

## **Cultural semiotics and culture**

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At the end of 1998, in Tartu University, there was the celebration of the 25th anniversary of “Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures” that was first published in 1973, both in Russian and English. Its title contains a specification: “As Applied to Slavic Texts” (Eng 1973).

Less than a year before his death J. Lotman independently wrote “Theses on the Semiotics of Russian Culture” (Lotman 1994) in which Lotman connects semiotic study of Russian culture with two tendencies. On the one hand, a researcher bases his work on the best means of contemporary cultural semiotics that help to describe Russian culture. The foundation of the second approach is the dissatisfaction with contemporary “semiotic culturology”, and new impulses from the material of Russian culture to search for new methods. Lotman identifies himself exactly with the second approach, hoping to enrich the methodology of cultural semiotics through the material of Russian culture: “the dynamism, instability and permanent inner contrariness turn it into a certain historical and theoretical polygon ...” (Lotman 1994: 407).

Theorizing in material has been important also for J. Lotman and members of the Tartu–Moscow semiotic school created by him, but this certainly did not exclude dealing with general theoretical problems. However, this detail helps to understand the development of scientific metalanguage where, in the case of J. Lotman, one can first talk about semiotization of philological terms and addition of general semiotic concepts (later also those of other disciplines). In this way the concept of language was complemented by the terms of code and system. At analyses of texts, F. de Saussure’s *langue* was only signifier of a system, because language is realized in text as a code that is derived from the pragmatics of the text. But as a code it equates to Saussure’s term of speech (*parole*). Text, as a term, was originally just speech registered by writing, but as an object of research it obtained

possessing structure, and being framed; the characteristics also include the coherence or regularity of connections between elements and levels, and coherence in the unity of the beginning and the end. As terms, language and text dropped into wider field of meaning, neighboring the notions of model and modeling system. In his theses “Art among Modeling Systems” Lotman defined model through the analogue of an object perceived and the language of a modeling system or the notion of analogue of language. Correspondingly he used the notion of secondary modeling system to describe the functioning mechanisms of systems using natural language as material (Lotman 1990: 8–9). In the framework of this treatment, the status of a secondary modeling system is obtained by poetic language in relation to written language, or the language of pictorial arts in relation to the language of consciousness, i.e. natural language into which it is translatable or by which it is describable. According to this logic, natural language is the primary modeling system in relation to reality, and the secondary modeling system, as a language of description, relates to all other languages of art and in wider sense languages of culture (mythology, religion, behavioral norms, etc.). This was indulged in polemics by those semioticians for whom also prelingual or simply non-verbal communication, for example in the case of children and animals, was important. In this way T. A. Sebeok, a founder of zoosemiotics, has stated that natural language is, in ordinary usage, a secondary modeling system and is thus tertiary as a language of description (Sebeok 1989: 33–34).

Lotman’s original logocentrism is only a parallel to those trends that seek for boundaries of semiotics, departing not from the semiotics of Ch. S. Peirce or Ch. W. Morris, but from the semiology of F. de Saussure. Therefore, R. Jakobson’s vision of semiotics as a concentric circle that signifies investigation of communication through all types of messages is also convenient for Lotman. In this circle there is a smaller circle that signifies study of communication through speech messages and in which linguistics is engaged. Linguistics and semiotics, in turn, belong to a wider circle in which there forms a general science of communication and which, in his opinion, is directed by social anthropology, sociology and economics (Jakobson 1985: 320–321).

The relationship of linguistics and semiotics has given U. Eco a reason to demonstrate evolution from Saussure to Jakobson through

change in the treatment of the code. While Saussure speaks of linguistic code, Jakobson connects the notion of code with the correlation between elements of two different systems, and keeps in mind semiotic systems in both broader and narrower perspective in the face of codes and subcodes. Thus Eco admires also Jakobson's ability to bring semiotics into linguistics, not just the ability to distinguish between extralinguistic codes (Eco 1977: 48–49).

