

Semiotics as an interdisciplinary discipline

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**INTERDISCIPLINARITÉ, PLURIDISCIPLINARITÉ, MULTIDISCIPLINARITÉ,
TRANSDISCIPLINARITÉ DANS LE MONDE ACADEMIQUE D'AUJOURD'HUI:
AVANTAGE OU OBSTACLE?**

UNIL
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A composite image of a fruit, where the left half is a green apple with a single leaf, and the right half is a yellow-orange citrus fruit, possibly a grapefruit or orange, with a textured peel. The two halves are joined at a vertical seam.

Semiotics is interdisciplinary

Because it is not a discipline.

Or is it not a discipline because it is interdisciplinary . . . ?

What is semiotics?

- the theory of the sign?
- the theory of semiosis?
- a “sign science” that encompasses all modes of signification?
- a concern with codes and decoding?
- a branch of, or supplement to, linguistics?
- synonymous with “semiology”?
- the study of human signification?
- the study of comparative Umwelten, comprising the signification of all living things?

Narratives of semiotics include

- founded by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American polymath, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)
- inaugurated as an enduring pre-Socratic practice by Hippocrates of Cos (460-377 BCE) and Galen of Pergamon (129-c.200), developed by St. Augustine (354-430) and John Locke (1632-1704)
- the means to perceive the gap between illusion and reality
- synonymous with communication theory

Ferdinand de Saussure



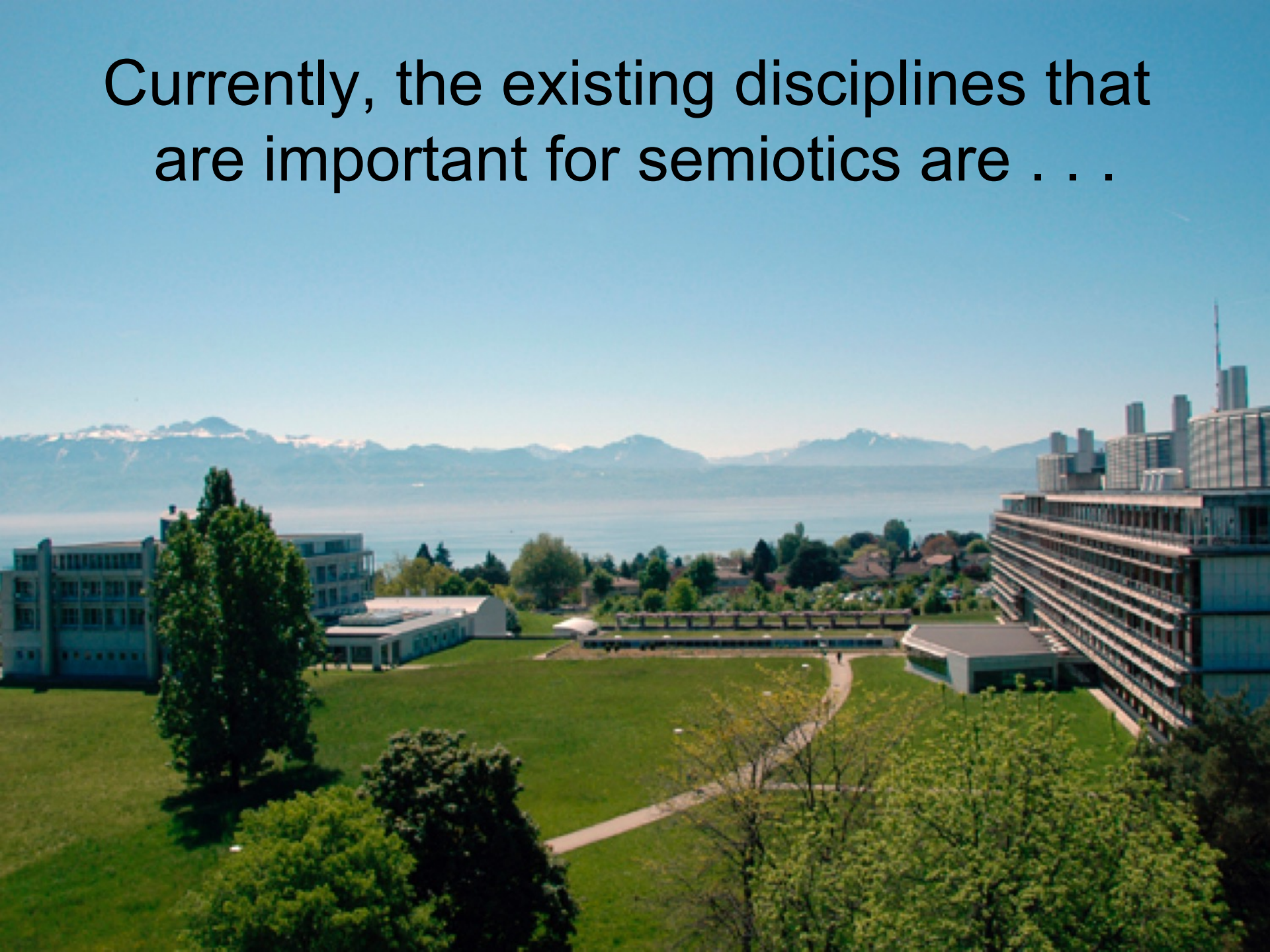
- d. 1913
- University of Geneva 1907-11
- *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)

