

A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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OF THE TARTU-MOSCOW GROUP*

I

In the Editor's *Preface* to one of the last publications which appeared in the well known series *Works on Semiotics* Yuri Lotman (1992: 4) wrote:

“semiotics has changed in the last several decades. One of its achievement on its difficult way was its relationship with history. On the one hand history was conceived in semiotic terms and on other hand semiotic reflection required semiotic features.”

Indeed, when we glance at the whole history of semiotics of culture which was developed in Tartu and Moscow we can notice that the point of

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departure in the early sixties was an analysis of relatively simple sign systems. Contents of first collective publications clearly shows that in first stage of investigations simple semiotic phenomena (like non-linguistic systems of communication, artificial languages, cartomancy, etiquette, chess, rite et caetera) were in the focus of interest. In accordance with prevailing conventional wisdom a given system was thought to have been recognized sufficiently when investigators discovered: 1) a set of elementary units (*vocabulary*) and 2) rules of connection of these units in the text.

This approach was intimately connected with so called “*languagelike*” treatment of culture. According to this point of view culture is an assemblage of “*secondary modelling systems*” (myth, folklore, religion, art ‘verbal and non-verbal,’ science, everyday life). The domains of culture enumerated above are defined as „*secondary modelling systems*” in the sense that they are in a way both superimposed on natural language and modelled on it. Lotman (1967: 130) presented it in the following way:

“Those systems based on natural language which acquire additional superstructures in the shape of secondary languages may be conveniently called *secondary modelling systems*.”

The differentiation between primary and secondary systems was an important step forward in formulating the semiotic theory of culture. However, Lotman soon realized that the model of culture founded on this distinction was in fact a kind of “*science fiction*.” Even though it might have been a useful tool in reaserch, the model was too far removed from the cultural reality itself (Lotman 1974). He admitted that this distinction had a certain heuristic value and would prove useful in the first stage of research, since it enabled one to look round and assess the inventory of culture and its elementary grammar. However, such an approach, although justified in the initial phase, involved a real danger when applied to further research.

“Heuristic purposefulness (i.e. facilitation of analysis) comes to be comprehended as the ontological characteristic of the object of our studies. We attribute to it a stucture which progresses from simple and well-defined atomic elements gradually to more complex ones. In this way, a complex object seemingly amounts to a sum of simple ones” (Lotman 1984: 5–6).

That was why at the beginning of the eighties Lotman decided to revise the aproach to culture he held so far. The breakthrough took place in his treatise entitled *On Semiosphere*, vital for the development of semiotics of culture. The author began with the statement that the former conception of culture as a bundle of unambiguous sign systems was a fallacy. In reality,

all sign phenomena exist only by virtue of their immersion in a specific continuum. Lotman suggested the latter should be called “semiosphere.”

The scholar presented the implications of this change in the following way:

“One may regard the semiotic universe as a mosaic of single texts and alienated languages. Accordingly, the whole structure would seem to consist of separate ‘bricks’ or elements. However, an opposite approach seems to be more sensible; then the whole semiotic space is seen as one mechanism, if not organism. If we take such an approach, our original idea of a primary phenomenon as a mere ‘brick’ will be superseded by that of a large system called semiosphere. Beyond this semiotic space, i.e. semiosphere, the sheer existence of semiosis is impossible.

Neither by sticking a number of beefsteaks together will we arrive at a proper cow, nor by adding up fragmentary semiotic acts can we reconstruct the semiotic universe. Conversely, only the existence of such a universe, i.e. semiosphere, can render a single sign act real” (Lotman 1984: 7).

Briefly speaking, we can depict an evolution of Tartu-Moscow Group as a shift from the conception of culture as a bundle of primary and secondary modelling systems to the notion of semiosphere. In methodological perspective this is a shift from synchronic (in other words: taxonomic or static) analysis to creating of dynamic models which take historical time into account. The notion of semiosphere assumes that all semiotic phenomena are involved in time and history. So we should not be astonished when Lotman (1993: 13) calls semiotics of culture in its mature shape “historical semiotics of intellectual activity of man.”

