

## Reading Uspenskij: Soviet ‘semiotics of history’ in the West

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**Abstract:** The article explores the reception of Boris Uspenskij’s writings and ideas outside of the Soviet Union, primarily in Western European and North American academic contexts. The present brief overview of Uspenskij’s academic reception covers the translations of his best-known scholarly works [first and foremost “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” and “*Istoriya i semiotika (Vospriyatie vremeni kak semioticheskaya problema)*”] into English, French, Spanish, German and other European languages, as well as various references to Uspenskij’s ideas on what nowadays would be categorized as ‘semiotics of history’, or thoughts at least in some way related to the ‘cultural-semiotic approach to history’ of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics.

**Keywords:** Boris Uspenskij; semiotics of history; *Historia sub specie semioticae*; cultural-semiotic approach; the Tartu–Moscow School

In the history of post-WWII Soviet humanities there were not many scholars whose academic works were read and translated abroad (especially if we speak about the so-called “West” or, as the non-socialists countries located West of the Soviet border were often called in the USSR – the “capitalist” countries) based on their academic merit as well as the relevance and importance of the academic contribution. The situation can be explained by a number of various reasons, both objective and subjective, well known to anybody born and raised in the USSR. Thus, it might be possible simply to register a certain historical misfortune of the Soviet “sciences of man”. However, a handful of stories of particular scholars who happened to live and work in the Soviet Union yet had the chance to be published and in some way “recognized” in the West seems to present rich case study material in the framework of the history of ideas. The intention of this article is to look into one of such stories – the reception and recognition of the works and ideas of Boris Andreevich Uspenskij related to semiotics of history.

## **“Historia sub specie semioticae” and its translations**

When we speak about Uspenskij's approach to historical materials (sources) and the past *per se*, “Historia sub specie semioticae” can definitely be mentioned as a milestone work. This scholarly piece, which originally appeared in a rotaprint booklet published in connection with the 1974 First All-Soviet-Union Symposium on Secondary Modelling Systems<sup>1</sup>, in a rather condensed style presents what we might call the essence, or at least the most important points, of Uspenskij's idea of the semiotics of history.

After the original publication, which, according to Uspenskij himself,<sup>2</sup> was primarily intended “for the ‘narrow’ semiotics audience”, the Moscow scholar decided to publish “Historia sub specie semioticae” for a wider audience and thus introduce his approach also to those readers who did not follow all the academic events and publications related to the so-called Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School closely enough. Such an “introduction” took place two years later on the pages of the 1976 collection of articles titled *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnej Rusi* [Cultural Heritage of Old Rus'],<sup>3</sup> which was a *Festschrift* in honour of Dmitrij Sergeevich Lihachov, the famous Soviet philologist and historian of Russian literature and culture. Unlike the 1974 Tartu rotaprint booklet which was printed in only a few hundred copies and had a very limited spread even among the community of Soviet (humanities) scholars, *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnej Rusi* appeared at the leading Soviet academic publishing house Nauka [Science] and was printed in 9,000 copies. Thus, in the end it is not surprising that many readers both in the USSR and abroad actually tend to date the original publication of Uspenskij's “Historia sub specie semioticae” to the year 1976 and not 1974 when this programmatic article first appeared in Tartu.

In connection with the two publications of “Historia sub specie semioticae” in the original Russian language it may be interesting to note that the first English-language translation of what amounted to a milestone work of Uspenskij's actually appeared even earlier than the publication meant “for the wider Soviet audience” in *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnej Rusi*. *Soviet Studies in Literature*, which at the time

<sup>1</sup> Materyaly Vsesoyuznogo Simpoziuma 1974. The event, which was held in Tartu on 8–12 February, 1974, is often called also the Fifth School of Semiotics, referring to the number of the famous Kääriku/Tartu Summer Schools held in 1964, 1966, 1968 and 1970.

<sup>2</sup> This is an answer to my question to Boris Uspenskij during the “Historia sub specie semioticae: Interdisciplinary seminar in honour of Prof. Boris Uspenskij” event held at Tallinn University on 18 February, 2016. (T. B.)