Charles S. Peirce



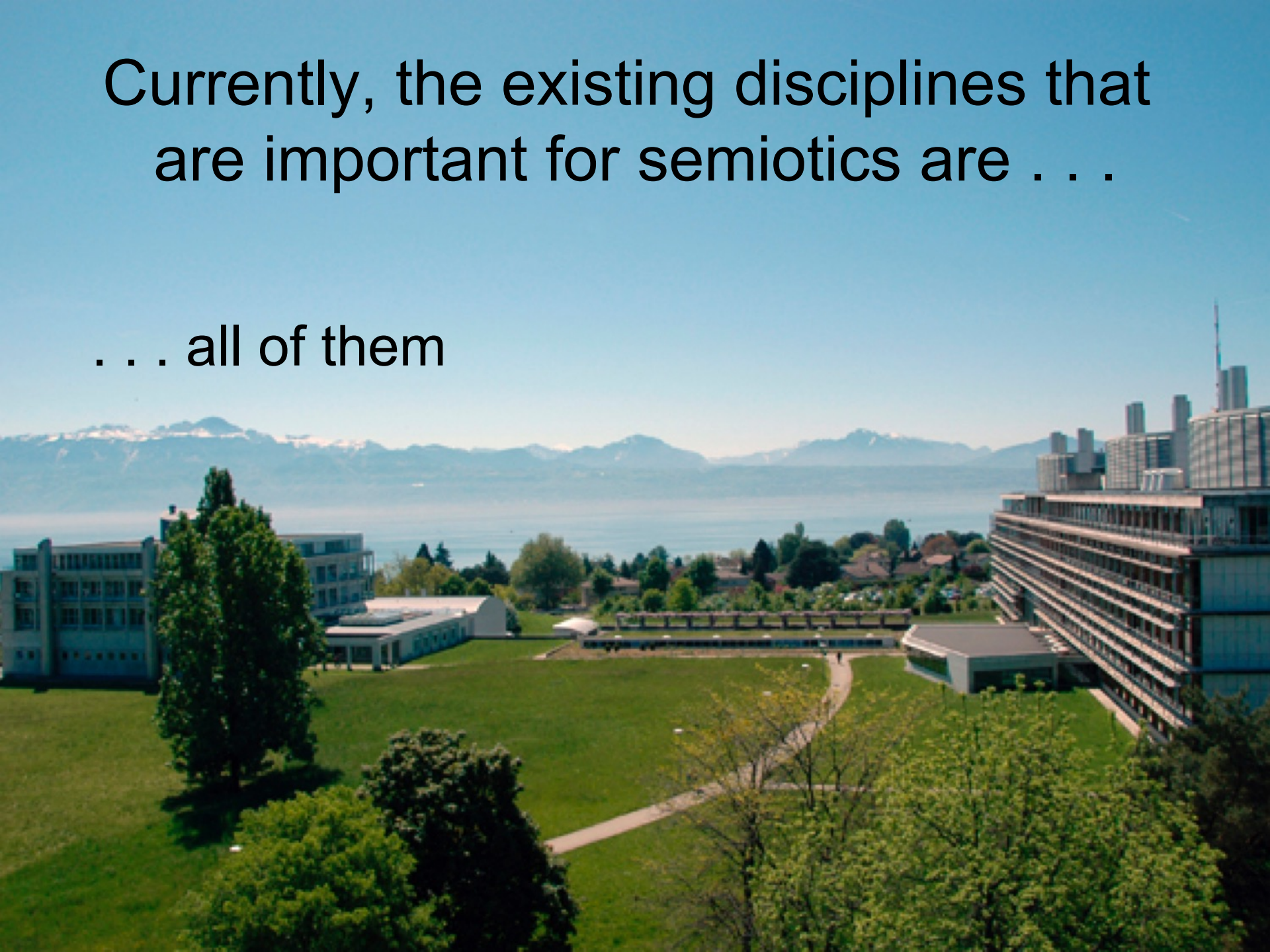
- 1839-1914
- logician
- philosopher
- scientist

