

The problem of (re)generation of the past in Juri Lotman's semiotics

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Abstract: This article investigates the past-generating mechanism in Lotman's semiotics by formulating a typology that distinguishes between two types of past-generating models – Marxian (as the repetitive compulsion of the past) and Benjaminian (as the redemption of the past) – and traces Lotman's views and perspectives that resonate with these two models. Not only was Lotman acutely aware of the obsession with repetition in the history of Russia, he actively contemplated the possibility of breaking free from and renewing such repetition as well. While Lotman's awareness of this was conceptualized as the inevitable persistence of a “dualistic structure” in the dynamics of Russian culture, his contemplation, on the other hand, was framed as an issue of transition from dualistic to ternary models. Defining the alternative approach of Lotman's to the historical past as ‘the aesthetic approach’, this article examines his speculation on the specific cultural mechanism called ‘*smuta*’ as an exceptional example of Lotman's interest in the “lost pathway” of the past. Through these explorations, the discussion illuminates Lotman as a thinker who, to use his own phrase, could see both “the allure and weakness of the Russian type of culture”.

Keywords: Juri Lotman; Karl Marx; Walter Benjamin; explosion; regeneration of the past; dualistic structure; *smuta*.

1. The past in the age of “presentism”

Despite all the fancy futuristic imagery associated with the rapidly advancing technologies of our age, the future, as we once imagined it, seems to be disappearing. Our world is moving closer to an almost “naturalized” system that does not change in the long term, but only focuses on rapid adaptation and short-term investment (Fisher 2009). Cultural mechanisms for generating new ideas about the future seem decisively devastated and broken down.

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Meanwhile, there is another aspect that is a consequence of the loss of the future, or perhaps even its flipside: the rise of the pseudo-past. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2017), *retrotopia* is a characteristic symptom of our time. The term ‘retrotopia’ refers to an obsessive nostalgia that attempts to redirect investment in the future back to a vaguely remembered past, a past that is believed to be stable and reliable, the overflowing mirage of imagined good times that are mobilized to console and compensate for the misery and lethargy of the present.

Then what would be the relevant concept corresponding to the dominant sense of temporality of our era, which is characterized by the simultaneous emergence of two phenomena that resemble the two sides of the same coin: the disappearance of the future and the rise of the retrotopia as a pseudo-past? According to French historian François Hartog, the concept of predominant temporality in our age is *presentism*. Presentism is the state of the “tyranny of the instant”, a never-ending now where only the present exists as a black hole into which the past and future are sucked. It is the state of “omnipresent omnipotent present” in which “immediacy alone has value” (Hartog 2015: xviii).²

Against the background of this blocked future, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the alleged “historical turn” in Lotman’s thinking³ was triggered – a problem of historical process embodied by the notions of ‘explosion’ and ‘unpredictability’: “The urgency of the new situation emerging from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR provokes an explosive acceleration in Lotman’s reflection on history” (Monticelli 2020: 203). As he watched the future disappear before his eyes, Lotman struggled to find a way to ensure that it was not just a

² “The French neologism *le présentisme* [presentism] was first coined by analogy with *le futurisme* [futurism], in which the future laid down the law” (Hartog 2015: xvii). Futurism was the fundamental temporality in modern history or, in Hartog’s terminology, the “regime of historicity” of modernity. Strongly suggesting that presentism is the heir to the century of futurism, Hartog (2015: xviii) points out that a new experience of time and a new regime of historicity is “all the more distinctive for the fact that the West has spent the last two hundred years dancing to the tune of the future”. What presentism decisively loses, in other words, is the idea of the future as a promise, as a long-term project, grounded in a sense of progressive historicity.

³ The problem of the “historical turn” in Lotman’s thought has been the subject of intense academic interest in recent years. The special issue of the journal *Sign Systems Studies* [25(1), 1992], appearing in the last volume that Lotman himself edited, was entitled *Semiotics and History*. A prime example of the renewed scholarly interest in the semiotics of history was a special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* [45(3/4), 2017], which was a *Festschrift* on the occasion of Boris Uspensky’s 80th birthday. On the re-examination of the place of the Moscow–Tartu Semiotic School in terms of historical research and the crucial status of the Tartu Semiotic School in this specific field, see Tamm 2017: 211–229.

tragic repetition of the past, and to (re)open the future as a historical project that could usher in something truly new, going beyond mere catastrophe.⁴

Rather than addressing the question of the future, which has already been explored quite often and in detail, in this article I would like to tackle the issue of the past that still gets short shrift. I am going to investigate the past-generating mechanism in Lotman's semiotics, which in its broadest sense refers to the entire dynamics of how a culture remembers and revitalizes its historical past, keeping in mind only two things: first, the problem of the past-generating was one of the central issues for Lotman even before he turned to the problematics of history at the end of the 1980s – that is, ever since the 1970s when he concentrated primarily on the elaboration of cultural semiotics as a new meta-discipline; second, the task of (re)opening the possibilities of the future for the unpredictable novelty is inextricably intertwined with the possibilities of recovering the lost past, that is, reviving the alienated potentiality of the past.

To explore the issue of the past in Lotman, I will attempt to formulate a typology that distinguishes between two kinds of models of past revival: roughly speaking, a Marxian model (as the repetitive compulsion of the past) and a Benjaminian one (as the redemption of the past). After outlining the historical background and characteristics of each model, in what follows I will trace and discuss Lotman's views and perspectives that resonate with these two models, developing them into useful illustrations to contemplate the temporality of our age as a specific form of articulating the past, present, and future in a particular way.