<sup>3</sup> A somewhat peculiar detail regarding this collection is that its editorial board was headed (at least on paper) by Mihail Hrapchenko, a high-level Soviet academician who is usually associated with the group of Soviet humanities scholars (incl. Yuri Stepanov, Vadim Kozhinov, etc.) opposing the approaches and ideas of the Tartu-Moscow School circle.

was a rather well-known journal specializing in publishing translations of works of Soviet scholars related to literary scholarship, criticism, etc., had actually printed an English translation of “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” already in their Spring issue of 1976<sup>4</sup> – a special issue devoted to Soviet semiotics of culture. Besides Boris Uspenskij’s programmatic article it also featured articles by Juri Lotman (actually three articles!), Vyacheslav Ivanov, Olga and Isaac Revzin and even a piece by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>5</sup>

In the same year an English translation of “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” was also published in the collection of articles titled *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union* (Uspenskij 1976b). The volume was prepared for publication and edited by Henryk Baran, a young scholar from the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of New York (Albany). In this anthology, readers could find reprints of the eight articles published earlier the same year in *Soviet Studies in Literature* 12(2) as well as a couple of interesting additional materials, i.e. articles by scholars associated with the Tartu-Moscow School (e.g. works by Eleazar Meletinskij, Vladimir Toporov and also a well-known joint work of Uspenskij’s and Lotman’s – “Myth – name – culture”).

In the introduction to this first English-language collection of articles by the Tartu-Moscow School members, Henryk Baran mentions that “In the course of approximately fifteen years [we should keep in mind that *Semiotics and Structuralism* appeared in 1976 – T.B.], the Soviet scholars [...] have created a large, coherent and interconnected body of writings” (Baran 1976: vii), and the edited volume “[...] presents a ‘state of the art’ sample of Soviet structuralism” (Baran 1976: viii). Concerning “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” in particular, Baran notes: “Uspenskii’s study is but one example of an important interest of Soviet scholars: to apply concepts and methods of semiotics to problems which had hitherto been the exclusive provenance of historical research” (Baran 1976: xvii). However, the American scholar also includes an endnote to this passage, in which he mentions that according to the report of the proceedings of the 1974 Tartu symposium, the Moscow professor’s interpretation of Peter the Great’s behaviour “was vigorously challenged” by some of the participants in the All-Soviet-Union Symposium on Secondary Modelling Systems.

In 1976 “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” was also published in French, while a somewhat peculiar detail in case of this publication by the Editions Complexe publishing house (Bruxelles) was the fact that the collection of articles of the Tartu-

<sup>4</sup> However, even before Issue 12(2) in which “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” appeared, Boris Uspenskij already had another text published in *Soviet Studies in Literature* [i.e. “Myth – name – culture”, appeared in Issue 11(2/3)].

<sup>5</sup> After the introduction of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas in the West (mainly credited to Julia Kristeva) it was not surprising to find his works published in the volumes dedicated to Soviet (humanities) studies.

Moscow School members appeared under the title *Travaux sur les systèmes de signes: École de Tartu* – a title which basically mirrored the Russian language title of the journal published by Lotman and his colleagues in Tartu – and was presented as “*Textes choisis et présentés par Y. M. Lotman et B. A. Ouspenski*”. The volume was divided into four sections: “*Sémiotique de la culture*”, “*Sémiotique de l’art*”, “*Structure des textes littéraires*” and “*Sémiotique générale*”. Not at all surprisingly “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” concluded the first (and largest) section “*Sémiotique de la culture*”. Interestingly, either the translator Anne Zouboff or perhaps even Uspenskij himself (probably keeping in mind the potential audience of this publication) had decided to add some further footnotes to the translated text of “*Historia sub specie semioticae*”, so in this regard the French translation is somewhat different from the original Russian version as well as the English translations that appeared in the United States in the same year.