Currently, the existing disciplines that are important for semiotics are . . .



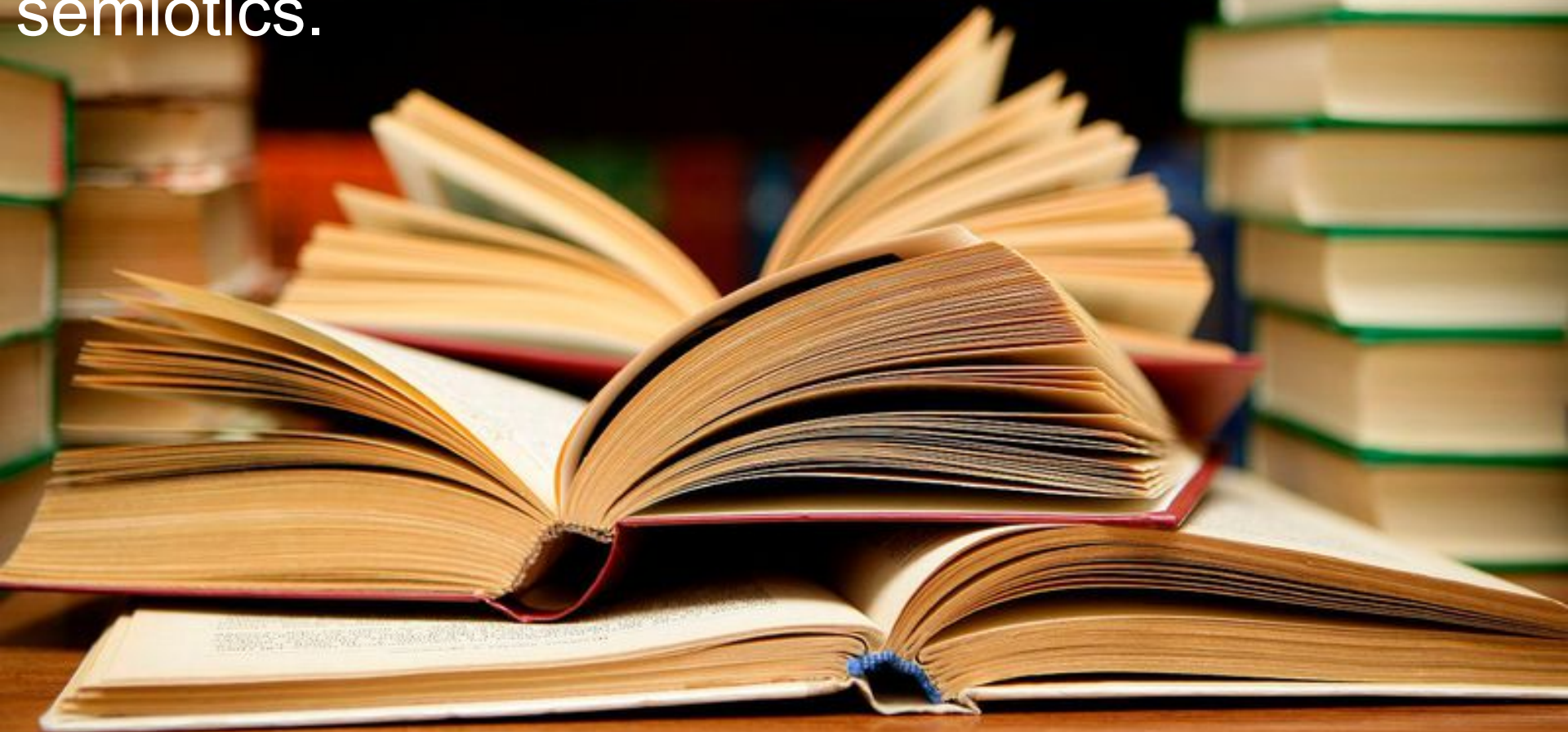
Currently, the existing disciplines that
are important for semiotics are . . .