2. Marx vs Benjamin: repetition/redemption

The most renowned text on compulsive repetition of history is Marx's "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852). In the paragraph following the famous opening passage on tragedy and farce, Marx (2002[1852]: 19) immediately brings up the problem of the past in making history: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited." Contrary to our probable expectation, here "circumstances, given and inherited", refer to not so much the so-called foundations, objective socio-economic

⁴ According to Monticelli (2020: 190), Lotman's vigorous advocacy of the creative potential of explosion to open the possibility of "unpredictable events", and especially his emphasis on the significance of choice and freedom as the sources of subjectivation in relation to history, through what Monticelli calls "a dialogical understanding of history", still have valid implications for the humanities and social sciences today.

conditions such as relations of production or the corresponding class structure as the superstructure, but to the tradition: past experiences, memories, emotions, ideas, fantasies, illusions, beliefs, fears, etc. Then, what is the status of this tradition? Marx (2002[1852]: 19) affirms: “Tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”.

According to Marx (2002[1852]: 19), “in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis”, i.e. “just when they [the present generation] appear to be revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented”, they “nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honored guise and with this borrowed language”. They put on the “masks” of the past, pretending to guise past revolutions:

Thus, Luther masqueraded as the Apostle Paul, the [French] Revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 could come up with nothing better than parody 1789 at one point, the revolutionary inheritance of 1793–95 at another. (Marx 2002[1852]: 20)

If Napoleon repeated the Caesar of ancient Rome when he ascended to the throne, Louis Bonaparte, in turn, put on the mask of his uncle, Napoleon. Marx’s stance on this repetition, or more precisely, this *borrowing* from the past, is clearly negative. Borrowing “their names, marching orders, uniforms” from the past is nothing more than to “summon up the spirits of the past” to their service, thus, amounting to casting the “tradition of all the dead generations on the brain of the living” like a “nightmare” (Marx 2002[1852]: 19). In his view, revolutionary novelty is only possible when all superstitions from the past are “stripped away” – that is what the famous phrase ‘let the dead bury their dead’ means:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin till it has stripped away all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realize its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase. (Marx 2002[1852]: 22)

Marx's view on the repetition of history might thus be summarized as follows: history is shrouded in a nightmarish masquerade of the past, and it is only by overcoming all these superstitions from the past that a truly new revolutionary future can emerge.⁵

Meanwhile, on the reverse side of Marx's position, there is a diametrically opposed stance: Walter Benjamin's take on history. While appropriating Marx's understanding of revolution in his own way, Benjamin expressed a unique view of the repetition of the past, or, in his words, the *citation* of the past. Contrary to Marx's view, Napoleon's reiteration of Rome, his framing of the French Revolution "as the returning Rome" was a fully legitimate and essential moment for the truly revolutionary "break" according to Benjamin (2003: 395):

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.

⁵ Of course, the profound insights contained in this text, and the complex and multifaceted political circumstances behind it, can never be summarized in such a simple way. Marx wrote this text out of a need to respond hastily to the highly fluid and ambiguous political situation of his time (1848–1851), when revolution and counterrevolution were intersecting urgently (in his words, 'gray on gray'). Thus, as many have already pointed out, it is not a neat treatise or pamphlet, but an exceptional text marked by the author's own contradictions, agitations and, above all, disconnections (on this, see Cowling, Martin 2022). Moreover, the trope of the 'ghost', which Marx himself used again here (after the famous passage from the Communist Manifesto in 1848), has stimulated the reflection of many later scholars. Among others, in *Marx's Ghosts*, Derrida notes the "ghostly clinging of the semantics of Gestalt to the semantics of (revolutionary) Geist", i.e. the "essential contamination of the spirit by the ghost" ('*Geist*', '*esprit*', and '*dyx*' all refer to both spirit and ghost together), and characterizes Marx's position as a laborious, dangerous, and impossible attempt to completely banish the ghosts of the past from the revolutionary spirit (see Derrida 2006). However, the present interest does not lie in the deconstructive reading of this kind, called 'hauntology', but in the concrete ways of recycling the past that Marx points out: the borrowing of names, battle slogans, and costumes from the past. As will become clear in the following discussion, it is this specific problem of borrowing from the past, which Marx and Benjamin both touch on, that provides the basis for applying these two models represented by Marx and Benjamin to Lotman's understanding of the past.

As Benjamin argues, citation of the past in the present is not merely disguising. Rather, it is a crucial opportunity to disrupt “the continuum of history”, which is perceived as a progressive flow of “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin 2003: 395). Revolutionary citations establish an unexpected encounter between the present and a particular image of the past. Benjamin conceives history as an anachronistic “constellation” to be made from the unexpected collision of past and present, and he calls these short-circuits of past and present ‘*Jetztzeit*’, now-time. This means that the past is never simply gone. It can never be fully historicized unless it is recalled, which means quoted in a revolutionary way. The past is incomplete because only the present holds the key to completing (that is, redeeming) the past by citing it. It is precisely through this re-enactment of the past that Benjamin restores (or “redeems”) the unrealized or unfinalized possibilities of the failed revolutions, or in his words, the “tradition of the oppressed” (Benjamin 2003: 392).