Eco's own semiotics as symbiosis of the theory of sign generation and the theory of code is definitely a continuation of this trend. In a later foreword to J. Lotman's book "Universe of the Mind", Eco also saw (Eco 1990) Lotman's evolution through this problematics. First he fixed Lotman's original state in the question: "Reconstruction of cultural code does not mean explanation of all phenomena of the given culture, but it rather enables us to explain **why** this culture has created these phenomena" (Eco 1994: 600). Eco viewed Lotman's extralinguistic attitude to the code as leaving borders of structuralism: "Lotman still understood that looking at text as a message produced on the basis of linguistic code is not at all the same as viewing the text (or set of cultural texts) as a code. Because he was aware of the fact that there is no historical period with one cultural code (although the modelhood constructed can be efficient abstraction), and that in every culture diverse codes exist simultaneously. /.../ In the course of his studies Lotman still reached the conclusion that a code identified in culture is much more complicated than the one that can be identified in language, and his analyses became more and more witty and obtained the background of bright and complicated historical knowledge" (Eco 1994: 600–601). Lotman's works of the last decade depart also from his attitude to codes: "Lotman understood undoubtedly already in the sixties that multiplicity of codes in a culture creates contraries and hybrids or "creolization". In his later works, especially in those written in the last decade, he has elaborated the term **semiosphere** analogous to the biosphere." (Eco 1994: 601).

Language, text, structure, model, (secondary) modeling system are these notions the dynamism of which — in the volume of their meaning — gives a good overview of the semiotics of Lotman and the Tartu–Moscow semiotic school until the birth of cultural semiotics in 1973. K. Eimermacher has called Lotman's ability to conjoin different terms and to provide them with novel meanings integrativity, and to

this he also dedicated an article “J. M. Lotman: Semiotic Version of Integrative Culturology” (Eimermacher 1998).

In fact, a so to speak non-structuralist reception can be noted already when Lotman’s first books reached the West. So T. G. Winner stressed already in the foreword of the first translated book that Lotman’s lectures on structural poetics do not view the text as independently existing, but “as a part of the context of extratextual elements” (Winner 1968: X).

A few years later he acknowledges that from treatment of artistic work as a secondary modeling system’s semiotic structure Lotman has reached to a comparative treatment, viewing an artistic work as such compared with extratextual structures. T. G. Winner stresses that in Lotman’s opinion signs in artistic works are not only indexical (in Peircean sense) as they are in natural language, but primarily iconic. Thus the plane of content and the plane of expression are connected in the text unlike in language. The peculiarity of art as a model is not only this iconicity, but the specific relationship to reality, the quality of the sign to be, via its elements or as a whole, a part of more than one system simultaneously (Winner 1971: X). It is characteristic that years later T. G. Winner has also stressed, while talking about Lotman’s innovativeness, the essential connectedness of structures of texts with extratextual context, the binary oppositionist nature of intratextual and extratextual relations (Winner 1990: 233). Thus Lotman has never been considered as an immanent structuralist.

And a view from the inside. A leading member of the Tartu–Moscow school, A. Pjatigorski has used, when defining the object of the semiotics of the beginning of the 1960s, a phrase “anything”. From Lotman’s first book “Lectures on Structural Poetics” of 1964, literature became into the object (Pjatigorski 1996: 54), and in connection with literature the text as a fundamental notion of semiotics: “Exactly the “text” gave Juri Mihhailovich the possibility to pass from literature over to culture as the universal object of semiotics” (Pjatigorski 1996: 55). Defining literature as an organic object and culture as a meta-notion, Pjatigorski considers the contact of these terms, in Lotman’s definition of culture, important in the aggregation of texts. By this, the traditional possibility of treatment “how I understand culture” was adjoined by a possibility to ask how culture understands itself or an another culture. Pjatigorski calls this textualization of culture and enlargement of textual analysis the ontologi-

zation of the method and refers to the naturalization of the object as its attendant phenomenon. Development from text to semiosphere resulted from the latter (Pjatigorski 1996: 55). Differentiation between two trends in Russian semiotics also concerns Lotman. Pjatigorski defines culture as an object of semiotics and Lotman a naturalist studying it, but at the same time he defines history as a second possible object of semiotics and V. Toporov a historiosoph studying it (Pjatigorski 1996: 55). In both tendencies Pjatigorski sees signs of withdrawal from semiotics, but as causes of both positions — location of the analyst inside the culture described. Undoubtedly, there is a historiosoph also in Lotman, be those ethical and political questions in articles of the current collection or discussion about the future of Russia and transfer from nihilist binary model of culture to European ternary treatment of culture in his last book “Culture and Explosion” (1992).