. . . all of them



In the first part of the last 100
years . . .

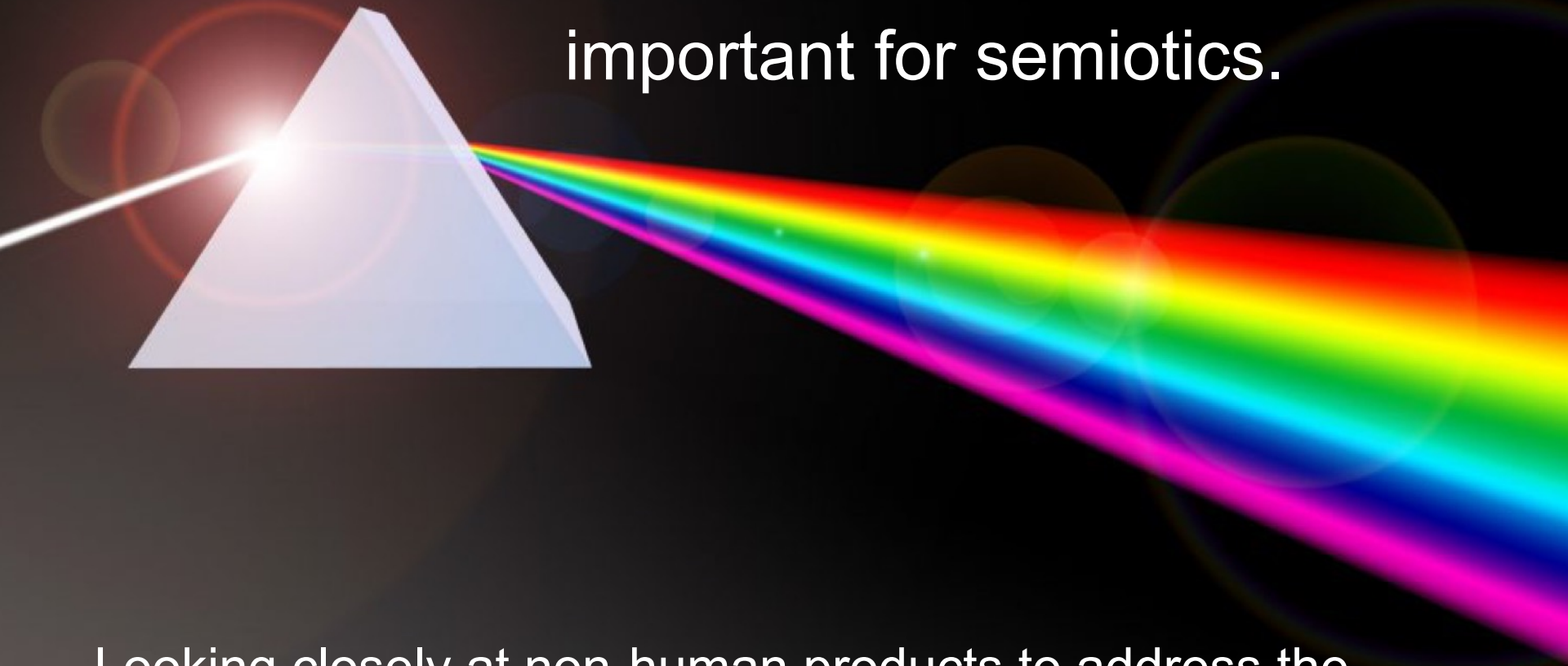
Linguistics and the humanities were important for
semiotics.



Looking closely at human products to address the question of what it is to be human.

In the latter years of the last
100 . . .

The sciences have been
important for semiotics.



Looking closely at non-human products to address the
question of what it is to be human.