On the other hand, what becomes clear here is that the flow of “homogeneous, empty time”, of which Benjamin (2003: 395) speaks, is not just chronological time; it is the history of the ruling class, the history of the victors, or more broadly, the history of the descendants who are “empathizing with the victor” (Benjamin 2003: 391); it is, after all, the record of barbarism in the name of civilization. This is the true meaning of the famous phrase of Benjamin’s (2003: 392): “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” This is the reason why the historian who is “firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he [the ruling class] is victorious”, that is, the “historical materialist” regards it as his task to “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 2003: 392).

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it [...]. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he [the enemy, S. H. K.] is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. (Benjamin 2003: 391)

As can be seen from the above, in contrast to the stance of Marx, the founder of historical materialism, Benjamin (2003: 391) advocated for the gift of “fanning the spark of hope in the past”, rather than exorcizing the ghosts of the past. For him, the revolution was another name for “the tiger’s leap into the past” (Benjamin 2003: 395), a strategy for rescuing the dead from oblivion.

3. Dualistic structure: Repetition compulsion in Russian history

Thus, an essential question posed here is: can we trace arguments in Lotman that coincide with the two models outlined above, namely, the repetitive compulsion of history in Marx and the passion for the salvation of the past in Benjamin? A particularly telling example of the former can be found in one of the best-known articles on Russian culture by Lotman and Boris Uspensky, entitled “The role of dual models in the dynamics of Russian culture (up until the end of the eighteenth century)” (Lotman, Uspenskij 1984[1977], Lotman 2020[1977]):

What interests us here is a specific feature of Russian culture in the era being discussed: its fundamental polarity expressed in the dual nature of its structure. Basic cultural values (ideological, political, religious) in the system of the Russian Middle Ages are distributed across a field of values having two poles, divided by a sharp line, and devoid of a neutral axiological zone. [...]. The afterlife in Catholic, Western Christianity is divided into three spaces: Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell [...]. The system of the Russian Middle Ages is constructed upon a pronounced duality. It had its own peculiar division of the afterlife, into Heaven and Hell, to continue with our example. It made no provision for intermediate neutral spheres. (Lotman 2020[1977]: 95)

The commonly shared evaluation of this essay suggests that it was written for the sake of emphasizing the typological specificity of the historical process of Russia, namely, the “dualistic structure” which is distinguished from the European “ternary structure”, and the former’s typical dynamics which manifests itself most clearly as “the radical rejection of the preceding stage” (Lotman 2020[1977]: 96), i.e. overt severance from the past. Since there is no “neutral axiological zone” in the dualistic model, the new is regarded not as a continuation (from the past to the future) but rather as an eschatological replacement of everything.

However, still another aspect makes researching this topic particularly fascinating. While addressing the issue of the dualistic structure of Russian culture, Lotman and Uspensky also revealed yet another eye-catching aspect. It is the fact that the development of Russian culture during the above-mentioned period, subjectively exposing a radical and overt break with preceding cultural codes, as a matter of fact turns out to be a process that perpetually (re)generates the old: “Novelty not only incorporated antiquity in a complex way, but it was also its generator, subjectively apprehending itself as its antipode” (Lotman 2020[1977]: 104).

For example, the “new” Christian culture of Kyiv Rus which thought of itself as the negation and utter destruction of the “old”, i.e. as the antithesis of the old

pagan culture, paradoxically functioned in practice as a powerful means for preserving the latter. This mechanism was exactly repeated in the post-Petrine culture, which presented itself as a secular state (Lotman 2020: 112–113). As Andreas Schönle (2020: 93) properly puts it in the commentary to the (new) English translation of the article, from the contemporary perspective what is particularly interesting about this article is “its argument about how cultures generate and, indeed, preserve a past that legitimizes their present, despite the rhetoric of a clear break”. A surprising paradox is that the past was winning secretly under the banner of novelty – that is, the most fascinating insight this article presents.

However, isn't this insight leading us to another important reflection on Lotman's intellectual path itself? It provokes us to realize that Lotman's strong orientation towards fundamental novelty, so prominent in the last years of his life, was closely linked to his struggle to break free from the “ghost” of the past – the “nightmare of all dead on the brains of the living”, according to Marx – the irresistible compulsion of repetition that runs through the whole of Russian cultural history. Lotman was not only acutely aware of the obsession with historical repetition, but actively contemplated the possibility of breaking free from it as well.⁶ As is well known, in Lotman's later years the challenge of overcoming this repetition of the past was framed as an issue of how to make a transition from dualistic to ternary models:

The radical change in relations between Eastern and Western Europe, which is taking place before our very eyes may, perhaps, provide us with the opportunity to pass into a ternary, Pan-European system and to forego the ideal of destroying “the old world to its very foundations,” and then constructing a new one on its ruins. To overlook this possibility would be a historical catastrophe. (Lotman 2009: 174)

In this most frequently quoted final paragraph of *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 1992), it is not difficult to read Lotman's strong orientation toward escaping from the past, and his willingness to eliminate the “ghosts of the past” that have

⁶ Vyacheslav V. Ivanov's reference to the old beliefs in Russian culture sounds like an appropriate response to this: “I would underscore the significance of the unpredictability underlying the choice of one of these equally probable (according to Lotman) paths [...]. This seems especially interesting to me insofar as the chief object of Lotman's life's work was Russian culture and Russian history, in relation to which the proposition that there is almost nothing new and that we shouldn't expect anything new had become a commonplace. Here the same things are supposed to keep happening over and over again. This popular and, therefore, vulgar notion – which was for Lotman erroneous – can to some extent actually encourage that form of repetition.” (Ivanov 2013: 8–9)

persisted throughout Russian history. The transition to the ternary model here sounds like Lotman's almost existential response to the historical upheaval that he faced at the end of his life.⁷

