

## **Igor Černov, founder of the Department of Semiotics in Tartu**

*In memoriam*

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Igor Černov (b. 18 March 1943, village of Oktyabrsk, Gorky oblast, Russia; d. 21 March 2025, city of Joensuu, Finland) was the first head of the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu. He held the position from 1992 to 1997 and to a significant degree designed the landscape of Estonian semiotics, serving as its *primus motor*. He will be remembered for several merits, including his activities dedicated to developing Estonian semiotics, his undertakings on the scene of world semiotics, and his distinctive ways of interacting with people. His activities and communication were characterized by dedication, impulsivity, sincerity and energy that could manifest itself on either side of point zero on the emotional scale.

Igor's father Apolloni Tšernov (1909–1989) was born in Narva, Estonia. He worked at the State Art Institute of Estonia as a teacher. As Apolloni's mother had also been a teacher, Igor would become a third-generation educator. Igor's mother Vera Tšernova (b. Kuboškina; 1921–1997) was also born in Narva; a fluent speaker of both Estonian and Russian, she worked as a radio journalist. Igor's brother Andrei (1945–2010) was a talented mathematician and worked as an aeronautical engineer at the Flight Research Institute in Zhukovsky, Moscow oblast, Russia. The whole family was fond of sailing.

Igor Černov studied at the Department of Russian Literature, University of Tartu. Supervised by professor Juri Lotman, he followed a special programme of studies and was the only participant in Lotman's first course specializing in structural poetics. Černov enrolled at the University of Tartu in 1960 and in 1966 he graduated with a degree in Russian philology with a thesis entitled *The Russian Chronicle Writer's Perception of the World*. In 1975 he defended his dissertation *Literary Culture of the Russian Baroque: Modes and Methods of Research* to obtain the degree of Candidate of Sciences (equals PhD). Both theses were written with Juri Lotman in the role of the academic advisor. Černov quickly became Lotman's

right-hand person regarding editorial work, organizing meetings in semiotics, as well as establishing of academic contacts. It was no other than Igor Černov, at the time a third-year student and head of the Students' Literary Circle, who in 1963 would travel to Moscow as the representative of the University of Tartu's Department of Russian Literature. In Moscow, Černov made a collaboration proposal to the local scholars who were interested in semiotics. As a result of the visit, the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics was born, as were the renowned summer schools in semiotics subsequently held at Kääriku village not far from Tartu. During the following decades, Igor Černov functioned as a main co-organizer of various events and publications of Lotman's group.

Recognizing in Černov his successor in semiotics, Lotman, at the end of his days, turned to him and to Ljubov Kisseljova, the next head of the Department of Russian Literature, with the request to continue his and Zara Mints' life work. What Lotman had in mind when suggesting this was taking care of the fate of semiotics and Russian literature, meaning primarily fending for the people connected with the departments, and maintaining trust, tolerance, and generosity in human relationships. With his characteristic esprit and intellectual spark, Igor Černov upheld these values till the end. He spent the final decades of his life in Finland, where his ashes stay on the island of Sompasaari in the Saimaa Lake system (Heinävesi municipality).

Attempts towards institutionalizing semiotics in Tartu had started already during the days of Juri Lotman's leadership. In 1983, the Laboratory of History and Semiotics was created, and attempts were made to develop it into an International Institute of Semiotics and Russian Cultural History (Lotman's proposal from 1990 that was probably sketched by Černov), or the Baltic Centre for Semiotics (Lotman's application from 1991 that had also probably been sketched by Černov). Eventually, and thanks to Černov's efforts, the creation of the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu in 1992 became possible. As the head of the Department, Černov designed the first curricula in semiotics and culture theory, delivering a considerable number of the courses himself. A glance at the development of the semiotics curricula reveals several features. First, the original curricula were truly created in the spirit of the existing Tartu semiotic tradition, focusing on both semiotics and Russian culture. This led to the axiomatic interdisciplinarity that certainly belonged to Černov's favourite academic concepts and principles. Interdisciplinarity found expression in Černov's characteristic orientation towards Western semiotic trends and tendencies: already in the very first curriculum from 1993 we can find such subjects as cognitive semiotics, sociosemiotics, and bio-semiotics. Second, to Černov, maybe because of following Lotman's line of thinking, it was quite natural that theoretical semiotics should also find some kind of

application. Thus we can meet courses in, e.g. histories of diverse cultures, understanding of cultural texts, semiotics of everyday behaviour, in the semiotics curricula from the very beginning. Third, Černov understood a nuance that was both practical and essential: the Department's curriculum had its focus on *both* semiotics *and* culturology. From this arose a theoretical basis for interdisciplinarity and an original plenitude of research objects, which would soon become important considering the students' actual individual study. Černov's legacy, that underlies the structure of the Department of Semiotics also these days, consisted in outlining the educational streams of cultural, bio- and sociosemiotics. This was done with a clear vision for the eventual institutional broadening of the academic scope of the department, not with an intent to draw boundaries between the streams.