Biology



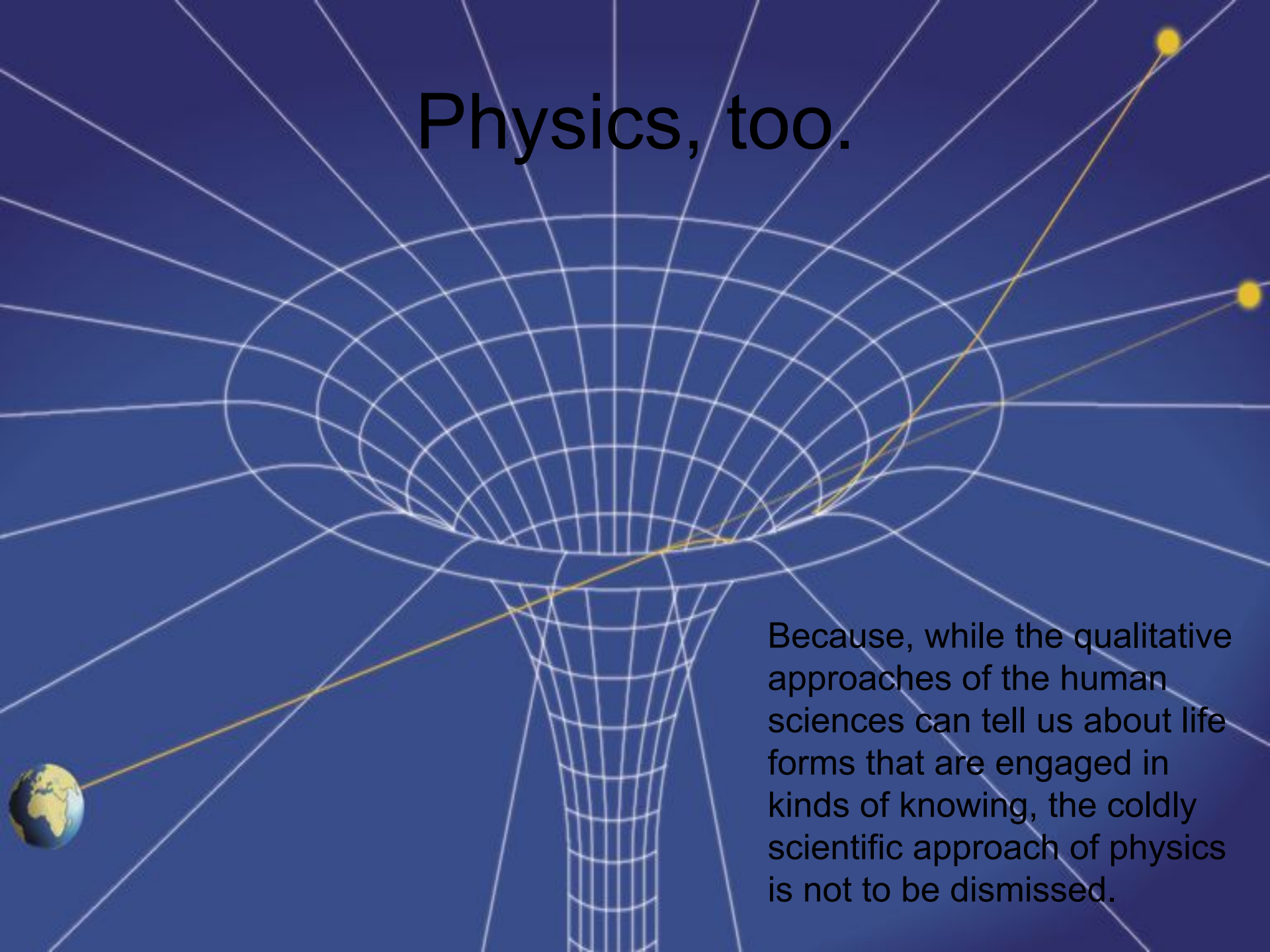
Particularly important because it deals with the semiosis of our closest evolutionary neighbours.

But, also, because it encourages us to think about signs in evolutionary terms rather than signs “just as they are at this moment”.

(see Kull, “Biosemiotics as a bridge between biology and the humanities”)

Physics, too.