In the second half of the 1970s the overall interest in “Soviet semiotics”<sup>6</sup> was on the rise, so that just a year after Henryk Baran’s *Semiotics and Structuralism* by the Johns Hopkins University Press yet another volume introducing the scholarly works associated with the Tartu-Moscow School (among other publications it included also Uspenskij’s “*Historia sub specie semioticae*”) was published for the North American/English-speaking audiences. This time, the volume had an even more straightforward title – *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, and in comparison with Baran’s volume it seems to have become an even more standard reference work dealing with Soviet semiotics/the Tartu–Moscow School in the US. The person behind this anthology was Daniel Lucid who edited the volume, translated the articles from Russian and also wrote an introduction. The anthology starts with the claim: “A number of distinguished Soviet semioticians, whose work has hitherto been largely unknown in the West, have been deeply concerned over the past decade with the problems of culture and communication [...]. Writing on general concepts, modeling systems, communications studies, text analysis, art and literature, and the typology of culture, the Soviet scholars add a fresh and exciting dimension to Western thinking in these fields” (Lucid 1977: cover blurb). In the introduction, Lucid continues with a brief history of Soviet semiotics and summarizes the articles published in the volume. Regarding the “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” he notes that it is an article in which “the perils of communication are explored forcefully” (Lucid 1977: 12), so it should

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, very often in the Western European and North American books, collections of articles and anthologies terms “Soviet semiotics” and “Tartu-Moscow School” were used synonymously and interchangeably, which is obviously an erroneous overgeneralization, since, besides the Tartu-Moscow (or Moscow-Tartu) School, better known in the West, Soviet humanities had “other semioticians” (e.g. already mentioned earlier Mikhail Hrapchenko or Yuri Stepanov).

not come as a surprise that the American scholar included Uspenskij's article in the "Communication Studies" section of the anthology.

Translations of "Historia sub specie semioticae" into other European languages followed the English and French editions almost immediately. In case of Italian the work first appeared in the extensive (700-plus pages) anthology edited by Carlo Prevignano *La semiotica nei Paesi slavi. Programmi, problemi, analisi* (in Feltrinelli's *Critica e Filologia* series) in 1979. Earlier translations of "Historia sub specie semioticae" into English and French had been published in collections and volumes specifically dedicated either to the Tartu-Moscow School or at least to what was called Soviet semiotics, but the first Italian translation was printed alongside with scholarly contributions from a much broader academic context – the volume featured works by scholars such as Vladimir Propp, Petr Bogatyrev, Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský, and articles by contemporary Italian slavists like Remo Faccani and Marzio Marzaduri. Just as Henryk Baran, the editor of the anthology Carlo Prevignano had reserved the introductory part for some general observations regarding the history of structuralism (formalism) in Central/Eastern Europe and Russia/Soviet Union, but unfortunately did not mention "Historia sub specie semioticae". The translation of the article by Remo Faccani was placed in the section titled "*La semiotica in URSS: la teoria dei sistemi modellizanti*".

The translation of "Historia sub specie semioticae" into Spanish also appeared in the same year, in 1979. Once again it is possible to register the fact that Uspenskij's article was published in a volume with a rather narrow focus related to the ideas of the Tartu–Moscow School – *Semiótica de la cultura* (Lotman, Yuriy M. y la Escuela de Tartu). Two years after the Spanish translation, Uspenskij's work was also translated into Portuguese and published in the volume *Ensaio de semiótica soviética* (1981).

The "second wave" of translations of "Historia sub specie semioticae" into continental European languages occurred during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this context another Italian translation, published by the Bompiani publishing house in Milan in 1988, should be mentioned. This time the article actually opened an entire collection of Uspenskij's works in translation which appeared under the title *Storia e semiotica*. A somewhat similar story happened with the first translation of "Historia sub specie semioticae" into German. In 1991, the Austrian Academy of Science Press published a 300-plus-page collection of Boris Uspenskij's history-related papers, and obviously, "Historia sub specie semioticae" was one of the central pieces of the volume. In his thorough review of *Semiotik der Geschichte*, as this volume was titled, Peter Grzybek (1994: 341) notes that "it [*Semiotik der Geschichte*] provides us with deep insights into both the theoretical foundations of what a semiotics of history might look like, and concrete analyses as to the semiotics of Russian (cultural) history".