Elaborating the semiotics curriculum was, of course, a difficult task for, despite vivid visions of the future, actual courses could be offered mostly on the basis of the existing lecturers, so to speak. Therefore, negotiations were constantly being conducted with other units and colleagues from the university – mostly with philosophers, theologians, linguists and psychologists. Barter deals were made for lectures, preceded by plans and visions designed in the “cubbyhole” of semiotics. The latter was a tiny 11m<sup>2</sup> “broom closet” on the third floor of the University's Languages Building. Looking back, it seems inconceivable that the space could have housed four desks, the departmental library and a wardrobe. Likewise, it is hardly graspable how the discussions with colleagues were survived by departmental co-workers, as the meetings were also dedicated to heavy smoking so that a person entering the room would hardly be able to identify the location of the window hidden by the screen of cigarette smoke. Smoking – that quite essential characteristic of Černov – also impacted his students, since it also proceeded in auditoriums, especially during smaller seminar or lecture courses (as a concession, a window might have been opened, though...).

Concerning the dire material conditions in which the new department found itself, Černov emerged as a saviour. Initially, the departmental library contained very few books, acquired largely by personal donations from authors. By negotiations and obtaining special grants Černov managed to expand the library significantly. Also, the space available for the department started to grow and in 1995, when the department became part of the Faculty of Social Sciences institutionally, and moved to new premises in Tiigi Street geographically, it already had six rooms at its disposal. This, indeed, was a *de facto* revolution, and announced the proper institutionalization of semiotics. Departmental financial problems started to find solutions after Černov, who did not consider this to be too much of an aspiration, managed to organize a personal meeting with George Soros in New York that resulted in a substantial grant from the Open Estonia Foundation.

Igor Černov was an International Man. Being fluent in English, he was initially a mediator for Juri Lotman, and later for Tartu semiotics in general, establishing contacts with eminent Western scholars and international semiotic organizations. For instance, he served as an interpreter between Lotman and Thomas Sebeok during the latter's visit to Tartu in 1970. Personal relations born in the "Golden Era" of 20th-century semiotics resulted in long-term ties with virtually all outstanding and pathfinding semioticians of the time. Through those connections, also the teaching of semiotics evolved in Tartu (many lecture courses were delivered by top-tier international specialists), the departmental library grew, and the export of Tartu semiotics into the West intensified. The latter could happen because Černov was not afraid of surprising his students by throwing them in at the deep end and sending them off to give papers at international conferences. For the students, those experiences were many-faceted. On the one hand, making presentations at conferences was a frightening lesson in survival for people who had only studied semiotics for a couple of terms. On the other hand, those were times when not that many conferences in semiotics were held all in all, and that meant meeting scholars whose existence had until then been testified only by names on the covers of books. At conferences, though, they attended the students' presentations in the auditorium... Consultations with eminent academics oftentimes developed into lasting personal contacts that significantly widened the scope of Tartu semiotics in terms of the fields of study, time and space, and later in terms of generations. Maybe consciously, maybe not, but this was a way in which Černov ensured one significant mechanism of the sustainability of Tartu semiotics.

Amongst the germs of the Tartu semiotic tradition were the Kääriku Summer Schools held in the 1960s and 1970s. While Černov participated in preparing the ground for them, after the emergence of semiotics students at the newly created department he urged them to continue with such gatherings. So, in 1995 a semiotics summer school was organized at Saarde village in South Estonia with participants including Russian students of Sergej Neklyudov, Černov's contemporary and friend from the Kääriku tradition, as well as Latvians and Poles. The experiences of participating in conferences were complemented by organizing them, and the networking of Tartu semiotics gained speed. Likewise, Černov's technique of "casting one into the unknown" that he kindly and cooperatively applied on students, started to bear fruit and deserve multiple acknowledgements (awards from the Estonian Academy of Sciences, from the President of the Republic of Estonia, and international organizations).

Lotman's group in Tartu was Russian-speaking and focused on the study of Russian culture, thus remaining relatively closed as regards the local culture. Igor Černov, being bilingual and having a large circle of friends among Estonian

intellectuals, became an important factor in mediating an interest in semiotics among Estonian intellectuals of his generation. He was a great lover of books, and friends and students could borrow books from his large personal library which consisted of approximately 6,000 volumes.



*Figure 1.* Igor Černov, in his living room in Sompasaari, May 2023. (Photo by Tuomo Vuottilainen.)

We should also recall his influence on students that had to do with his general attitude towards people. The conviction that between students, teachers and colleagues there may actually exist friendly and human relations was also transferred to the world of the students at the department. Information exchange became possible also from students to teachers – which was not too common an understanding at the time. The principle ‘colleague = teacher = student = colleague’ was applied in real life. This can certainly be seen as traditionalization of the Lotmanian attitude to life and scholarship. Amongst other things, it also meant that the boundary between the diverse academic roles largely lost its importance, and showed that knowledge and awareness could flow in various directions.

Igor Černov’s career cannot be associated merely with the creation of the Department of Semiotics in 1992 – we ought to recognize his work on the development of semiotics as a discipline, and bringing it to both academic as well as public information space, that went hand in hand with his efforts at institutionalizing semiotics. That work started largely in quite an empty place in terms of material resources, lecturers and students. Thus, it is phenomenal that in a short time Černov achieved the creation of an academic institution and an efficiently working academic community. He carried out his work by a principle he left to his students: “By willing, you will!”

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<sup>1</sup> For an earlier version, see: Salupere, Silvi 2013. Igor Černov 70. *Acta Semiotica Estica* 10: 193–197. The present bibliography has been updated.

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