Because, while the qualitative approaches of the human sciences can tell us about life forms that are engaged in kinds of knowing, the coldly scientific approach of physics is not to be dismissed.

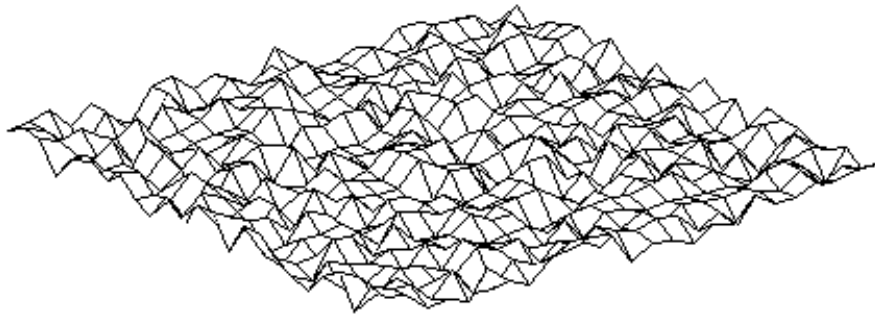


A bright sun with rays shining in a clear blue sky.

There are two reasons for this

a) while signs are the province of the living, the sources of signs are inorganic as well as organic and the channels for signs comprise matter as well as energy.





b) physics is not just Newtonian; there is also quantum physics where the relation between material entities is defined by a *field* in a manner analogous to the definition of signs in the field of semiosis.



So

Semiotics takes inspiration from, but also requires engagement with, a range of disciplines.

It investigates the *field* of semiosis.

Indeed, semiotics might be defined by the phrase “(inter)disciplinary field”.

Semiotics

Seeks not so much to define signs (although it does, sometimes, define signs).



Seeks not so much to reveal what signs do to living beings and living beings do with signs (although it does, sometimes, do both).

The chief goal of semiotics is to examine the way in which semiosis provides a model of the world – the way that it allows life forms to negotiate what is *reality* and what is *illusion*.

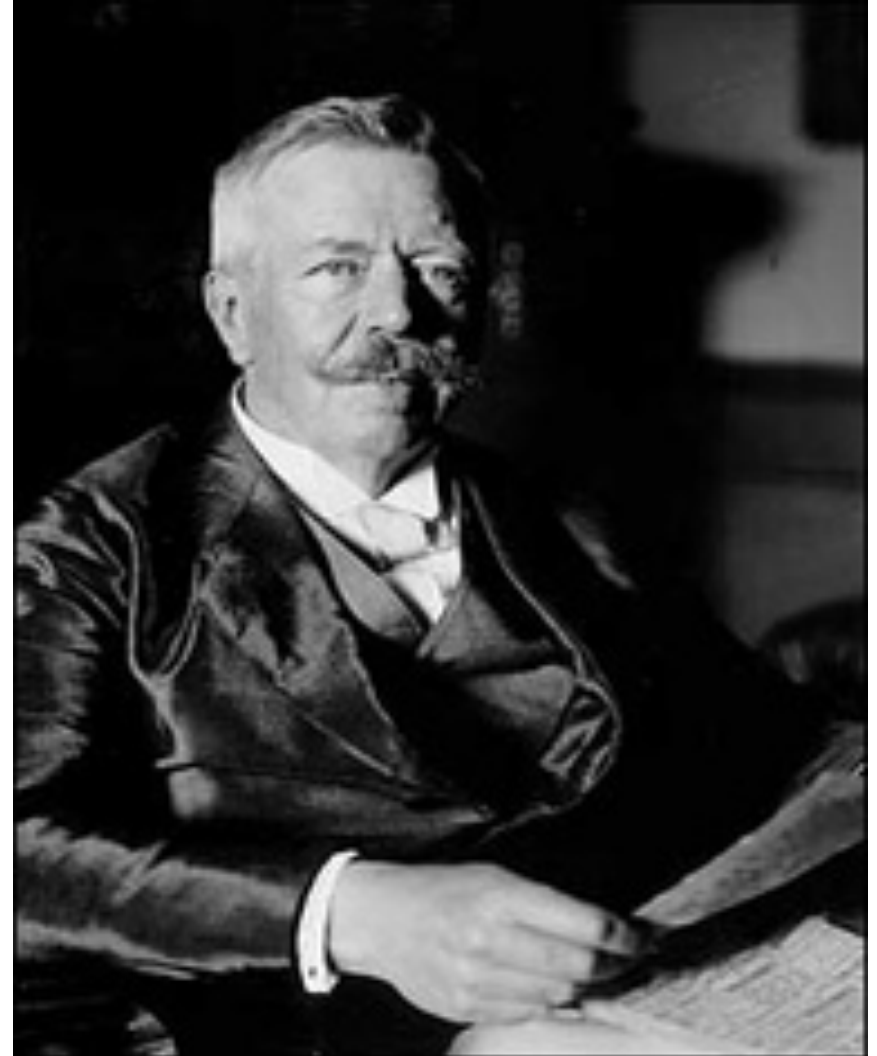
Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944)

