

# changing worlds & signs of the times

**Selected Proceedings**

from the 10th International Conference  
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

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Eleftheria Deltsou

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# Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times

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# Contents

Preface .....	11
Introduction .....	12

## PLENARY SPEECHES

<b>Jean-Marie Klinkenberg</b> <i>Thinking the Novelty</i> .....	16
<b>Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos</b> <i>Continuities, discontinuities and ruptures in the history and theory of semiotics</i> .....	30
<b>Farouk Y. Seif</b> <i>Resilience and Chrysalis Reality: Navigating Through Diaphanous Space and Polychronic Time</i> .....	52
<b>Göran Sonesson</b> <i>The Eternal Return of the New. From Cultural Semiotics to Evolutionary Theory and Back Again</i> .....	68
<b>Κάριν Μπόκλουντ-Λαγοπούλου</b> <i>Γιατί η Σημειωτική;</i> .....	88

## SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

<b>Mari-Liis Madisson, Andreas Ventsel</b> <i>Analysis of Self-descriptions of Estonian Far Right in Hypermedia</i> .....	102
<b>Joseph Michael Gratale</b> <i>The 'War on Terror' and the re-codification of war</i> .....	112
<b>Emile Tsekenis</b> <i>'African modernity': Witchcraft, 'Autochthony', and transformations in the conceptualizations of 'individual' and 'collective identity' in Cameroon</i> .....	122
<b>Sofia Kefalidou, Periklis Politis</b> <i>Identity Construction in Greek TV News Real-Time Narratives on Greek Financial Crisis</i> .....	134
<b>Anthony Smyrnaiois</b> <i>Discerning the Signs of the Times: The role of history in conspiracism</i> .....	144
<b>Όλγα Παντούλη</b> <i>Ο 'αριστερός' και ο 'ανατολίτης' σύζυγος στις αφηγήσεις γυναικών επιστημόνων: διαδικασίες επιτέλεσης του φύλου τους</i> .....	152
<b>Μαριάννα Ψύλλα, Δημήτριος Σεραφής</b> <i>Η ανάλυση ενός γεγονότος μέσα από τον πολυσημικό λόγο των εφημερίδων: Μία μεθοδολογική και πολιτική προσέγγιση του Δεκέμβρη του 2008</i> .....	160
<b>Αλεξία Καπραβέλου</b> <i>Ο ρατσισμός σήμερα μέσα από τη σημειωτική ανάλυση γεπορτάζ εφημερίδων</i> .....	170

## SPACE AND/IN SOCIETY

<b>Eleftheria Deltsoy</b> <i>Salonica Other Ways – Otherwise': A Mirror-λ letter and heterotopias of an urban experiment</i> .....	186
<b>Fotini Tsiibiridou, Nikitas Palantzas</b> <i>Becoming Istanbul: a dictionary of the problematics of a changing city; inside critique of significant cultural meanings</i> .....	196

<b>Κώστας Γιαννακόπουλος</b> <i>Αναφομοίωτες διαφορές, «εξευγενισμός» και πόλη</i> .....	206
<b>Ιορδάνης Στυλίδης</b> <i>Η Βιτρίνα ως ελκυστής σημασίας</i> .....	216
<b>Δήμητρα Χατζησάββα</b> <i>Αναδυόμενες έννοιες για τον χωρικό σχεδιασμό</i> .....	226
<b>Θεοδώρα Παπίδου</b> <i>Μεταγραφές ψηφιακού υλικού στον αρχιτεκτονικό σχεδιασμό</i> .....	236
<b>Κωνσταντίνος Μωραΐτης</b> <i>Τοπία σημαίνοντα</i> .....	248
<b>Νεφέλη Κυρικήσου</b> <i>Η ολίσθηση των σημασιών στην τοπική θεωρία του Jacques Lacan</i> ..	260
<b>Ανθία Βερυκίου</b> <i>Τόποι απουσίας και Τοπολογικά τοπία</i> .....	270