## Reception

When we speak about the reception of Uspenskij's works (and, in many ways, also of the ideas and writings of the Tartu-Moscow School members *per se*) in the "West", it is important to keep in mind the general (academic) situation of the time. In the late 1960s and throughout the entire 1970s interest in semiotics, both as a method/approach and as a discipline, was on the rise in many academic circles and scholarly communities. As a result, nearly any scholarly paper with a certain "presence" of semiotics in it (either in the form of some general approach to an object at stake or even just the use of some semiotics-related terminology/concepts) immediately attracted attention in the scholarly field. Semiotics-related papers were read, widely cited and definitely attracted a lot of attention from peers and colleagues. At the same time, we should not forget that it still was the Cold War era that meant a continuing interest in Soviet affairs, including a particular concern with the writings and ideas of the Soviet (humanities) scholars.<sup>7</sup>

Taking into consideration such an overwhelming interest in both semiotics and what can be called "the academic voices from the Soviet Union", it is possible to say that ideas associated with the Tartu-Moscow School, including Uspenskij's reflections on semiotics of history, seemed to have two rather distinct channels of entry into the Western academic contexts. First, this occurred via the Slavistics/Russian language and Soviet/Russian Studies departments, which were very active at that point of time in almost all the major universities in Western Europe and North America; second, through the numerous semiotics-related collections of articles and academic journals published in the West. We can see an example of the latter tendency even in the brief history of translations of "Historia sub specie semioticae" outlined above. Translations of Uspenskij's articles were often published in special volumes dedicated to the works and ideas in the field of "Soviet semiotics" or the Tartu-Moscow School in particular.

Sometimes the two channels of disseminating Soviet ideas into the Western academia merged. For instance, in case of Henryk Baran's *Semiotics and Structuralism*, which seems to belong more to the category of semiotics-related collections of articles, it is also possible to bring into the picture Yuri Glazov's<sup>8</sup> review of the same volume published in the journal *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*. Among other things, when talking about Lotman's and Uspenskij's papers, Glazov (1977: 612) concluded that "Lotman's article 'Theater and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth

<sup>7</sup> Since Slavistics and Soviet/Russian studies departments were well financed and had a visible number of former Soviet citizens (*émigrés*), so paying attention to the publications from the Soviet Union was an important part of the academic life.

<sup>8</sup> Yuri Glazov was a scholar with the Soviet Academy of Sciences and a Professor at Moscow University, but after signing of protest letters and other dissidentism-related activities, he lost the position and was basically forced to leave the USSR, eventually settling in Canada.

Century Culture' and Uspenskii's 'Historia sub Specie Semioticae' (both dedicated to discovering the main parameters of Russian cultural and political history) should be acknowledged as masterpieces". This serves as an example of how Yuri Glazov, Professor at the Department of Russian Studies at Dalhousie University, in some sense "promoted" the semiotic ideas expressed by Soviet scholars when analysing particular episodes from Russian imperial (cultural) history.

When trying to track the appearance of first references to (and citations from) "Historia sub specie semioticae" in Western scholarship one might stumble upon some rather unexpected findings. For instance, a young scholar interested in Hispanic literature cited the opening passage from "Historia sub specie semioticae" in his academic review of a recently published novel by Gabriel García Márquez (Ortega 1978), and Itamar Even-Zohar made a reference to Uspenskij's work in his 1981 article "The emergence of a native Hebrew culture in Palestine: 1882–1948" (Even-Zohar 1981). However, less unexpected references to, and citations from, "Historia sub specie semioticae" obviously prevail in the overall number of works which rely on Uspenskij's reflections and ideas related to the domain of semiotics of history. By "less unexpected" I first of all mean the presence of references to Uspenskij's works in papers like Ada Steinberg's "Colour and the embodiment of theme in Bely's 'urbanistic' novels" (Steinberg 1979) or Stephen Baehr's "Regaining paradise: The 'political icon' in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russia" (Baehr 1984), in which Uspenskij's ideas are valued and cited due to his expertise as a researcher of Russian (cultural) history (very often the concern is with the idea of Peter I manifesting himself as the antichrist and not that much with the theoretical part in which Uspenskij talks about the historical process viewed as a communication process). Besides the relevance of "Historia sub specie semioticae" as a case study of the particular episode from Russian history it was also cited quite early in more theoretical papers, for example in the articles coming from the North American context and referring to the translations published in Baran's and/or Lucid's collections – e.g. John Downing's "Communications and power" (Downing 1982) or Leonard Orr's "Intertextuality and the cultural text in recent semiotics" (Orr 1986).

