can be characterised by retrosemiotic tendencies — passing from the signs of higher semioticity (the degree of mediation of reality by the sign) to signs of lower semioticity (Bense 1980). Symbol is a sign of high semioticity. Retrosemiosis takes place on two levels. On the microsemiotic level a symbol becomes a signal, whereas on the macrosemiotic level language becomes a code, where the code is understood as a collection of signals (Wolniewicz 1999). In this respect two codes are crucial, namely binary and genetic. Desymbolization ideas and the concepts of post-information age all draw attention to the importance of digital code. Retrosemiosis has a connection with nominalism as well:

> . . . as opposed to signal and message, which are concrete units, *signifiant* and *signifie* . . . are abstract. One should be careful not to mistake *signifiant* for signal and *signifie* for message. (Prieto 1970, p. 45.)

In general, the tendency is to talk about semiotic nominalism.

Twardowski's pragmatophobia is an aversion to the things being references of symbols. Pragmatomania has two aspects. The first aspect is perceiving symbols as physical beings, real or virtual objects and the objective aspect of the symbol is considered basic. Semiotic nominalism is also related to the concept of pragmatomania because it replaces universals with concrete sounds or graphic systems. As Ernst Cassirer described, "a signal is a part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning" (Cassirer 1944, p. 51). The second aspect of

pragmatomania is the active character of signals. In order to be activated, symbols need interpretation processes, whereas signals as elements of the physical world of being are active by themselves. Signals are dynamic and do not stay passive.

Symbol is an aesthetic-noetic unity. Weakening of the symbol is a shift of proportion between its aesthetic and noetic aspect — strengthening of the aesthetic side or the weakening of the noetic one. Both Lanier and Baudrillard pay attention to the strengthening of aesthetics of symbols, which leads to the loss of their semantic transparency. Suzanne Langer observed that semantic transparency is possible due to the fact that words in themselves are worthless and unattractive. If a given symbol were replaced by, for example, delicious-looking fruit, only few people would be able to fully relate it to the right concept (Langer 1948). Overesthetization of a symbol is what makes us draw more attention to itself instead of relating it to its meaning. The weakening of the noetic aspect of the symbol is also connected with the visions of post-information age, when symbolization will be simulated computationally. Will the symbols then be, as if to say, 'artificially resurrected'? On the grounds of physical symbol system hypothesis crucial to the symbolic paradigm of artificial intelligence, the concept of symbol has a meaning different from semiotic symbol-type. This hypothesis considers symbols to be tokens that are manipulated on the basis of their sizes, shapes and relative locations by accordingly designed systems (Fetzer 1997). At this point it is important to remind Guattari's statement — symbols and semantics are needed only temporarily until they become reduced to signals and code.

In the end it would be worthwhile to confront symbolomania and symbolophobia, because they have one thing in common. It is their negative attitudes to objective reference, although they are differently motivated. Symbolomania was limited to the syntactic level and dealing with sign-types. It was the suspension of semantic symbolizing, which was possible only because there were some syntactic universals left, namely pure symbols. On the other hand, symbolophobia equals deletion of symbolizing. This is possible only because the level of sign-types is discarded and one cannot assign firm objective references to disposable and idiosyncratic uses of specimens. The concentration on the aesthetic aspect of the symbol is not about syntactic contemplation. For pure syntax an individual visual form of the symbol is not important. An interesting thing is that symbolomania and pragmatophobia in the form of a dynamic development of formal logic have led to the construction of digital machines which have become so widespread that they triggered a social change — a passage from industrial society to information society. My goal was to show that the visions and prognoses

concerning the coming of post-information age exhibit tendencies similar to opposite concepts — symbolophobia and pragmatomania. However, it is important to remember that post-information scenarios are among the many other possible options in thinking about the future(s) of information society (Zacher 2014).

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Symbolophobia and Pragmatomania

Abstract

The article discusses concepts which express desymbolization tendencies in contemporary culture. They postulate abandonment of the notion of symbol or weakening of symbolization relationship. Such an attitude can be called 'symbolophobia.' The assumption of these concepts is semiotic nominalism — the rejection of sign-types level in favor of idiosyncratic uses of sign-tokens or physically active series of signals. In this perspective, signs are seen primarily as objects included in the causal relations. Objective aspect of the symbol is considered as more important than representative one. In this sense, one can talk about 'pragmatomania.' Both symbolophobia and pragmatomania utilize retrosemiosis processes, which consists in passing from the signs of higher semioticity (symbols) to signs of lower semioticity (signals). Concepts expressing the aforementioned tendencies include: post-symbolic communication project, concept of a-signifying semiotics, some ideas of Stanislaw Lem, who called himself 'anti-semiote,' and visions or projections concerning post-information age.

Keywords: symbol, signal, retrosemiosis, semiotic nominalism, post-symbolic communication, a-signifying semiotics, post-information age, Stanislaw Lem.