## VISUAL CULTURES

<b>George Damaskinidis</b> <i>Are University Students Followers of the World's Semiotic Turn to the Visual?</i> .....	284
<b>Dimitrios Koutsogiannis, Vassiliki Adampa, Stavroula Antonopoulou, Ioanna Hatzikyriakou, Maria Pavlidou</b> <i>(Re)constructing Greek classroom space in changing times</i> .....	294
<b>Polyxeni Manoli</b> <i>A multimodal approach to using comics in EFL classrooms</i> .....	308
<b>Αικατερίνη Τάτση, Μαρία Μακαρού</b> <i>Πολυτροπικά πολιτισμικά παλίμψηστα: η περίπτωση ενός κόμικ</i> .....	318
<b>Αναστασία Φακίδου, Απόστολος Μαγουλιώτης</b> <i>Σημεία και κώδικες: Πώς αντιλαμβάνονται τα παιδιά τη γλώσσα εικόνων που αναπαριστούν την παιδική ηλικία;</i> .....	332
<b>Έφη Παπαδημητρίου, Δήμητρα Μακρή</b> <i>Πολυτροπική κοινωνική σημειωτική προσέγγιση στη δημιουργία νοημάτων-σημείων από μαθητές/τριες της πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης</i> .....	346
<b>Θεοφάνης Ζάγουρας</b> <i>Ο σχεδιασμός πολυτροπικών κειμένων για το γλωσσικό μάθημα στο Δημοτικό Σχολείο</i> .....	360
<b>Dimitra Christidou</b> <i>Does pointing in the museum make a point? A social semiotic approach to the museum experience</i> .....	374
<b>Παρασκευή Κερτεμελίδου</b> <i>Οι μετασχηματισμοί του μουσείου τέχνης στην εποχή της κατανάλωσης</i> .....	386

## ART

<b>Eirini Danai Vlachou</b> <i>The Beatles Paradigm. Transcending a collection of 'ropey', scrappy, multi-cultural breadcrumbs into a whole new semiosphere</i> .....	398
<b>Μαΐνη Κοκκίδου, Χριστίνα Τσίγκα</b> <i>Η κουλτούρα των βιντεοκλίπ: η περίπτωση των μουσικών βιντεοκλίπ δια-τροπικής ακρόασης</i> .....	408
<b>Angeliki Avgitidou</b> <i>Art imitating protest imitating art: performative practices in art and protest</i> .....	420
<b>Spiros Polimeris, Christine Calfoglou</b> <i>Some thoughts on the semiotics of digital art</i> ..	430
<b>Χρύσανθος Βούτουρος, Ανδρέας Λανίτης</b> <i>Η Σημειο-αισθητική προσέγγιση της Βυζαντινής τέχνης ως Εικονική Κληρονομιά</i> .....	440
<b>Άννα Μαρία Παράσχου</b> <i>Τοπογραφία διάρρηξης: Φωτογραφικές απεικονίσεις πολέμου από τον Simon Norfolk, ως μια αφήγηση ανατροπής</i> .....	454

<b>Pirjo Kukkonen</b> <i>Signs of times and places in Aki Kaurismäki's films. The existential subject and the semiotic modalities of being and doing</i> .....	466
<b>Christina Adamou</b> <i>Swarming with cops</i> .....	478
<b>Yvonne Kosma</b> <i>Picturing 'Otherness': Cinematic Representations of 'Greekness' in "My Big Greek Fat Wedding"</i> .....	488
<b>Χρήστος Δερμεντζόπουλος, Θανάσης Βασιλείου</b> <i>Προσεγγίζοντας μια αφαιρετική κινηματογραφική μορφή: "Το Δέντρο της Ζωής", του Terrence Malick</i> .....	498
<b>Νίκος Τερζής</b> <i>Η σημειωτική μέθοδος ανάλυσης μιας ταινίας</i> .....	508
<b>Ηρώ Λάσκαρη</b> <i>Σύστημα γενεσιουργής οπτικοακουστικής αφήγησης</i> .....	524

## ADVERTISEMENT

<b>Luiz Carlos Migliozi Ferreira de Mello</b> <i>Viagra: New Social Forms</i> .....	536
<b>Nikos Barkas, Maria Papadopoulou</b> <i>'The house of our dreams': A decade of advertisements in building magazines</i> .....	544
<b>Stamatia Koutsoulelou</b> <i>Advertising strategies in times of crisis: A semiotic analysis</i> .....	560
<b>Περικλής Πολίτης, Ευάγγελος Κουρδής</b> <i>Κοινωνιόλεκτοι σε ελληνικές τηλεοπτικές διαφημίσεις. Η περίπτωση της «γλώσσας των νέων»</i> .....	572
<b>Ευριπίδης Ζαντίδης</b> <i>Αναδυόμενες ταυτότητες και εθνικότητα σ' ένα φλιτζάνι κυπριακού καφέ</i> .....	588
<b>Ελένη Συκιώτη, Γενοβέφα Ζαφειρίδου</b> <i>Σημειωτικές παρατηρήσεις στη σύγχρονη διαφήμιση: Η περίπτωση της εμπορικής και της κοινωνικής διαφήμισης</i> .....	600
<b>Βασιλική Κέλλα</b> <i>Η διαφήμιση ως λεκτική πράξη</i> .....	612