Meanwhile, what matters to us now is the other question that this strong orientation found in the last stages of Lotman's intellectual path naturally brings up: what should we do with the past when we really want a fundamentally new future that is principally different from the past? Recalling the original proposition that the crisis of the future is the flip side of the crisis of the past, we can ask again: is it possible to open up a truly new future, leaving the past there as it was? Isn't it none other than the task of (re)making of the past that enables true change in the future, rather than just erasing the past through the exorcism of its ghosts? Without this other task regarding the past, wouldn't it be impossible to expect radical innovation in the full sense of the word? In the context of our discussion thus far, all these questions converge on one crucial question: can we trace the Benjaminian moment in Lotman's thought?

Contrary to what is commonly believed, in the late period Lotman delved deeply into the topic of the past alongside the issue of the future, the so-called problematics of the unpredictable future. I suppose that this idea revolving around the issue of the past might clearly reveal the essential feature of Lotman's not only as a theoretician of culture, but also as a literary historian.

4. Wearing the mask of the past: An "aesthetic" perspective on the past

Lotman's full-length text addressing the issue of revisiting or regenerating the past as a central theme is the article "Cultural memory", published in 1986.⁸ While asserting that "Sometimes the past of a culture has greater significance for its future than its present does," Lotman (2019a: 146) writes:

⁷ At the same time, however, it should not be overlooked that this was also a theoretical task requiring a systematic solution (breakthrough) at the conceptual level: it is the issue of so-called "Lotmanian explosion" which can be defined as a shift of attention from the previous spatial model to the new temporal model characterized by an unpredictable explosion of the historical process. On the theoretical issues surrounded by the concept of explosion, see Kim 2014.

⁸ It is worth noting that 1986 is the year when the last summer school on the topic of 'history' was held in Kääriku. The papers presented there were published in the last volume of the journal *Sign Systems Studies* (25[1], 1992), which was entitled *Semiotics and History* (see Tamm 2017).

Culture, as one form of collective memory, is itself subject to the laws of time but simultaneously sets up mechanisms that resist time and its movement [...]. It is not simply the last temporal cut that is active here but rather an entire cross-section of considerable depth, as certain centers of activity periodically flare up from time past; texts that are separated by centuries are “remembered” and so become contemporary.

The passage, which refers to the phenomenon of contemporizing centuries-old texts being recalled, that is, “certain centers of activity periodically flaring up from time past”, is clearly reminiscent of Benjamin, who called for the talent of “fanning the spark of hope in the past” (Benjamin 2003: 391), rather than exorcizing the ghosts of the past. Lotman’s remarks are also Benjaminian in that the past should not be recalled just as it was, but should necessarily be contemporized, that is, connected to the present context. Lotman’s reference below to the need to “play between the languages of the past and the present” in a way that the past abruptly “be awakened”, also directly recalls Benjamin’s idea of an unexpected (like a flash) encounter between the past and the present. Echoing Benjamin’s thesis of ‘now-time’ [*Jetztzeit*], Lotman (2019a: 144) formulates this:

In this respect, the metaphorical expression “to store information” can be misleading. Memory is not a storehouse of information but rather a mechanism for its regeneration. On the one hand, the symbols stored in a culture carry within themselves information related to past contexts (i.e., languages), while on the other hand, in order for that information to be “awakened,” the symbol must be placed in a contemporary context, which will inevitably transform its meaning. Therefore, reconstructed information is always produced in a context of play between the languages of the past and the present.

To rephrase this, since “previous cultural states are constantly tossing fragments of themselves – texts, fragments, individual names, and monuments – into the future of the culture” and each of these elements possesses its own volume of “memory”, “each activates a certain degree of its depth based on the context into which it is introduced” (Lotman 2019a: 148). However, in the context of our discussion, there is something else that is indeed interesting.

It is the fact that, surprisingly, in Lotman’s thoughts around the issue of the past we can find exactly the same patterns of reappearance of the past as in Benjamin, namely, the present wearing the “mask” of the past. Lotman (2019a: 146) introduces the very case mentioned by Benjamin (and Marx), a revisiting of Roman antiquity:

And so, for example, European (primarily, French) culture of the eighteenth century was saturated with symbolic images of Roman antiquity [...]. The metaphorical use of Roman names (during the time of the Revolution, these metaphors were transformed into proper names) made a symbolic formula into a program for everyday behavior for actual individuals. Babeuf took the name Gracchus, Radishchev associated his life's work with Cato, and Napoleon, with Julius Caesar. [...] Taken together, however, they represent "something Roman" – a broad and multivalent but entirely real conceptual sign for the eighteenth century. In this sense, the Roman Age as a whole, as well as every individual detail, forms a simple symbol in the eighteenth century, despite the complexity of its field of expression.

When Lotman regarded "something Roman" as a "real conceptual sign", ascribing the wearing of Roman masks to a self-conscious programme for the entire eighteenth century, what did he truly have in mind here? Was it actually the Benjaminian "redemption of the past" in the name of a "revolutionary citation"?

It would be a hasty generalization to conclude that Benjamin and Lotman share a common position. This is because there is another key context that is much more directly relevant to the issue of mask-wearing, and without considering it, any kind of affirmation is too early. It is the programme of "the poetics of (everyday) behavior", one of the most important theoretical explorations that Lotman engaged with in the 1970s.

