



The Italian Graduate Society at Rutgers University presents:

SIGNS

an Interdisciplinary Conference

April 1-2, 2022



Call for Papers

The conference invites contributions on signs of all sorts, discussing both the nature of signs at the theoretical level, and the interaction of signs and of systems of signs in different texts and media. In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino describes the countryside surrounding the town, Tamara:

“You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger’s passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are.”

Calvino’s description here centers on the specifically human disposition to conceive entities in the world not merely as themselves but as perceivable signs of something else. Not only natural objects and linguistic formulations but also human artifacts—for example the buildings of a town—can fall in the category of signs. Whether considered as the proof of a process, as a syntactic mark, as a distinguishing feature, as a premonition, as a symptom, or even as a vestige or a trace—the remnant of a former artifact or text in the form of a fragment—the notion of sign, created or discovered, has accompanied human beings in their understanding of the world and each other even before the advent of verbal languages. Moreover, signs seem to be the necessary tool to say the world, which would otherwise remain ‘silent’ to us, as Calvino emphasizes.

Throughout the centuries, scholars and authors have attempted to define the nature of the irreducible relationship between the *sign* and what is *signified*. Building on classical Greek thought, St. Bonaventure assumes an inductive move *per signa ad signata* leading from perceivable entities to transcendent ones. St. Augustine and Dante already combined a theory of signs with reflections on language, and with Saussure the linguistic notion of sign becomes a model for the interpretation of other systems of communication, simultaneously opening up new hermeneutic approaches to both verbal and non-verbal languages. More recently, Pierce’s notion of *icon* has been widely used in visual studies to investigate the relationship between images of the world and the world itself. Umberto Eco has proposed the intersection of a theory of signs with a theory of interpretation, focusing on “the textual destiny of the sign”, which situates the reader in the center role as the one “entitled” to “awaken” the text. A theory of signs becomes thus a theory of interpretation. More radically, Derrida’s notion of *trace* challenges the process of reading and the concept of sign in itself. What happens if we add this additional layer to the “textual destiny” of the sign?

Encouraging comparison among a variety of approaches and disciplines, the conference aims to discuss questions such as: are signs a subsidiary tool to refer to something momentarily unavailable, or the only possible entryway to an otherwise inaccessible and inexpressible world? How are signs embodied? How do signs shape, transform and regulate our experience of the world and how does the world in turn condition signs? What happens when a sign-referent relationship consolidates and fossilizes in language and culture? What are the advantages and the risks of this process? What is the relationship between verbal and non-verbal signs and codes (visual, acoustic, body languages...) in different means of communication, and how does it change over time? What is at play when translating signs of a code into signs of a different code and how is referentiality involved in or impacted by this process? Topics might include:

- Anthropology
- Arts
- Communication Studies
- Cultural Studies
- Digital Humanities
- Environmental Studies
- Intellectual History
- Linguistics
- Literary Studies
- Media Studies
- Medical Humanities
- Performance Studies
- Philosophy of Language
- Psychology
- Queer and Gender Studies
- Rhetoric and Stylistics
- Semiotics
- Sociology
- Textual Studies
- Translation Studies

Please send an abstract (250 words) with title and affiliation by **February 1, 2022** to italian.grad.society@gmail.com, subject-line 'IGS Conference 2022 submission'. Presentations will be in English and should be timed for 15 minutes. The conference is planned to be held in person consistent with current Rutgers University policies and guidelines for the spring semester 2022. In case of a significant change in circumstances, moving the conference on-line is the fallback option.