## LANGUAGE, TEXTS AND TEXTUALITIES

<b>George Androulakis, Roula Kitsiou, Carolina Rakitzi, Emmanuel Zerai</b> <i>Linguistic cityscape revisited: inscriptions and other signs in the streets of Volos</i> .....	622
<b>María José Naranjo, Mercedes Rico, Gemma Delicado, Noelia Plaza</b> <i>Constructing new identities around Languages and Media</i> .....	634
<b>Ιωάννα Μωραΐτου, Ελευθερία Τσέλιου</b> <i>Ανάλυση Λόγου και μεταμοντέρνες προσεγγίσεις στη συμβουλευτική / ψυχοθεραπεία: η «στροφή στο λόγο»</i> .....	642
<b>Φίλιππος Τεντολούρης, Σωφρόνης Χατζησαββίδης</b> <i>«Κατασκευάζοντας» το κείμενο και τον συγγραφέα: οριοθετημένα και μη-οριοθετημένα σημειωτικά πλαίσια της σχολικής γλωσσικής δημιουργίας</i> .....	652
<b>Βάσια Τσάμη, Δημήτρης Παπαζαχαρίου, Άννα Φτερνιάτη, Αργύρης Αρχάκης</b> <i>Η πρόσληψη της γλωσσικής ποικιλότητας σε κείμενα μαζικής κουλτούρας από μαθητές της Ε' και ΣΤ' Δημοτικού</i> .....	664
<b>Αναστασία Χριστοδούλου, Ιφιγένεια Βαμβακίδου, Αργύρης Κυρίδης</b> <i>'Lego-Legends of CHIMA'. Κοινωνιοσημειωτική ανάλυση της συναρμολόγησης του θρύλου</i> .....	676
<b>Μαρίνα Σούνογλου, Αικατερίνη Μιχαλοπούλου</b> <i>Η Σημειωτική στη διαμόρφωση της έννοιας του πολίτη στο νηπιαγωγείο</i> .....	686

## BODIES & MINDS

<b>Fotini Bonoti, Plousia Misailidi</b> <i>Graphic signs of jealousy in children's human figure drawings</i> .....	700
<b>Eirini Papadaki</b> <i>The Semiotics of Children Drawings, A Comparative Study of Art, Science and Children Drawing</i> .....	708
<b>Myrto Chronaki</b> <i>Changing practices and representations of birth and birth-spaces in maternity clinics and at home</i> .....	720
<b>Athanasios Sakellariadis</b> <i>Metaphor as a Hermeneutical Design of the Mental Phenomena: The role of narrative speech in the cognitive field of the Philosophy of Mind</i> .....	730
<b>Anita Kasabova</b> <i>A semiotic attempt to analyze delusions</i> .....	738

## LITERATURE

<b>Miltos Frangopoulos</b> <i>The Task of the Translator</i> .....	756
<b>Fitnat Cimşit Kos, Melahat Küçükarslan Emiroğlu</b> <i>Reality as a Manner of Transformation</i> .....	766
<b>Angela Yannicopoulou, Elita Fokiali</b> <i>Transmedia Narratives for Children and Young Adults</i> .....	778
<b>Ioanna Boura</b> <i>The expression of worldviews through narratives and chronotopes of liquid times</i> .....	790
<b>Evgenia Sifaki</b> <i>The "Poetic Subject" as "Subject of Semiosis" in C. P. Cavafy's "Going back Home from Greece"</i> .....	798
<b>Αγγελική Παννικοπούλου</b> <i>Το εικονογραφημένο βιβλίο χωρίς λόγια</i> .....	808
<b>Μαρίνα Γρηγοροπούλου</b> <i>Κόσμοι που συγκρούονται και σημεία των τεχνών: οι «Σκοτεινές Τέχνες» του Νίκου Κουνενή</i> .....	818
<b>Σοφία Ιακωβίδου</b> <i>Εις τα περίχωρα της δυστοπίας: αφηγήσεις της κρίσης στη λογοτεχνία για νέους</i> .....	826
<b>Πέγκυ Καρπούζου</b> <i>Το παιχνίδι και η ηθική της μετανεωτερικής συμβίωσης</i> .....	834
<b>Αγλαΐα Μπλιούμη</b> <i>Ρευστοί καιροί και μεταφορές – Σημειωτικές προσεγγίσεις στη λογοτεχνία της ενωμένης Γερμανίας</i> .....	844
<b>Παναγιώτης Ξουπλίδης</b> <i>Ένας οικείος δαίμονας: προς μια προσέγγιση του σημείου της λογοτεχνικής γάτας σε 7 κείμενα παιδικής λογοτεχνίας του Χρήστου Μπουλώτη</i> .....	856
<b>Conference Credits</b> .....	868