Poetics of behaviour is a very special form of wearing a mask of the past. A basic thesis of Lotman's article on the poetics of everyday behaviour is that, during the 18th century, Russian nobility "constructed their personal behavior, everyday speech, and, in the last analysis, their destiny in life, according to literary and theatrical models," and, further, embraced them as immediate "aesthetic experiences" (Lotman 1984[1975]: 145). That is why Petr Chaadaev unexpectedly resigned after a private meeting with the Czar, and Mariya Volkonskaya, Decembrist's wife, went to a penal colony in Siberia for her husband with whom she had spent only three months. Chaadaev wanted to perform 'Marquis Posa', a character in Schiller's tragedy, and Volkonskaya intended to follow a heroic programme proposed in Ryleev's poem: "In this example we see how the real-life behavior of an individual of the Decembrist circle takes the form of an encoded text, and a literary plot is the code which enables us to penetrate its hidden meaning" (Lotman 1984[1975]: 93). Thus, in the case of the poetics of behaviour, the masks of the past they are wearing are not simply the past itself, but the masks of literary, and artistic (theatrical) text having their own plot.⁹

⁹ On the special implication that such theatrical imitation of literary plot has in Lotman's "Poetics of behaviour", see Bethea 1997, Kim 2016.

While for Benjamin, wearing the masking of the past was the product of a redemptive impulse to resume and complete the past that had been repressed and interrupted, namely, to rescue “enslaved ancestors” (Benjamin 2003: 394) from oblivion, for Lotman it was the result of an essentially “aesthetic” impulse to “live art” in everyday real life. It is particularly crucial to emphasize here the “aesthetic” aspect embedded in Lotman’s poetics of behaviour, since I believe none other than this aspect can tellingly exemplify Lotman’s unique stance as a semiotician towards the issue of the historical past.

If we should find the most pertinent phrase to summarize Lotman’s alternative approach to history, it would have to be the “aesthetic” method. An artistic perspective on the past is grounded in the methodology of reconstructing not just what happened, but what could have happened (even though it did not):

Whereas the historian seeks to comprehend the past, which has already occurred, and to deal with the hardened facts that have been presented to him or her, the artist who writes about the past rehabilitates the moment in which the given events occurred in all their unpredictability. Consequently, unlike the historian, the novelist who moves off into the distant past is, nonetheless, always writing about the future. (Lotman 2013: 169)

Lotman explains this difference with an interesting analogy of the fairy-tale princess. Seeing the past through the eyes of an artist is like looking at the past “with the eyes of a still available young girl” as if she has not decided yet who she will choose: “Until a choice is made, all the princes have an equal chance at success, and all can be called her fiancé. But if the moment were to be described in retrospect, the one who was successful will seem destined for victory, while the others will appear as unworthy usurpers” (Lotman 2013: 170). Thus, if history is a window into the past, art is a window into the future. In the former case, the past is understood as a direct path to the present (the present, in this perspective, appears as the only possible result of the past), whereas in the latter case, the shift to the future is conceived of as an explosion.

In short, the essence of Lotman’s aesthetic perspective lies in that it is treating the historical past as if it were a situation in which the future has yet to be determined, a present that is open to multiple, equally viable options. From this, the following legitimate question arises: is it possible to apply Lotman’s speculation on the past not only to (the process of) fictional creation, but also to the actual historical process itself, and if not, is it still impossible to equate Lotman’s notion of the past as a set of open, non-deterministic possibilities and Benjamin’s conception of the past as redemption?

In this regard, it is quite telling that in his article entitled “Unpredictability of the past” Suren Zolyan (2020) puts forward ‘fiction’ as an essential cultural mechanism for compensating for the limitations of historical methodology. According to him, Lotman believed that “the distorting effect” (Zolyan 2020: 95) that occurs as an inevitable consequence of the methodology of historiography which is condemned to deal with texts must be complemented by an “artistic” approach. It is here that fiction emerges as an essential means for supplementing the limitations of the methodology of historiography and modifying its distorting effects. In other words, at the heart of Lotman’s aesthetic approach was the recognition of fiction as a “special (kind of) reality” in its own right. Zolyan (2020: 95) concludes that Lotman “found in his aesthetic method a special and inherent approach that helped him avoid the politicization or relativization of the issue that often surrounds the question of ‘the changeability of the past’”.

While I agree with Zolyan’s view, in the next section I would like to address another point that he did not touch on. It is Lotman’s reflection on the historical past of Russia, not its fictional reconstruction using the historical novel or, more precisely, Lotman’s particular thought experiment on a historical past that did not happen but might have happened.

5. Lotman’s ‘now-time’: In search for the lost paths in Russian history

In terms of the lost possibilities of the past, one piece of writing deserves special attention, yet is rarely mentioned. It is Lotman’s article “The Time of Troubles as a cultural mechanism: Towards a typology of Russian cultural history” (Lotman 2019b), written in the last years of his life, around the same time as *Culture and Explosion*. Here we can see an exceptional example of Lotman’s interest in the “lost pathway” of the past, unrealized opportunities that were abandoned by linear historical consciousness, in short, events that did not occur but could have occurred, being applied to the history of Russia and reassessed.