The first western paper, however, that I'd like to highlight in particular is "Semiotics and history", written by Peter Haidu in the early 1980s and eventually published in *Semiotica* 40(3/4) in 1982. Haidu, whose research was mostly focused on the domain of medieval literature and was influenced by the French structuralism of the 1960s-early 1970s, conceived his "Semiotics and history" as an article that would generalize historical semiotics for a literary academic public, and, obviously, within the framework of such project a place had to be found for Tartu–Moscow semiotics. According to Haidu, his own awareness of Tartu–Moscow cultural semiotics "came first in French, with Lotman's *La structure du texte artistique* (Paris, 1973), and then the collective *Travaux sur les*

*systèmes de signes*, which included essays by Ivanov and Toporov as well as by Lotman and Uspenskij. That was followed by the publication of Daniel Lucid's anthology of Soviet Semiotics (Baltimore, 1977), which became a standard reference in the US for a time.<sup>9</sup> What Haidu takes from what he would call "Soviet semiotics" is the idea that it "has developed an extensively discussed cultural typology, whose founding binary opposition is a version of the opposition between culture within a historical society and culture in a nonhistorical society" (Haidu 1982: 217).

The discussion regarding the relations between semiotics and history that had been started on the pages of *Semiotica* by Haidu was continued by another US historian (or, as she called herself, "a semiotician whose field is history") – Brooke Williams.<sup>10</sup> Williams' article with a rather provocative title "What has history to do with semiotic?" starts with the suggestion, "It seems time for at least a preliminary attempt at an overview of the basic issues and options, of the semiotic dimensions, as it were, of the problem of history"<sup>11</sup> (Williams 1985: 268), while Uspenskij's "Historia sub specie semioticae" is presented as an "explicitly semiotic illustration of the crucial cultural context of words for an understanding of history" (Williams 1985: 322). The role of those 'contexts of words' is important for Williams, since it is "through language, not first of all as a means of communication, but as a means of modeling the world, that history so defined is transmitted. An explication of history in relation to semiotic must take this semiotic transmissibility of history as its point of departure" (Williams 1985: 274). As a result, the whole project of "semiotics of history" can basically be built on some kind of reconstruction of such historically remote world model(s) and it is rather obvious that gaining access to these models is only possible by way of texts. There is no direct reference to Uspenskij's work here, but it seems that in this case Williams comes very close to the Tartu-Moscow School's approach (on the topic, see also Boyko 2014, 2015),<sup>12</sup> since throughout the entire 1970s–1980s Uspenskij on

<sup>9</sup> Personal e-mail correspondence from January 2015 between me and Peter Haidu (T. B.).

<sup>10</sup> As part of *Semiotica's* discussion it makes sense to mention also Marike Finlay-Pelinski's "Semiotics or history: From content analysis to contextualized discursive praxis" (1982), which was a rather critical reply to Haidu's "Semiotics and history".

<sup>11</sup> Williams explains this need for the overview by referring to the recently held events which discussed a number of issues related to semioticians' interest in history (e.g. History Colloquium held within the framework of the Fourth International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University in June of 1983 and Special Session on History and Semiotics at the eighth Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America held at Snowbird, Utah, in October of 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Besides the "Historia sub specie semioticae" one could mention also Juri Lotman's short editorial note which accompanied Mihail Postnikov's and Anatolij Fomenko's article "Novye metodiki statisticheskogo analiza narrativno-tsifrovogo materiyala drevnej istorii" in the 15th volume of *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* [*Sign Systems Studies*] (Lotman 1982).

numerous occasions talked about a “cultural-semiotic approach to history” (*kul’turno-semioticheskij podhod*) which in essence had to presuppose the reconstruction of a system of beliefs which conditioned both the perception of the historical events in question and the reaction to them from a socium or a particular social group.