One is justified to say that diachronic leaning is characteristic for the whole Russian tradition in the humanities. This attitude to the object of investigation was established by Alexander Veselovsky (1838–1906), distinguished comparatist, one of the founders of historical poetics in Europe. Even scholars, who programmatically declare their commitment work-centred criticism, in their own studies very often plunge into history to search there for the beginnings of the phenomena which they discuss. For example, Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), the author of famous *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), treated as the epitome of structural analysis, after the Second World War published a work titled *Historical Roots of the Folktale* (1946). A similar attitude towards the object of research was demonstrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his treatise on Dostoevsky’s poetics where after the chapters in which he discussed the architectonics of Dostoevsky’s novels he placed a chapter in which he considers “the distant (in time) contexts” of these novels (Mennipean satire, classical dialogues). Many

scholars from the Tartu-Moscow semiotics school (especially Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov) have continued this scientific tradition and laid the foundations of „diachronic semiotics” (the last term belongs to V. Ivanov).

But among the members of the Tartu-Moscow Group we can find scholars who are deeply interested in history itself. In this case we do not deal merely with a particular methodological inclination or with an attachment to national research tradition. Some of them are interested in history in a double meaning of this word: in history as *res gestae* and in history as *historia rerum gestarum*. (In English this distinction may be rendered by the juxtaposition *the history* and *a history*. In my paper I shall rigidly keep this distinction: *the history* will mean historical process itself whereas *a history* —narration about it).

First of all I mean Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky, two eminent figures in contemporary semiotics who devoted much energy to explanation of mechanism of historical processes and problems connected with their verbal presentations (using old formulas: *historiosophy* and *historiography*).

II

Looking at the Tartu-Moscow Group from the present day perspective we can easily detect that at least two separate visions of semiotics of history were worked out within this scientific school associated with the names of Lotman and Uspensky. In the further parts of my paper I will try to shed light on the differences between their approaches to history.

Let us begin, however, with the common premises which are shared by the two scholars. The main shared point is that they assume that historical process is a kind of process of communication. The specificity of this approach consists in the inversion of the relation between the level of expression and the level of content (in Hjelmslevian terms). In ordinary human communication the level of expression (language) refers us to the level of content (to reality in final account). To cut a long story short, we have to deal with a movement from word to world. In historical communication the reversal of these levels manifests itself in the following way: people, their actions, situations (in short—all flux of events) create the level of expression. The level of content appears as a result of perception (and interpretation) of this “event text”). Lotman in one of his articles, devoted to historical styles of human behavior) uses a diagrams, which are worth showing here:

(1) expression	content
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word	act
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(2) expression	content
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act	word
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In the first case (“normal” communication) words call our attention to human acts. In the second one (characteristic for “historical” communication) we have an opposite situation: “not word means an act but an act means word” (Lotman 1975: 36). From the point of view of immediate participants of historical processes the history appears as a stream of human actions (events) which have a certain sense although this sense is not given directly and requires explanation and interpretation. Boris Uspensky consistently presents this as an interaction between events which occur at a given moment and people who are involved in it in terms of communication. He divides all these participants into two rather asymmetric groups: senders of historical information and its recipients. The first group is formed by “historical subjects”—from emperors and kings to contemporary statesmen. Sometimes it could be an abstract being like God, destiny etc. In any case, Uspensky asserts, we have to do with communication which can acquire different forms: communication between a society and an individual, a society and God, a society and fate and so on. In conclusion Uspensky may say that a historical process in its elementary schape reminds a process of generation of new “propositions” in certain “language” and reading these phrases by a social addressee (Uspensky 1996: 71). Of course, reversible reactions of the social addressee may subsequently exert an influence on further events. This constant inflow of new information contained in historical events and reversible reactions on the society’s side seems to constitute for Russian semioticians the essence of the historical process.

The task of historians is to reconstruct this interacion between senders and recipients of historical information. They cannot do it through immediate insight into this course of events and its perception by the community. Historical cognition is always indirect. As Yuri Lotman (1994: 353) observed:

“a historian is sentenced to work with texts. There is always text between which mediates ‘pure’ events and the historian and this circumstance changes fundamentally the whole situation of the inquiry. The text is always created by somebody. It is a past event translated into a certain

language. The same reality which is encoded in the medium of different languages provides different (sometimes opposed) texts. The extraction from a text of a certain event, from a story of this very event, is always connected with the operation of decoding. Thus a historian, regardless whether he is aware or unaware of it, begins with semiotic manipulations with text, which is a point of departure in his work.”

As we can see a history (*historia rerum gestarum*) has a semiotic nature as well because all the time it deals with other texts (sources), or more broadly—with different signs of the past. We can say that the history (history as a branch of human knowledge) produces its own texts which are constructs of a secondary order.

III

Let us now look at the differences between Uspensky’s and Lotman’s conceptions. First we turn to Uspensky’s writings because he was the first semiotician among the members of the Tatu-Moscow Group who posed the problem of the semiotics of history. As we remember he did it in his well-known article entitled *Historia sub specie semioticae* (1976).