In this article, which aims to reconsider the role of the Times of Trouble [*smuta*] in Russian history, Lotman attempts to define the concept not merely as a term referring to a specific period in the 17th century, but as a specific mechanism governing Russian history during the entire Moscow–Petersburg period. Lotman (2019b) meticulously examines how the mechanism of *smuta* has remained constant at every turn of the century from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. In this regard, this article is clearly reminiscent of Lotman’s writings from the 1970s, in particular, “The role of dualistic models in the dynamics of Russian culture”.

However, in an essential point this text differs decisively from the one published twenty years earlier. In this article, Lotman's concern is not oriented toward the enduring durability of a specific model, or, on this occasion, the mechanism of *smuta*, but rather towards the possibility of its opposite, that is, the possibility that history could have turned out differently:

When considering these processes, it becomes obvious that the historian must study not only the events that actually took place and that were retrospectively canonized, but also all the potential paths that remained unrealized. (Lotman 2019b: 230)

Needless to say, the possibilities of what could have been otherwise, “all the potential paths that remained unrealized” here, refer to the possibility of transition from a dualistic to a ternary structure. The very reason why Lotman was interested in this period of turmoil in the first place was that it was during this period that these other possibilities emerged: “The idea of individual responsibility” proclaimed by Shuisky, and the notion of “the authority of the people as a source of power [manifested by the gesture by Godunov, S. H. K.] grew during the Time of Troubles” (Lotman 2019b: 236). According to Lotman (2019b: 247), “[t]he reign of Boris Godunov, which began in 1598, was accompanied by a complex ritual that had no precedent in Russian tradition”, and “the result of the time of troubles in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries should have been Russia's transition to a regulated legal-autocratic state, like, for example, in Sweden. This, however, did not occur.”

The (momentary) opening of the possibility of fundamental change and its subsequent frustration, that is, the mechanism of *smuta*, invariably would be repeated throughout the rest of the century's turn. For instance, all the economic and cultural processes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as the development of bourgeois forms of economy, the rapid economic progress of the final decades of the nineteenth century, and the formation of the intelligentsia, indeed created the potential for a transition to a ternary system. However, as always, “Chekhov's path [that is an intermediate, compromising stance; S. H. K.] was not allowed to continue. Instead, Blok's path – that of maximalism – won out” (Lotman 2019b: 239). The same was repeated a few decades later when New Economic Policy's reformist line was abandoned, and Stalin's accelerationism emerged:

The problem of transitioning from a binary to a ternary point of view arose, as we have seen, during the Time of Troubles at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Every time this transition encountered unsurmountable obstacles, however, the government experienced one crisis after another and was painfully torn from its transition to a European (i.e., ternary) order, and this attempt ended every time with a new crisis. In fact, Russian development is facing the same problem today. (Lotman 2019b: 241)

The final sentence, ending with the word 'today', sounds especially significant in that it practically testifies to the source of Lotman's impulse to revisit Russian history. What is the intrinsic motivation that drives Lotman to redeem lost paths of history? It is none other than the 'now-time [*Jetztzeit*]', a past charged with the present, the very moment that Benjamin once formulated as an unexpected (like a flash) encounter between the past and the present. As already cited earlier, for Benjamin, "articulating the past historically [...] means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger", that is, "to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 2003: 391).¹⁰ In the early 1990s, when Lotman was writing this article, Russia was once again experiencing the classic turn-of-the-century mechanism of the *smuta*, and he was trying, as best as he could, to find an alternative image of the past that would avoid its fateful repetition. This is why the last sentence of the essay sounds almost Hamletic in its existential weight:

Today, the crisis Russia is experiencing is, on the one hand, the same kind of crisis that has been repeated in various forms, but with a common core from the time of Peter the Great to the present. On the other hand, we are experiencing an essentially new situation in that today the question of transitioning to a general European ternary structure has assumed Hamletian proportions: "To be or not to be." (Lotman 2019b: 242)

What becomes clear here is that, for Lotman, the problem of reclaiming the past was not simply a matter of rewriting it. As it had been for Benjamin to a certain extent, it was a matter of renewing the encounter between the past and the present. Temporality, crystallized into a "monad" that Benjamin called a 'dialectic at a standstill', corresponds to the moment when one recognizes "the sign of a

¹⁰ "He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one" (Benjamin 2003: 397). Benjamin's goal is to discover the critical constellation that some fragments of the past constitute with certain moments in the present. And that constellation manifests itself as fleeting images that (unexpectedly) flash up to the historian as political actor.

messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (Benjamin 2003: 396) and quickly seizes it.¹¹ Interestingly, the situation is no different for Lotman: for him also, potential paths do not remain open for long; they are fleeting opportunities that are granted only immediately after an explosion. These potential paths are bound to close as soon as a particular path is selected.

Immediately after the explosion, [...], the number of potential future paths is enormous [...]. Subsequently, however, another factor comes into play: conscious human activity, which is directed at suppressing certain aspects of reality, declaring them non-existent, while maximally cramming the remaining elements into an ideal model of reality that is then imposed upon history.

When considering these processes, it becomes obvious that the historian must study not only the events that actually took place and that were retrospectively canonized, but also all the potential paths that remained. (Lotman 2019b: 230)

So, regenerating the repressed past, or in Lotmanian terms, taking into account the unrealized (potential) paths that have been declared non-existent and thus eliminated by the idealized model of reality is what Lotman calls ‘aesthetic (semi-otic) methodology’, which could and should supplement conventional way of historiography. Thus, is the only thing we can verify here a remarkable resonance between Lotman and Benjamin? That is not the case. What is equally impressive is the inevitable distance between the principal stances.