# Analysis of Self-descriptions of Estonian Far Right in Hypermedia

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## Abstract

*Our article focuses on processes of identification in hypermedia. We would like to explicate the strategies of self-description that prevail on the websites of the activists of the Estonian extreme right. Les Back has developed the concept of liquid ideologies that explains how extreme right movements tend to use generally accepted discourses for the purpose of legitimizing their own ethno-centric media practices. To explain this paradoxical situation we employ the concepts of the hegemonic logic of signification and the empty signifier, as elaborated by Laclau, as well as the theoretical framework of cultural semiotics. Our case-study is based on the extraordinarily forceful public feedback that followed the discussions of ACTA ratification in Estonia. "Information-freedom" became an ambiguous core-signifier.*

## Keywords

extreme right groupuscule , ACTA , hegemony , cultural semiotics , self-model

Our study concentrates on the tendencies of identity-creation prevalent in extreme right online communities, i.e., groupuscules. We must keep in mind that the communication of the contemporary extreme right is a manifold and intricate research object located in an intertwined network of different discursive trends. Les Back, a sociologist of racism and nationalism, has indicated that it is useful to treat the contemporary extreme right as a conglomerate of liquid ideologies. By liquid ideologies Back (2002a) refers to the paradoxical tendency of right-wing extremists to transform the signifiers of dominant and 'normalized' discourses into their racist media practices. A similar tendency is outlined by several other authors (see Atton, 2006; Campbell, 2006; Sommer, 2008; Taguieff, 1999).

The main objective of our article is to explain how the self-descriptions of extreme right groupuscules – consisting of controversial values – are constituted. We believe that for this project it is efficient to synthesize the concepts of *self-description* and *self model* (originating in Tartu-Moscow cultural semiotics) with the *theory of hegemony* (of the Essex school). Our study is based on non-participatory observation, in which we focus on an analysis of the prevailing discourse on five Estonian extreme right blogs. According to Les Back (2002b, p. 632), movements of cyber-racism have various profiles but they also exhibit the following common features: “1) a rhetoric of racial and/ or national uniqueness and common destiny; 2) ideas of racial supremacy, superiority and separation; 3) a repertoire of conceptions of racial Otherness; 4) a utopian revolutionary world-view that aims to overthrow the existing order”. The main reason why we chose the following blogs, EESTI RAHVUSLIK BLOG<sup>1</sup> [Estonian Nationalist Blog] Rahvuslane<sup>2</sup> [The Nationalist]; BH Ruzzland<sup>3</sup> ja NS blogi [NS blog]<sup>4</sup>; Vabamõtleja [The Freethinker]<sup>5</sup>, is that we believe that they give an illustrative picture of the center of the contemporary Estonian groupuscular right. These blogs are quite well-known to the so-called countercultural public and they predominantly exhibit an extreme right tonality. The most common ideas expressed include: the urgent need to preserve indigenous Estonian-ness, speculation that the existing world order (including the Estonian state) is subordinated by a Zionist/Masonic grouping, mixing races and cultures is dangerous, the Estonian economy should keep rigorous track of protectionism, etc.

Our case-study is based on the extraordinarily forceful public feedback that followed discussions in the Estonian government over the ratification-project of ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement). ACTA is a multinational treaty whose purpose is to establish international standards for intellectual property rights enforcement. ACTA aims at establishing an international legal framework for targeting counterfeit goods, generic medicines and copyright infringement on the Internet. ACTA Ratification discussions led to numerous public demonstrations and also the formation of *Rahvakogu* [The Panel of the People] in Estonia. The topic of information-freedom became an ambiguous core-signifier: it played an important part in the discussions of parliament but also in the self-descriptions of Estonian radical nationalists.