Generally speaking, Uspensky’s position on the discussed question may be labelled as “philological.” As it was mentioned above he grasps a historical process as a certain text composed of events which is then read by a social addressee. At the basis of this approach one can see a model of communication: senders (historical actants) generate various messages (most often in the shape of significant actions) which are read by a receiver (a community) and cause his reactions in return. Both senders and recipients often resort to languages which do not overlap.

Uspensky is deeply interested in such historical situations where we can observe a clash of these languages. The history of Russia provides a plethora of such conflict situations. A good example often depicted by Uspensky may be the reign of Peter the Great. The Russian emperor initiated wide political reforms aimed at reconstructing the whole state and pushing it along the European way of development. The activity of this czar and his ideological associates is described as a sign activity *sui generis*. Peter the Great wanted to change the whole existing system of social signs, but his efforts mostly faced negative reactions. The majority of his contemporaries (especially simple people) applied “a language” based on traditional beliefs. In the light of these traditional conceptions Peter the Great appears as Antichrist who is eager to bring down the Holy Russia.

First of all Uspensky is interested in such situations where there is a conflict between various languages where social signs become a source of dramatic controversies. An extreme example of this historical situation is the split in the Russian Orthodox Church which took place in the middle of the XVIIth century. The bone of contention were not religious dogmas but religious signs. For instance let us take the sign of the cross. Patriarch Nikon, who initiated reforms in the Russian Church, introduced so called three-finger sign of the cross. The adherents of old rites (Old Believers) abided by the traditional ceremonies and they made the sign of the cross using two finger (*troeperstie* and *dwoeperstie*). The conflict which took a heavy toll of human life and caused unimaginable suffering of thousands of people indeed was caused by the different attitude to the sacral signs.

The “philologism” of Uspensky’s approach to a history manifests itself also in his predilections for such phenomena which owed their existence to language. For instance the spelling some names may be a cause of serious religious tensions (and not only religious). In this case the very sign, its form (how to write the name of Christ—*Iisus* or *Isus*) can become the arena of passionate contentions and can lead to consequences which go beyond religious disputes.

In Uspensky’s conception the historian’s point of view on the past is a retrospective one. In his essential study on a history and semiotics he wrote that in the historian’s works “the past is organized as a text which is read in the prospects of the presence” (Uspensky 1996: 18). The image of a history is not a constant, invariable one. This image undergoes changes because every new generation in the chain of in succession of generations tries to rewrite a history. May be Uspensky’s position in some aspects is close to presentism but this problem should be examined with great care.

Let us now pass on to Yuri Lotman and his proposals on the theory of history. Lotman’s standpoint contrary to Uspensky’s one may be labelled as prospective in the sense that he places his “ideal historian” in the past and orders him to look ahead from there.

In Lotman’s eyes the most salient feature of a history (especially in the sphere of culture) is its dynamic character. This is a result of the fact that history is full of antinomies.

He attributes particular importance to the distinction between what is predictable and unpredictable. The majority of the contradictions which we can find in the history amount to this very distinction, only expanding on its different aspects. Roughly speaking, the essence of this contradiction consists in the fact that one can distinguish two contradictory tendencies in the history. On the one hand, there are processes of deceler-

ated, steady evolution; on the other hand, periods of abrupt acceleration, not infrequently taking the shape of explosions. In Lotman's opinion, periods of stabilization and "explosions" are two complementary states of the same evolutionary process.

The sphere of what is predictable embraces "mass" phenomena, which are recurrent and subject to slow, often inert, gradual and linear development. We could also mention cyclic processes here (e.g. those in accordance with the annual calendar), typical of archaic communities. On the other hand, the "explosive" quality manifests itself in great historic events, epoch-making inventions and discoveries, and actions of influential individuals. Among the latter Lotman also rated any individual behavioral "excesses", including acts of madness and extreme tyranny (Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great), which could similarly change the direction of development and prompt sudden transitions from one phase to another. Such "explosions" cannot be predicted on the basis of the preceding stages of development. Thus they introduce informativeness to the historical process; the latter would be entirely redundant were it not for their influence. On the one hand, "explosions" conclude a certain period; on the other hand, they mark out new routes and generate new, equally probable, chances of further development.