After all, what does it mean for Benjamin to rescue the looted past and chart a new constellation of history? Basically, it is a “political” task to express solidarity with our “oppressed dead brothers” who “teach us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (Benjamin 2003: 392). And it is also a “theological” task to open a “small gateway” through which the “weak messianic power” (Benjamin 2003: 390) that connects us to all the generations before us could enter into “a quite distinct chamber of the past”: “The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action, however destructive, reveals itself as messianic” (Benjamin 2003: 402).

¹¹ “Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (Benjamin 2003: 396).

On the other hand, for Lotman, a natural-born researcher who never lost faith in the possibilities of semiotics as a new discipline complementing traditional historiography until the very end, the task of regenerating the past, of restoring missed alternative routes of history, was not unlike the task of reconstructing, figuratively speaking, “drafts of (the text of) history”. By its very nature, this task belongs to academic work.

According to Mihhail Lotman (2019: 259), when his father focused more and more on time and history in his last period, he “relie[d] here too on studies of literary text”. When it comes to literary texts, “the reader receives a finished text, where all plans, drafts, and versions have been discarded”, while for the author “the text exists in all its variability and often the author will come back to an already published text in order to change it or restore parts that had previously been edited out” (M. Lotman 2019: 259). Here, history is essentially no different from (literary) text: “Just as with literature, we can speak of unrealized possibilities, which are drafts of history. These developments were possible but were not realized. In his last period, Lotman made several comments on possible developments of culture” (M. Lotman 2019: 261).¹² As the quote appearing earlier in this paragraph shows, the task of reviving all potential paths that remained is ultimately left to the historian who studies history.¹³

6. Lotman as a thinker: “The allure and weakness” of the Russian form of culture

Can we describe this difference in terms of the distance between the political position of the unorthodox philosopher Benjamin and the scholarly stance of the

¹² Lotman's distinctive (literary-)text-centrism, which he still adheres to when dealing with issues of history, provides a very intriguing contrast to Benjamin's marked orientation toward image. For example, Benjamin's conception of history as basically a ‘constellation of images/memories’ can be easily linked to Aby Warburg's formulation of art history as a unique transmission of specific (gesture) images (Didi-Huberman 2016), but this is not the case with Lotman. If one were to find a Russian counterpart to Benjamin/Warburg, it would certainly be Eisenstein (in his late period), not Lotman.

¹³ To some extents, Lotman's approach can be compared to the late researcher Svetlana Boym's “Off-modern” project. ‘Off-modern’ is her neologism for a new initiative to explore the “side alleys of critical modernity” and trace its “lateral potentialities”; it is, according to her, a rewriting of the “conjectural” history of a “what if” modernity, a revival of possibilities that were never realized but perhaps could have been: “‘Off modern’ is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress.” (Boym 2017: 3).

academic Lotman? It would be an oversimplification if we reduced this difference to a simple dichotomy between politics and academia. What should not be overlooked here is that academic discourse or, more broadly, any aesthetic or symbolic model, is not confined to merely a secondary speculation, but rather functions as an active agency that has a profound effect on reality itself at certain stages of history. Perhaps, Lotman's *political* stance is most representatively manifested when he points out the "dangerous" side of this aesthetic model, and it is exactly at this point that we are brought back to the earlier model of the 'Roman masking':

Recalling Roman history and drawing analogies with it in the age of the French Revolution makes more theatrical-political sense than it does true historical sense, and it begat a long chain of bloody excesses, which were by no means unavoidable. The desire of those participants in the Russian Revolution and the Civil War (1917–1920) to construct their age through the prism of the French Revolution played a similar role. (Lotman 2013: 166)

As we can see, the Russian Revolution in due course programmed its actions through the prism of the French Revolution, just as the French Revolution once brought Rome back. However, perhaps most significant is the last sentence that Lotman added to the end of the following paragraph in *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*: "And therein lies the danger". This points to the present's capacity to recreate actively the past as a place of generating new myths in a period of historical crisis (i.e. at the moment of explosion):

The game of the past, precisely because it does not throw any light on any actual historical event, is capable of exerting a transforming effect on it. In this sense, one could say that in the realm of self-consciousness the present is not only created by the past but actively recreates a "new past." In moments of historical crisis the past is made into a site for the generation of new myths. *And therein lies the danger.* (Lotman 2013: 168)

While acknowledging the possibility that the present can actively recreate a new past, beyond just reviving its discarded options, Lotman does not forget to warn of the dangers it could bring about. Lotman's warning about the dangers of "binary systems that find their ideal soil in the realm of speculative models, theoretical constructs, and artistic fantasies" (Lotman 2019: 241) resonates as powerfully as his earlier assessment of dualistic structure as a typical characteristic of Russian culture.

The political manifestation of a binary structure is the hopeless attempt to create the kingdom of God on Earth, which, in reality, produces only extreme forms of despotism. Hence the indisputably *positive* significance of binary structures in the secondary layer of culture – in the realm of ideas and art – and the no less significant *danger* posed by attempts to actualize these structures in political reality. This defines both the allure and the weakness of the Russian form of culture. Life without Tolstoy and Dostoevsky would be morally and spiritually poorer; but life according to the ideas of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky would be unrealizable and monstrous. (Lotman 2019: 239–240)

“The allure and weakness of the Russian form of culture” expressed in a sentence preceding one which speaks of a willingness not just to *read* Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but also to *live* according to them, seems to me to serve as a concluding commentary on Lotman's entire programme of regenerating the past. Lotman is clearly aware of the power and allure of the Russian form of culture, and in some ways he is fascinated with these, but at the same time he is afraid of the catastrophic consequences it may entail and tries to avoid them at all costs. This *ambivalent* attitude is, I would argue, not restricted to the historical explorations of his last years but constitutes the characteristics of Lotman as a “Russian thinker”¹⁴ throughout his creative evolution.