## **Groupuscular extreme rightism in hypermedia**

As with the majority of human communication, extreme right interactions have adapted to the signification peculiarities of hypermedia. Contemporary extreme right movements, predominantly spreading in online environments, can be explained most comprehensively by Roger Griffin's theory of the groupuscule. Griffin (2003, p. 30) states that "in the context of extreme right-wing politics in the contemporary age, groupuscules are intrinsically small political (frequently meta-political, but never primarily party-political) entities formed to pursue palingenetic (i.e. revolutionary) ideological, organizational or activist ends with an ultimate goal of overcoming the decadence of the existing liberal democratic system." Groupuscules systematically distribute links to other ideologically connected groupuscules and also to more institutionalized extreme right organizations. Groupuscules share the opinion that most of the world is secretly dominated by a greedy and morally corrupt elite (which is in most interpretations perceived as implicitly *Evil*), whose main aim is to subordinate the whole global system to its authoritarian regime. If the corruptive plans of the elite succeed then everything sacred will be disappear, nation-states included.

### **The level of self-description of groupuscules**

As the main aim of this study is to explicate how self-descriptions of extreme right groupuscules – that consist of conflicting values – are constructed, we conceptualize the groupuscule as a semiosphere, i.e., a semiotic unity which on the meta-level of self-understanding (self-description), that distinguishes different (sub)spheres according to their borders. Self-description is a universal semiotic operation by which a semiosphere acknowledges its own specificity and opposes itself to other, so-called outer spheres (Lotman 2005, p. 211–212). According to Lotman, it is important to emphasize that the meta-level of self-description always presupposes belonging in wider cultural unities. "Only by taking part in a much greater whole, does it recognize the external point of view as specific to itself," (Lotman 2005, p. 225). The self-description of a particular groupuscule is thus affected by its positioning in the context of a groupuscular field but also in the context of other online communities. Processes of self-description provide internal order and unity for a particular sphere. Thus active interaction with the natural unevenness of the periphery "becomes one of the roots of the dynamic processes within the semiosphere" (Lotman 2005, p. 213). The self-description processes of groupuscules form certain frames that specify the possible horizons of meaning creation in the contemporary extreme right. By marking borders with other groupuscules a particular groupuscule becomes aware of its own particularity, but this also helps to create the conditions for communicative operations – for the exchange and transformation of ideas. As Griffin has discussed, the extreme right groupuscule's physical manifestation is usually a website produced or maintained by a small number of enthusiasts, although it

can also be a magazine (2002: 4) or some underground meeting-place, e.g. a club. We think that it is important to emphasize that Griffin uses the concept of groupuscule to describe the communicational structure of contemporary extreme right. The concept of semiosphere helps to explicate and explore groupuscular meaning creation – to describe how different extreme right nodes create self-models and how they interact with other socio-cultural units.

### **NO ACTA as signifier of discourse**

As mentioned in the introductory part, Les Back (2002a) outlines the way in which the contemporary extreme right tends to meld fragments from incompatible discourses (e.g. from multiculturalism and nativism/racism) into each other, creating *liquid ideologies*. *Liquid ideologies* is relevant for describing the extreme-right postings which reflect upon the ratification-process of ACTA. Signifiers from the discourse of democracy and equality, such as 'freedom of speech', 'justice', and 'privacy', constitute an integrated discourse along with the signifiers of radical right ideas. We will attempt to explain this contradictory signification logic by relying on cultural semiotics and the Essex school of discourse analysis.

The problem of the constitution of social and political reality becomes for Laclau the problem of the *constitution of discourse*. Hegemony is to be understood only on the terrain of discourse: a hegemonic relation is a *certain* kind of articulation of meanings (Laclau 2006, p. 114). The specific hallmark of this signification-process is that the logic of equivalence is dominant over the logic of difference. Hegemonic signification logic is aggregated around a particular signifier. This particular signifier, an *empty signifier* in Laclau's terminology, thereby acquires a dominant position in the signifying system, or discourse, and subordinates, to a greater or lesser extent, all the other elements of the discourse, allowing them to appear as equivalent and undermining their particular *differences* (Laclau 1996, p. 36–46). In our present case concerning the ratification of ACTA, the central dominant signifier seems to be 'NO ACTA'. The agreement, the explicit purpose of which was to regulate property issues, was perceived by many protesters (extreme rightists being only a minute portion of these) as a juridical mess which, in the event of ratification, threatened to compromise freedom of speech. Furthermore, ratification of ACTA was depicted as fundamentally undermining not only freedom of speech but also democratic social organization in general. We see articulations of such fears in the following postings which indicate the contradiction between ACTA and the values protected by the Estonian Constitution:

We have to agree that intellectual property is important in our society, and it needs protection. But at the same time we mustn't consider it more important than the inviolability of private life, freedom of expression and data protection, and other rights, like presumption of innocence and a sufficient juridical sup-

port. Thus we think that ACTA, which is being negotiated in such an undemocratic manner, doesn't suit our legal order. Therefore, we ask everybody to cast their vote against ACTA, and together, if we express our views, we can compel the Estonian state to say no. Give your signature here: <http://petition.ee/ei-acta-le>.<sup>6</sup>

In this posting it is important to emphasize that 'NO ACTA' aggregates together, in addition to 'freedom of speech', other signifiers of the democracy-discourse, e.g. 'inviolability of private life', 'data protection', 'supremacy of law', etc. It is clear that these signifiers designate different contents in their particularity, but in our case they constitute one meaningful discourse against ACTA, one that is dominated by a 'threat to freedom of speech'. The groupuscule directs visitors to link to a forum for petitions ([www.petition.ee](http://www.petition.ee)) and to online articles from the largest Estonian newspaper – *Postimees* – which address the slogans that were used in demonstrations in Tallinn:

'I love my country, but fear my government', 'No ACTA, no new world order', '1984 - Orwell was only off a decade or two', 'ACTA – global censorship', 'Stop ACTA – before space is run out' and from Tartu the DELFI reported about protesters with posters: 'Stop ACTA!', 'ACTA=snooping', 'ACTA is against to Constitution', 'ACTA is the end of E-society', 'ACTA is Molotov-Ribbentrop Contract', 'Die in Hell ACTA!', etc.<sup>7</sup>

We can see a similar signification logic, which puts different signifiers into a sequence as equivalent signs, in the following posting:

It turns out that a certain contingent is allowed to present their political views on social networks and others are not. We can bring examples from across the ocean (e.g. President Obama can use everything for advertising his ideas and political propaganda) but we also have examples from the homeland [...] Political activity is allowed only within certain limits, and it has to be approved by current leaders – you cannot do anything even a gram more than they allow!<sup>8</sup>

In this posting we may notice the tendency to oppose the 'establishment', which is characteristic of communications of the extreme right; it is important to note that such extremists conflict with both global and local leaders. Political activity is understood as exercising freedom of speech – one of the core values of democracy. But on the other hand, the author of this posting perceives that freedom of speech is undermined and impeded by a corrupt elite ("a certain contingent is allowed to present their political views on social networks and others are not"; "political activity is allowed only in certain limits, and it has to be approved by leaders). The blogger portrays the main purpose of this elite as prohibiting the spread of alternative views, which in our case is understood as predominately radically right, on the internet.

It is quite clear that, in these kinds of signification-processes, every particular signifier (element of a particular discourse) becomes gradually empty of its content, because

'inviolability of private life', 'data protection', 'political activeness', 'juridical law', etc., are not actually reducible to each other. They have separate – or in different discursive context, different – meanings. Paradoxically, this emptying results in a certain unity or transparency (systematicity) between signifiers. But one particular signifier which forms the discourse tends to become emptier and emptier from the point of view of its own specific meaning and in comparison with other signifiers loses its specific meaning the most. The signifier 'NO ACTA' unites and represents all other signifiers (elements) that belong to this specific, whole, meaningful discourse. If we consider the signifier 'NO ACTA', then its eventual meaning becomes far less specific than it was at the beginning (as the potential ratification of an intellectual property law) of the protests. This logic of emptying of the signifier takes place through the proliferation of different meanings that are attributed to it. Only then does it begin to constitute all particular signifiers in the discourse; it also functions as a border which distinguishes itself from other discourses. This kind of discursive unity is at the same time also unstable because every discourse has a processual, context-dependent and temporary nature; it changes together with the discourses it is opposed to, so that it does not have a pre-given metaphysical basis or structure.

### **e-Estonia as self-model**

Thus for Laclau a movement from one hegemonic formation to another is always a radical upheaval, a so-called creation *ex nihilo*. At the same time, the stress of contingency sets certain limitations for analyzing particular political situations. We believe that by relying on cultural semiotics, especially the notion of *the model of itself* (or *self-model*), it is possible to enhance Laclau's approach.