These two contrasting manifestations of dynamics, i.e. gradual development vs sudden acceleration (or in short, stability vs explosion), are in fact two complementary states in a history. One is marked by predictability and a potential for prognostication, the other by unpredictability, which introduces to a history the element of free choice and the element of accident as well. The concept of unpredictability presupposes the existence of a whole set of possibilities; each of them has equal chances of fulfilment, but only one eventually becomes transfixed into reality. By virtue of "explosions", historical process is basically unpredictable; in this consists its "informativeness". In spite of Hegel's theory to the contrary, the historical past is devoid of intrinsic logic, whereas the future, in Lotman's opinion, seems to be a domain of possible states. Only afterwards, in historians' descriptions, what is essentially unpredictable turns out to be regular and only possible. Historical reflection yields retrospective transformations of the past. Historical descriptions "introduce to history the notion of the objective, which is completely alien to it", Lotman (1992: 34–35) remarked.

How can scholars of the past grasp this dynamics of a history?—this seems to be the main problem for Lotman. First of all they should abandon the retrospective point of view. In his opinion, this standpoint "evens" the historical process, straightens out its bends, introduces an or-

der into a “messy” history and as a consequence leads to its deformation. To avoid these oversimplifications historians should situate themselves (mentally) in the past. This vantage point enable them to look at the history as a process which is composed both of gradually proceeding periods and of sudden explosions which can sharply change the whole direction of further development.

There is no place to indicate all Lotman’s sources of inspiration and his intellectual borrowings. But we by all means should mention at least two sets of ideas which appeared in various areas of XXth century knowledge.

They are, on the one hand, achievements of the French school in historiography (so called *l’histoire nouvelle*) and, on the other hand, ideas which appeared in science (physics, chemistry, biology) as a result of exploring dynamic processes in nature.

Lotman estimates works of the French historians very highly. They are a source not only of intellectual satisfaction but also aesthetic pleasure. Their merits in renewing of the historical thought are unquestionable. But this does not mean that their approach to a history is free of certain shortcomings. As we know, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, Jean Delumeau and other *annalists* turned to exploring slow, anonymous, mass processes which have eluded historian’s attention in the past. Their weak side is that they do not take into account dynamic factors in a history which make it as a whole unpredictable. Lotman is of the opinion that *l’histoire nouvelle* overestimates “typical” phenomena at the cost of individual undertakings. Briefly speaking, *annalists* propose the vision of the history without creativeness and freedom: without “freedom of thought, freedom of will, i.e. without the possibility of *choosing further way of development*” (Lotman 1994: 356). The essence of the discrepancy between Lotman’s position and the views of Marc Bloch, the founder of *l’histoire nouvelle*, consists in the general attitude to the past. Bloch (1960: 150) discusses “the past as a date which does not leave the place for different possibilities” whereas for Lotman (1994: 358) the point is that “the historical event always is a result of the fulfilment of one of many alternatives.” The French school *la longue durée* according with Lotman’s concluding opinion cultivates a kind of determinism because it minimizes the role of individuals and their free actions.

It may sound paradoxically but he finds support and remedy against this determinism not in the humanities but in science, namely in the works of Ilya Prigogine’s (Nobel Prize in chemistry of 1977). Ilya Prigogine depicts various forms of dynamics in nature using notions of *bifurcation* (lat. *bifurcus*—forked, branched, ramifying) and *fluctuation* (lat. *fluctus*—

waving, shakiness, ferment, tempest). Notions of bifurcation and fluctuation refer to these phases of a dynamic irreversible process when its further development becomes unpredictable. Simply speaking, a process proceeding in accordance with some determined curve starts to behave unpredictably when it is approaching near the point of bifurcation. Several solutions appear before the dynamic process and in this situation an accident can determine the choice of further development.

On the basis of his extensive research and familiarity with the philosophy of science Prigogine notes:

“In some specific circumstances the role played by individual behaviour may be decisive. To put it in broader terms, one may not generally claim that that holistic behaviour dominates in any way over elementary processes which comprise such holistic entity. Self-organisation processes in conditions far from equilibrium refer to a subtle play of accident and necessity, fluctuation and deterministic laws. We expect that in the vicinity of bifurcation points fluctuations and random chances will play an important role, and in between subsequent bifurcations deterministic factors come to the fore” (Prigogine, Stengers 1990: 191).

Lotman tries to adopt these concepts to historiosophical reflection. He is especially interested in “the subtle game of accident and necessity” (explosions and gradual processes, unpredictability and predictability—in his own language). The accident in his understanding is not something irrational, something what appears from nowhere without any cause. Most often it is a phenomenon which comes from another causal course, an interference of some element from another system.