Another important publication directly related to the reception of Uspenskij’s ideas in the West is Peter Grzybek’s review of *Semiotik der Geschichte* in which appeared the first German translation not only of “*Historia sub specie semioticae*”, but also of Uspenskij’s lengthier piece “*Istoriya i semiotika (Vospriyatie vremeni kak semioticheskaya problema)*” [“History and semiotics (Perception of time as a semiotic problem)”]; Uspenskij 1988, 1989] published in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* [*Sign Systems Studies*], vol-s 22 and 23. Peter Grzybek’s review titled “Semiotics of history – historical cultural semiotics?” appeared in *Semiotica* 98(3/4) (Grzybek 1994) and is perhaps the first scholarly work which not only introduces Uspenskij’s ideas to the Western audience, but actually also tries to contextualize those ideas (first of all in relation to the “classics of semiotics”, but also the contemporary humanities in general) and analyse them.<sup>13</sup> For instance, after mentioning Uspenskij’s strong emphasis on the idea that the past is organized like a text which is read from a present-day perspective, Grzybek (1994: 344) notes:

What sounds like a statement typical of Moscow–Tartu semiotics – the extremely broad usage of the word ‘text’, by no means referring to verbal texts only – is, in fact, completely in line with recent developments in the historical sciences. We find here an ongoing discussion on semiotics and history, i.e., on the semiotic nature of history. Uspenskij does not devote a single word to this whole discussion; still, his book integrates itself completely in it.

So Peter Grzybek, who was (and continues to be) one of the main disseminators of the ideas of the Tartu-Moscow School in the German-speaking world and one of the most distinguished “Western” slavists, presupposes that Uspenskij had to be familiar with those “recent developments and discussion in the historical sciences”<sup>14</sup> and wonders why he “does not devote a single word” to it. I think that this is a very interesting detail in the context of the review and the entire story of the reception of Uspenskij’s, Lotman’s, etc. ideas in the West *per se*. It seems that for the Western scholars like Grzybek it was not always easy to step into the shoes of Soviet humanities scholars and consider the reasons having to do with the various limitations of and obstacles to the

<sup>13</sup> E.g. one of the explicit aims of Grzybek’s review article is “to point out what Uspenskij actually wants to say, and what ultimately turns out to be important to him” (Grzybek 1994: 343).

<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Grzybek means here the vortex of discussions stirred up by the so-called “linguistic turn” and scholars like Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit and others.

actual access to important Western texts nor, as it appears to have been predominant in the case of Boris Uspenskij and Juri Lotman, the fact that they would consider only those ideas coming from the West that suited their own scholarly agenda, while at the same time mostly ignoring the majority of the historical-philosophical debates which were going on in the West. Anyhow, it is rather remarkable how scholars like Uspenskij or his friend and frequent co-author Juri Lotman actually managed to arrive at similar conclusions as their Western counterparts and, in Grzybek's own words, to be "completely in line with the recent developments in the [Western] historical sciences" without actually engaging much with those ongoing theoretical discussions in Western scholarship.

Grzybek's final point of the review also deserves a special mention. In consonance with the Tartu-Moscow School's idea about the meta-texts (e.g. instructions, rules, prescriptions, self-descriptions, etc.) of a given culture being extremely useful for the semiotic study of the particular culture, since these texts display the myth the culture creates about itself,<sup>15</sup> Grzybek suggests that Uspenskij's works published in *Semiotik der Geschichte*, as well as the metasemiotic texts produced by the Tartu-Moscow School in some sense "provide insights into Soviet (Russian) culture as a whole [...] [since] semiotics is not only an instrument for cultural studies; it is also rendered one of its possible objects – the (meta-) texts produced by a given culture (or a cultural sub-group)" (Grzybek 1994: 353).