In the context of our case study we must emphasize that two types of texts can be distinguished. A *self-model* belongs to a different level than texts that circulate in so-called ordinary communication, and which are deciphered by that self-model (Lotman, Uspenskij 1978, p. 227). So, while studying groupuscular self-descriptions, we have to distinguish two levels: a) the *primary* level – the level of particular postings that groupuscules produce in different communicational situations; b) the *secondary or meta-level* – the level of representations which reflect how groupuscules describe themselves or discourses meaningful for them. This latter level presents their ideal image of themselves. According to Lotman and Uspenskij, "the need for self-description, which is connected with the need at a certain stage to define it as a unit in terms and structure, has a vigorous effect on the culture as a phenomenon to be described" (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013, p. 241). Of course, different meta-languages have different potentials to become part of the object-language of culture, and to transform it. This depends on various historical and socio-cultural factors.

The self-models of Estonian nationalist groupuscules can not be analyzed separately from Estonian public identity that is dominated by e-discourse, which can be described

in the vocabulary of Dominic Boyer as a cybernetic-informational epistemology. People (especially those who participate in online content creation) tend to identify with the main characteristics of hypermedia, e.g. with its non-hierarchical or decentralized and dynamic nature, its interactivity, etc. Those notions are attributed high axiological values. They are usually articulated in situations in which individuals want to highlight the innovative and progressive nature of online media practices, especially in contrast with traditional media (Boyer 2010, p. 79–80). The relative anonymity of the Internet (with regard to race, confession, class, religion, gender, location, etc.) and its decentralized and interactivity-facilitating character are often considered signs of the medium's democratic nature.

This kind of cyber-democracy discourse plays an important role in Estonian identity. We (Estonians) are proud to describe our country as e-Estonia, which means that thanks to clever digital solutions a bridge has been created between state institutions and citizens. Essentially, everything connected with the internet and digital solutions carries strong positive connotations: besides broadening the possibilities for democracy, digitization and the internet are also understood as future-oriented, progressive and liberating. In tourist-brochures Estonia is depicted as a country that offers WiFi access even in its forests. We like to point out that we enjoy an e-election system, that doctors can generate digital medicine prescriptions, and that parents, teachers and pupils can interact via the system of E-school. Hence, the E-discourse that is (more or less intensively) present throughout the world is especially flourishing in Estonia; and for Estonians in particular this discourse is charged with strong axiological values.

Surely, this cybernetic-informational discourse plays an important role in the self-descriptive models of extreme right groupuscules. Estonian nationalists present the success-story of e-Estonia as national treasure; as something that proves the extraordinary quick-wittedness of digital solutions and makes Estonians more innovative than other nations. Groupuscules also tend to identify themselves as radical citizen journalists opposed to the mainstream media and contributing to a revolution of information-freedom (which is made possible by means of hypermedia). Stressing the essentially democratic nature of their activities (blogging, writing comments and organizing petitions) helps to legitimize their extreme right content creation to themselves and also, in some cases, to outside observers. This tendency demonstrates that the contemporary extreme right does not exist separately from the discourses that prevail in the mainstream public. In the preceding part we indicated that extreme right representations have much in common with the representations of broader countercultural grass-root activists. The self-model that functions as a structuring code of self-descriptions is aggregated around value-concepts such as freedom of speech, the inviolability of private life, etc., which are seen as endangered by the ratification of ACTA. On the other hand, we can also see meanings that are opposed to these values and that primarily belong to the discourse internal to the extreme right. Let us now analyze the 'NO ACTA' discourse in more depth.

## Extreme right freedom of speech

In the case of the ratification of ACTA it was suggested that an Estonian elite is complicit in a global criminal network that includes the political and economical elite, the mainstream media and different minority-groups (especially Jews, homosexuals, immigrants, secret societies, etc.).