Perhaps this might be a sign of Lotman as being a thinker, not just a theorist. As I understand it, a thinker is a theorist who is given a historical context. Theory can exist outside the historical context, but thought cannot exist or develop in a vacuum. All great ideas bear the imprint of the era in which they were framed, the various conditions, and the challenges of that era. Lotman's semiotics, created in the historical conditions of Russian culture, seems to mark the *threshold* of thought that extraordinary critical intellect can reach.¹⁵

As we have seen thus far, Lotman has delved deeply into the topic of the past, alongside the question of the future. Contrary to the commonly held belief, in the background of Lotman's central concern in his later years, which was the question

¹⁴ Rather than referring to any inherent or institutional Russian-ness, what is meant here is the Russian culture that constituted the intellectual context of Lotman's thought as a cultural historian and thus conditioned the latter, implicating its strengths, limitations and dangers as well.

¹⁵ Of course, it is also possible to interpret this as the result of Lotman's “transformation” as a scholar. According to Brian James Baer (2013: 26), translator of *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, “After all, Lotman himself was constantly evolving as a scholar and a theorist. In the late 1980s, Lotman began to alter his approach, abandoning the strict objectivity of the archivist and speaking more directly to his own historical moment.” However, it would be more appropriate to say that he was, as Baer (2013: 24) puts it, politically charged rather than politically engaged in a direct sense.

of the future as “unpredictable explosion”, looms another large topic: the issue of regenerating the past. As has become clear from the discussion thus far, the problem of the past remained constant throughout his career, from his work on Russian cultural history in the 1970s to the semiotic of history in the early 1990s.

Most importantly, this exploration of the past is far from one-sided. Lotman’s ideas encompass both the Marxist and Benjaminian views of the past. In some respects, Lotman’s semiotics can be regarded as a rare instance in which these two opposing positions can be simultaneously identified. And it can be said that in his own unique theoretical formulation, Lotman raised the question of temporality as a form of linking, mixing, and articulating the past, present, and future in a particular way.

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로트만의 기호학에서 과거 (재)생성 메커니즘의 문제

이 논문은 과거 재생의 두 가지 유형을 정식화함으로써, 로트만 기호학에 있어서 과거 (재)생성의 매커니즘을 탐구한다. 즉, (과거의 반복강박으로서의) 마르크스주의적 유형과 (과거의 구제로서의) 벤야민적 유형을 구분하고, 이 두 모델과 각각 공명하는 로트만의 견해와 관점을 추적해본다. 로트만은 러시아 역사의 과거에 대한 강박을 날카롭게 인식하고 있었을 뿐만 아니라 이를 탈피하고 갱신할 수 있는 가능성에 대해서도 적극적으로 성찰한 바 있다. 전자가 러시아 문화의 역동성에서 '이원적 구조'의 불가피한 지속성으로 개념화되었다면, 후자는 이원적 모델에서 삼원적 모델로의 전환 문제로 프레임되었다. 이 논문은 역사적 과거에 대한 로트만의 대안적 접근을 '미학적인 것'으로서 정의하는 가운데 과거의 '탈각된 노선'에 대한 로트만의 관심을 보여주는 예외적인 사례로서 «스무타»라고 불리는 특정한 문화적 메커니즘에 관한 그의 성찰을 살펴본다. 이러한 탐구를 통해 «러시아식 문화의 매력과 약점»을 모두 볼 수 있었던 러시아 사상가로서의 로트만을 조명해 볼 것이다.

Mineviku (re)genereerimise probleem Juri Lotmani semiootikas

Artiklis uuritakse mineviku genereerimise mehhanisme Juri Lotmani semiootikas ning sõnastatakse tüpologia, milles eristatakse kaht tüüpi mineviku genereerimise mudelid – marksistlikke (mis on seotud mineviku kordamise sunniga) ja benjaminlikke (mis on seotud mineviku lunastamisega) ning jälgitakse Lotmani vaateid ning seisukohti, mis on nende kahe mudeliga kooskõlas. Lotman mitte üksnes ei teadvustanud eredalt Venemaa ajaloo kordamise suundmõtet, vaid ka mõtiskles aktiivselt võimaluse üle end sellest vabastada ja seda uuendada. Kui tema teadlikkust kontseptualiseeriti kui “kahetise struktuuri” paratamatut püsivust Vene kultuuri dünaamikas, leidis Lotmani mõtisklus raamistuse kahetistelt kolmetistele mudelitele ülemineku küsimusena. Defineerides Lotmani alternatiivset lähenemist ajaloolisele minevikule kui “esteetilis”, vaadeldakse artiklis tema mõtisklusi *smuta*'ks ehk segaduste ajastuks nimetatud konkreetse kultuurilise mehhanismi üle kui suurepärasest näidet Lotmani huvi kohta mineviku “kaotatud raja” vastu. Nende arutelude kaudu heidab käsitus valgust Lotmanile kui mõtlejana, kes suutis näha nii “Vene tüüpi kultuuri köitvust kui ka selle nõrkust”.