For Lotman it is absolutely crucial that at turning-points in a history we always have a spectrum of possibilities. The choice of the further is automatically tantamount to the elimination of other possibilities. But choice does not depend on accident alone. It may be result of conscious decision as well. The problem is that every implemented choice of a further way of development appears in the midst of unrealized possibilities.

In this context the main task of historians is to expose the past in its whole complexity. They should be interested not only in fulfilled historical solutions but they should take into account unrealized “cut” possibilities. The last ones form a indispensable background which enables to show the whole “energy” of the history and its “informativeness”. Otherwise a historical process, as Lotman (1975: 28) noticed in one of his articles, would be quite redundant.

IV

Both Uspensky and Lotman devote quite a lot of place to specific features of a history of Russia. In their opinion Russia in its history realized “the binary model” of development. This means that every new stage drifts toward a complete destruction of the former one. The point is that an old structure must be demolished to the earth in order to build on its ruins a new system which has to realise a new radical utopia. Using the above-mentioned concepts one can say that in Russian conditions bifurcations do not open new ways and possibilities of which the most rational one could be chosen. The whole impetus of fluctuation first of all is addressed toward the existing order and its values. As evidence we can mention a very interesting fact: the Chinese, who lived after the October revolution in the Russian Far East, called the Russians “lomai-lomai” (which means in Russian “destroy-destroy”) because of their passion for blowing up churches, monuments and other signs of the *ancien régime*.

In accordance with Lotman’s and Uspensky’s view “the binary model” belongs to the deepest level of Russian history and culture. It manifests itself among other things in the sharp division of all cultural values into two groups which are diametrically opposed. There is no neutral axiological sphere. This polarity and its distant roots in Russian history and culture they describe as follows (let us quote a larger fragment from the dissertation in which the authors consider the binary character of a Russian history and postulate the adoption of the western, ternary system):

“The afterlife of western catholic Christianity is subdivided into three distinct spaces: paradise, purgatory, hell. In accordance with this subdivision in human life three types of behaviour should be distinguished: absolutely sinful, absolutely saintly and intermediate, in a sense neutral, which offer prospects of salvation after some form of purification. As a result in the real life of western Middle Ages materializes an extensive sphere of neutral behaviour, neutral social institutions, which are neither ‘saintly,’ neither ‘state’ nor ‘anti-state,’ neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad.’ This neutral sphere becomes a structural reserve out of which the system of tomorrow emerges. Since continuity is here obvious, it need not be structurally emphasized, nor consciously or artificially recreated.

On the other hand, the system of Russian Middle Ages was characterized by distinct bipolarity. If we develop our example we will notice that the afterlife is subdivided into paradise and hell. In accordance with this subdivision life on Earth may also be sinful or saintly. [...] The existence of a neutral zone in the western medieval consciousness contributed to the emergence of a subjective continuity between the negated today and the

expectations of tomorrow. [...] The Russian culture of that period was dominated by a quite different axiological orientation. Bipolarity and the absence of a neutral axiological sphere led to a situation in which novelty was understood not as continuation but as an eschatological change of everything” (Lotman, Uspensky 1977: 4–5).

In “the binary system” an explosion embraces the whole of social reality (from *base* to *superstructure* in Marxist terms). In “the ternary system” which is characteristic for western societies an explosion (even a very powerful such as Napoleonic wars) does not lead to the total demolition of the existing order. Changes in this system resolve themselves in the movement along the line *centre–outskirts*: the old “systems of customs and forms of behaviour move to the outskirts and coexist as a rule with subsequent structures” (Lotman 1992: 15) which emerged in the wake of explosion.

Contemporary events significantly contributed to Lotman’s preoccupation with a history. Both Gorbachov’s *perestroika* and the fall of the communism further confirmed his thesis that historical processes were unpredictable (who among sovietologists had predicted such a turn of events?). It must be emphasized that Lotman never treated his contemporary times solely as a source of arguments for his thesis. He was far from being a lofty scholar confined to a narrow circle of scientific problems. He wished to influence the course of events insofar as it was possible. He wanted Russian history to get out of the vicious circle of seeming revolutions and “binary historical structures” and instead, to adopt the ternary model of historical development, typical of western societies. Time will show whether his wishes will come true. This is significant for us today as well because many people in the world are asking themselves the question *quo vadis, Russia?*

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Abstract

This article examines the contribution of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics to semiotic studies of history, with the main focus on the work of Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky.

Key words / słowa kluczowe

Tartu-Moscow School / szkoła tartusko-moskiewska, semiotics / semiotyka, history / historia, Yuri Lotman / Jurij Łotman, Boris Uspensky / Borys Uspieński