Perhaps the most acclaimed and widely read book from the West which heavily relies on "Historia sub specie semioticae" and other history-related papers by Uspenskij (as well as Lotman) is Richard Wortman's *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (1995). The main aim of the scholar from Princeton and Columbia Universities was to describe the rituals and ceremonial behaviour at the Russian court, especially in case of monarchs and monarchs' families, but also Russian nobility and elite in general. With this monumental and highly recognized academic work<sup>16</sup> Wortman wanted to represent the ongoing "theatre of power" and analyse political symbolism in the Russian Empire from the epoch of Peter I (late 17th – early 18th centuries) till the abdication of Nikolaj II (1917). From the very first pages Wortman (1995: 4) rather strongly emphasizes: "My work is meant as a first effort at exploring this problem [presentations acting on imagination and symbolic exercising power], which has been all but ignored in the extensive scholarship of prerevolutionary Russia." However, at a closer look it turns out that a number of his key examples and ideas regarding the Russian monarchy and nobility (e.g. the

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Section 9 of *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture* (Ivanov et al. 1973).

<sup>16</sup> *Scenarios of Power* was awarded George L. Mosse prize of the American Historical Association and Efim Etkind prize of St. Petersburg European University for the best Western work on Russian culture and literature.

'foreignness' of the monarch, 'myths and heroic archetypes' or even such a crucial notion as 'theatre' itself) are actually taken from Uspenskij's and Lotman's writings from the 1970s–1990s. Wortman makes more than a dozen references to the works of Tartu-Moscow semioticians, yet taking into consideration the striking number of similarities between Lotman/Uspenskij's and Wortman's approaches in *Scenarios of Power*, the latter does not seem to have given enough credit to the ideas he has taken from the Tartu–Moscow School.<sup>17</sup>

Another prominent Western historian who praised the entire idea behind "Historia sub specie semioticae" was Luisa Passerini from Italy. In her essayistic piece "History and semiotics" (1999), the professor of the European University Institute in Florence started at a very Uspenskian note: "Res gestae, i.e., what happened in the past, is not only no longer conceived as a totality, but, in the perspective of a semiotised history (historia sub specie semioticae), it is conceived as itself a communicative process [...], semiotisation of history, inherent in historical perception, transforms the objects it perceives into historical events" (Passerini 1999: 13). Thus, from Passerini's point of view the existing separation between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* is more nuanced than it would be if the two processes were thought of as pertaining to different orders of reality.

For the Italian historian, who almost directly follows Uspenskij's proposals from "Historia sub specie semioticae" and "History and semiotics (Perception of time as a semiotic problem)",<sup>18</sup> "*Historia rerum gestarum* is made possible by and based on the textual nature of *res gestae*: recurrences and patterns present in the text of passed history condition or resist interpretations from the present [...] [while] the textual reading of new historians reformulates the past as a text" (Passerini 1999: 13). However, she specifically emphasizes the fact that such an approach does not imply that the whole past is reduced to acts of verbalization, because "the connection with other aspects – from emotional drives to economic forces – is a horizon that history can never lose sight of, although it is not the direct object of its exercise" (Passerini 1999: 14). Another interesting observation related to the history of ideas and deriving from Passerini is that the whole semiotization of history she is talking about is basically opposed to the structuralist definition of history,<sup>19</sup> a definition which "reduced history to a pulverisation of infinitesimal events, to which only the subjective choices of the historian intervened to give some sense" (Passerini 1999: 14). For Passerini, history is clearly not an amorphous myriad of psychic and individual movements that, in the

<sup>17</sup> In the new and abridged edition of *Scenarios of Power* (2006) references to Uspenskij and Lotman are almost entirely missing from the Wortman's text.

<sup>18</sup> The later work was translated into Italian and published in the volume *Storia e semiotica* mentioned above.

<sup>19</sup> Here Passerini makes a reference to Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (1962).

end, could be resolved into cerebral, hormonal, nervous, i.e. physical or chemical, phenomena. In her Uspenskij-influenced opinion:

[...] historical process (*res gestae*) is conceived of as the product not only of physical and chemical determinations, but also of acts of decision and understanding a text including stories about a partial and conditioned freedom – only then can the subjectivity of historical choices in *historia rerum gestarum* show its whole strength as a new understanding with the past, a dialogue that was not possible before and has become possible now thanks to the development of new languages. (Passerini 1999: 14)

The final remark of the essay actually ends on a note that is rather promising for the project of the semiotics of history: “The development of a semiotics of history might be the essential step that historians have to take in order to assume their role on the cultural scene of the present” (Passerini 1999: 19).