Umwelt

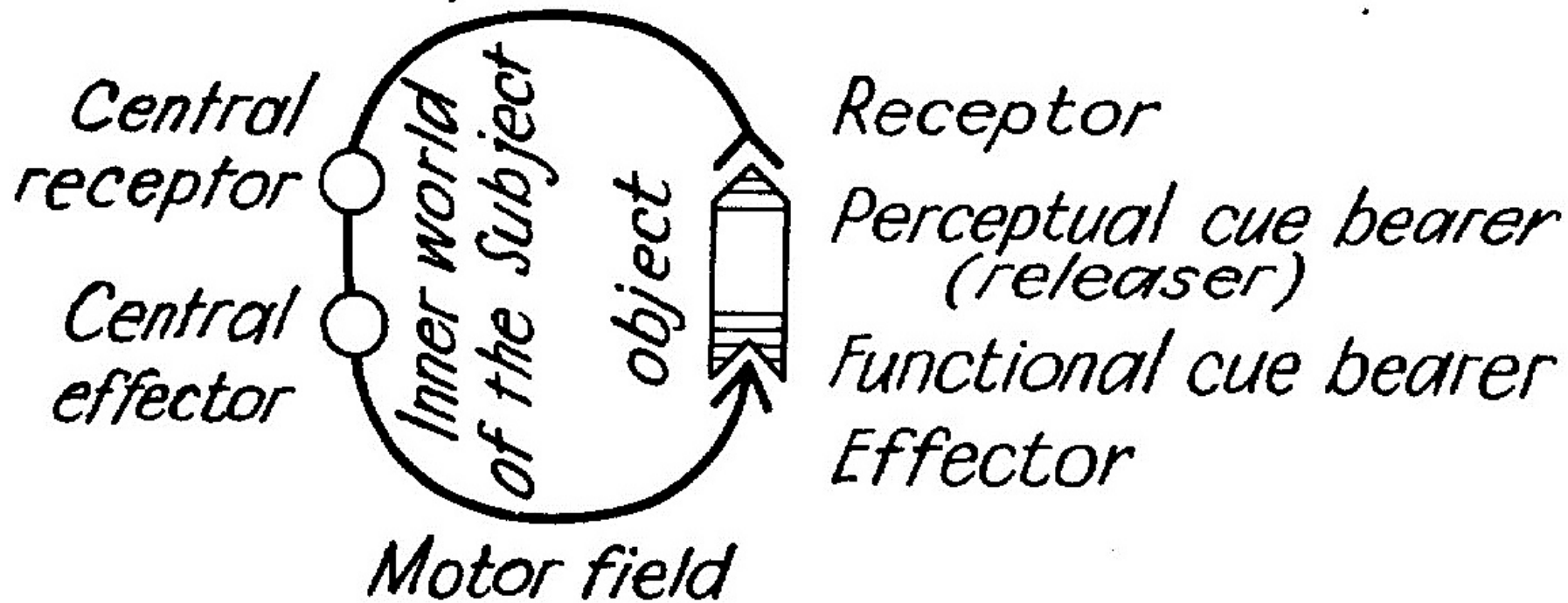
“model”

The signs we (all
species) can receive

The signs we (all
species) can make



Perceptual field



Destiny of life on Earth

To receive signs

To make signs



The human Umwelt



. . . particularly recursive and fosters diversity

Diversity

Multiculturalism, tolerance and gaining local knowledge (these are instrumental and sometimes even aggressive)



Diversity

Diversity, in semiotics, is a matter of the multifarious ways in which the world can be modelled.