It is quite well-known that the European Union is lead by interest groups and by several secret societies. Probably the pressure was so high that the Commission decided not to go to the Court. Now activists from all over Europe that are against ACTA have to face a new wave of fighting.<sup>9</sup>

As the daily news changes, so do the topics stressed in extreme right representations. Still, these are usually predominantly concentrated on the corruption of the European or American administration, and the guilt for limiting freedom of speech is projected primarily onto Jews. So, we read:

Now, there has risen a problematic blasphemy-law which has its roots in 2001 – with the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS185, Estonia ratified it in 2003.) The time was just right for criminalizing IT-crimes, but some forces saw this topic as ideal to hammer out their shady initiatives. The Additional (widely understood as pro-Zionist) Protocol ETS189 of the same convention tries violently to establish historical truth — to criminalize Holocaust revisionism.<sup>10</sup>

Extreme rightists usually try to present themselves as defenders of freedom of speech and democracy. We could point out a certain tendency toward anti-Semitism in the blog-postings discussed here (Holocaust revisionism and opposition to Israel), but in truth members of all kinds of minority groups are depicted as enemies of democracy. In Estonian extreme right communication the prevailing type of enemy is the local elite, but these are usually understood as the flunkies of a greater European elite, and chiefly an American elite. At the top of this hierarchy of elites there are meant to be Jews dedicated to criminalizing the Holocaust and pushing through their political projects. The signifiers that mark different social, economic and ethnic groups form a discursive chain of equivalence with each other. Its aim is to represent to an audience the “violent quelling of society” supposedly taking place. ACTA is understood as a part of a broader Jewish conspiracy.

In the discourse of the postings under consideration, we have detected two abstract and hierarchically-structured self-models: a) a self-model whose dominant was freedom of speech; and b) a self-model which relies mainly on the idea that nationalism is maliciously subordinated by the Jews. These self-models carry contradictory value-systems, but they are unified into a coherent whole at the level of the discourse of opposition to ACTA. The Estonian extreme-right web community expressed its ideological viewpoints through a so-called double orientation: from one side they stressed the freedom of speech endangered by ACTA, but they also expressed quite clearly that

that freedom of speech is necessary only for the spreading of their own radical ideas. Extreme right groupuscules stress freedom of speech mainly on the level of outward communication, which is tries to find intersections with other alternative or anti-establishment voices. At the same time, bloggers use their freedom of speech to call for the elimination or censorship of other public voices (e.g. feminists and sexual or ethnic minorities) which are opposed to extreme-right views, by accusing them of restricting the plurality of viewpoints. But there is also inward communication to consider. The inner gaze always takes into account the self-concept of a culture (Lotman, Uspenskij, 1978, p. 227), and its main function is to provide for a culture (in present case the extreme right groupuscule) a certain value-based organization of itself.

## Conclusion

In this article we analyzed Estonian extreme right blogs and our aim was to explain the paradoxical situation wherein in a single discourse can co-exist signifiers which belong to contradictory registers. In the case of representations of and reactions to ACTA ratification, we encountered postings that juxtaposed signifiers from the discourse of freedom of speech with the signifiers of racism. We tried to explain this logic by relying on the concepts of *self-model* (originating in the Tartu-Moscow school) and *empty signifier* (of the Essex school). 'NO ACTA' functioned in our case as an empty signifier which united into a discursive whole these contradictory signifiers and self-models. The concept of a self-model was useful for explaining why some signifiers have a greater potential to become discursive dominants.

It seems to us that in Estonian extreme-right meaning-creation there are certain relations of equivalence between signifiers that are more likely to aggregate the discourse than the others, and these depend on the abstract level of the self-model. The discourse that is aggregated around "NO ACTA" relies on a self-model that emphasizes freedom of speech. This creates an inner-discourse hierarchy of elements of equivalence, and allows these elements to be connected with a racist self-model and signifiers.

The general goal of this paper has been to develop a conceptual framework that helps to explicate and explain the structures of identification and communication in the contemporary extreme right. We think this understanding necessary for opening a dialog (at least on some level) with those radicalized groups that tend to operate in hermetic informational systems.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. [ra=hvuslik.blogspot.com/](http://ra=hvuslik.blogspot.com/)

<sup>2</sup>. <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup>. <http://bhr.balanss.ee/>; BH indicates Blood & Honour, a world-wide neo-Nazi network

<sup>4</sup>. <http://nsblogi.com/>; NS indicates National Socialism

- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.vabamotleja.info>; this blog has now been erased but the same author continues his blog in an other adress: <http://toomaskask.blogspot.com/>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/search?q=acta>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/search?q=acta>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.vabamotleja.info/index.php/poliitika/73-facebook-keelustab-poliitiliselt-ebakorrekt-seid-pilte>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/search?q=acta>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/2012/11/anto-veldre-ood-blasfeemiaseaduse.html>

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