In the 21st century Boris Uspenskij's history-related ideas have unfortunately been cited by Western scholars mostly in the very limited form of “See B. A. Uspenskij, ‘*Historia sub specie semioticae*’”, or simply as one of the items on the reference list.<sup>20</sup> Among the couple of dozens of academic works that include actual references to “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” or “History and semiotics (Perception of time as a semiotic problem)” it is perhaps only in Antonella Salomoni's “*Storici e semiotica della storia*” (Salomoni 2012) and Arturo Casas' “*Iuri Lotman y la semiosis histórica ante el historicismo (Un debate europeo del siglo XX)*” (Casas 2010) that it is possible to detect attempts at a discussion of the semiotics of history project/approach *per se* and Uspenskij's contribution to it in particular.

To conclude, in the reception of Boris Uspenskij's ideas related to the semiotics of history in the West over the last five decades we can see two clear tendencies: first, it seems that in the absolute majority of cases (no matter whether in the 1970s or the 2010s) Western scholars have for the most part preferred simply to extract Uspenskij's examples and conclusions regarding Russian (cultural) history, while at the same time dismissing/not seeing the theoretical suggestions which accompanied those examples – Uspenskij has been seen first of all as a historian of Russian culture and not as a theoretician; and, second, only a limited number of scholars (e.g. Peter

<sup>20</sup> At this point it is important to note that besides the reception in the West one should also keep in mind an entire layer of academic works originating from the countries of the so-called (post)socialist bloc (e.g. Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.). In this case the story of the reception, both prior to the collapse of the “Iron Curtain” and since the 1990s, and the discussion of Uspenskij's (and the Tartu-Moscow School's) history-related ideas is very different and deserves a separate discussion, since the contributions by scholars such as Elżbieta Hałas, Bogusław Żyłko and others provide very interesting readings and analyses of those ideas.

Grzybek or Luisa Passerini) have actually made the choice to enter a discussion with Uspenskij's ideas and try to understand (or sometimes just explain) the essence of what the Tartu–Moscow School's semiotics of history had to offer.

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### **«Семиотика истории» Бориса Успенского на Западе**

В статье рассматривается рецепция научных идей Бориса Андреевича Успенского за пределами Советского Союза, главным образом в западноевропейском и североамериканском академических кругах. Данный обзор академических рецепций работ Успенского охватывает переводы его наиболее известных историко-теоретических трудов [в первую очередь «Historia sub specie semioticae» и «История и семиотика (Восприятие времени как семиотическая проблема)»] на английский, французский, испанский, немецкий и другие европейские языки. Обзор также включает рассмотрение различных «западных» ссылок и отзывов на идеи Б.А. Успенского, относящиеся к «семиотике истории» и рассуждения связанные с «культурно-семиотическим подходом к истории» практикуемым Тартуско-московской школой семиотики.

### **Uspenskit lugedes: Nõukogude 'ajaloosemiotika' läänes**

Artiklis vaadeldakse Boris Uspenski kirjutiste ja ideede retseptiooni väljaspool Nõukogude Liitu, eelkõige Lääne-Euroopa ja Põhja-Ameerika akadeemilises kontekstis. Käesolev lühike ülevaade Uspenski sellisest akadeemilisest retseptioonist katab tuntuimate teadustööde [eelkõige “Historia sub specie semioticae” ning “Ajalugu ja semiotika (Aja tajumine kui semiotiline probleem)”] tõlkeid inglise, prantsuse, hispaania, saksa ja teistesse Euroopa keeltesse ning mitmesuguseid viitamisi Uspenski ideedele valdkonnas, mida tänapäeval kategoriseeritakse ‘ajaloosemiotikaks’, või mõtetele, mis on vähemalt mingil moel seotud Tartu-Moskva semiotikakoolkonna “kultuurisemiotilise lähenemisega” ajaloole.