Color Spectrum that Dogs See



Color Spectrum that Humans See



The interdisciplinarity of semiotics



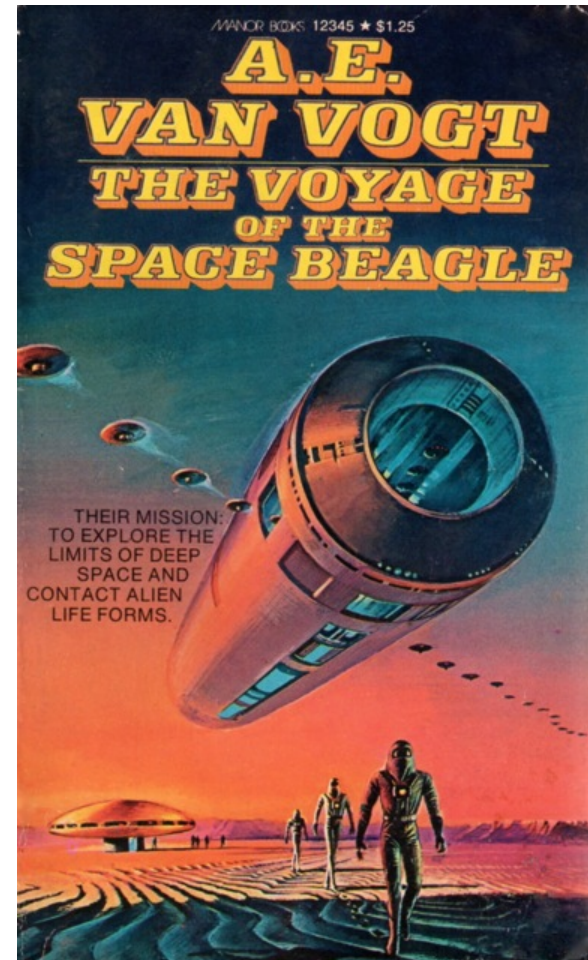
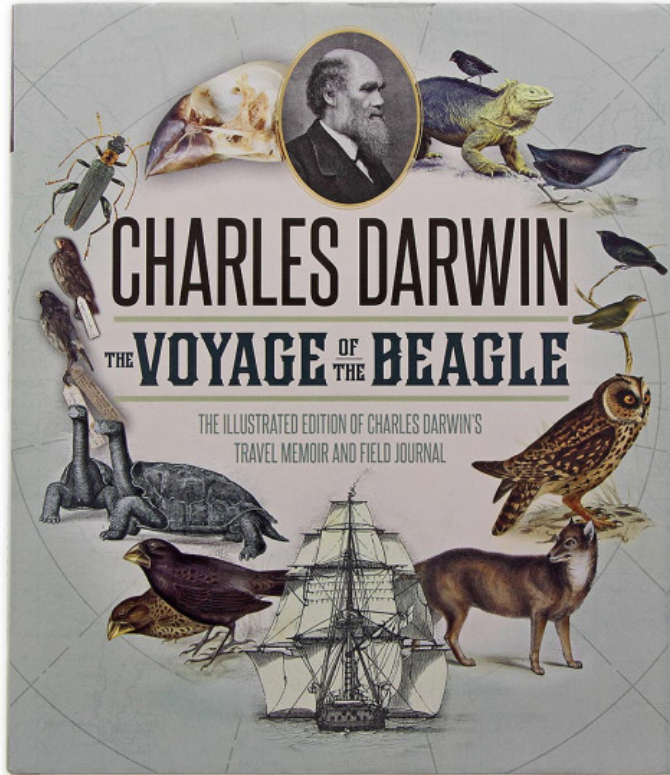
The background image shows two men from behind, wearing white lab coats, standing in a dark room and looking at a large, curved digital display. The display shows a green landscape with numerous pink, cloud-like or bubble-like shapes floating in the air. The scene appears to be a high-tech laboratory or a virtual reality environment. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

Semiotic
research into . . .

. . . the cartography of an Umwelt.

Signs are unruly. They refuse to be
definitively packaged up into
disciplines.

A semiotic voyage



The arts and the humanities are engaged in the pursuit of human progress just as much as science is.



Thank you