The literature-centered period in Lotman’s work is concluded by the appearance of two books — “Structure of Artistic Text” (1970) and “Analysis of Poetic Text. Structure of Verse” (1972). In the same period (1970), two booklets appear into which articles on cultural typology have been gathered, and which is the sign of shift to the paradigm of cultural semiotics. In the definition of text the notions of material, forming, structurality, coherence and framedness are not stressed any more as inner features of organization. More important is the comparison of extratextual and intratextual relations that does not only mean the connection of text and context, but changes understanding of the ontology of text. Keeping the text in mind, it is possible to talk about subtextual meanings or meanings pertaining to language in general, as well as textual meanings and functions of texts in cultural system. Culture, in turn, is also describable through the description of three levels: a level of subtextual meanings, a level of culture as a system of texts, and a level of culture as a set of functions serving texts (Lotman 1970: 73–77). By the beginning of the 1980s, the symbiosis of text and culture has taken place, and the text as a monolingual formation has become into multilingual and semiotically heterogeneous formation that, all the more, has intellectual capabilities and memory. Besides recording and transmitting a message, the text is also concerned with the creation of new information.

When U. Eco differentiates between the notions of coding and recoding in his semiotics, and admits the possibility of optimal

reading, he connects deviations from the optimal or the right understanding of texts with the notion of extracoding. The modification of recoding into extracoding brings along the oscillation between two strategies of reading, undercoding and overcoding. The former means a simplification of texts, the latter an over-signification of texts and treating them as more complicated than reality (Eco 1977 b: 133–136).

In his article “Cultural Semiotics and the Notion of Text” (1981) Lotman replaces the notion of deciphering or decoding the text with the term of communication and creates, by describing circulation of texts in culture and relations between the text and the reader, a typology of different, although complementary processes: 1. communication of the addresser and the addressee, 2. communication between the audience and cultural tradition, 3. communication of the reader with him/herself, 4. communication of the reader with the text, 5. communication between the text and cultural tradition (Lotman 1990: 276–277). On the basis of this typology the object of cultural semiotics is formed by semiotic functioning of concrete texts, but in the evolutionary plane cultural semiotics means for Lotman the semiotics of secondary modeling systems (Lotman 1990: 4).

Evolutionally the name of Lotman and the notion of cultural semiotics are specifically connected. The cultural semiotics that was carried on by him contains enough aspects of general theory, but is applicatively still naturalistic (in Pjatigorski’s sense), i.e. connected with Russian culture. This connection is made explicit both in program texts and process of reception (see also: Torop 1994).

Therefore, a collection of articles appeared in 1984 bears the title “Semiotics of Russian Culture” (Lotman, Uspenskij 1984), and a selection published a year later, respectively, “Semiotics of Russian Cultural History” (Lotman, Ginzburg, Uspenskij 1985). Also, “Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures”, published with Lotman’s initiative both Russian and English in 1973, from which the date of birth of cultural semiotics has been started to be reckoned, have a subtitle “as Applied to Slavic Texts”. Although, next to the authors connected with the study of Slavic material, V. Ivanov, J. Lotman, V. Toporov and B. Uspenski, there was also A. Pjatigorski, the orientalist (Teesid 1998).

1973 is the year of interesting coincidences. In that year several books appeared that significantly influenced the study of culture,

development of semiotics and cultural semiotics, and induced an interesting symbiosis. Lotman and the Tartu–Moscow school presented the definition of cultural semiotics, calling it a science studying the functional relatedness of sign systems circulating in culture that departs from the presupposition that it is possible to operationally (proceeding from a theoretical conception) describe pure sign systems, but they function only in contact with each other and in mutual influences (Teesid 1998: 61). Dynamism is added by attitude to the text that is viewable as an individual sign, but also as a set of signs or a system. In culture, there are functionally possible texts as assemblages of signs and the semantics of such texts can be approached via the semantics of signs. However, there are also possible such texts that neither are discrete nor disintegrate into signs (Teesid 1998: 66). The relationship between discrete or indiscrete types of texts is important at the description-comparison of cultural epochs or cultural types. Complex treatment is also based on the same logic: “In the union of different levels and subsystems into a single semiotic whole — “culture” — two mutually opposed mechanisms are at work: a) The tendency toward diversity — toward an increase in differently organized semiotic languages, the “polyglotism” of culture. b) The tendency toward uniformity — the attempt to interpret itself or other cultures as uniform, rigidly organized languages (Teesid 1998: 86).

In 1973, in New York, there appeared the first print of C. Geertz’s collection “The Interpretation of Cultures” (Geertz 1993) that arouse excitement in cultural theory, and in which the notions of interpretive and semiotic are used synonymously.

Thus his interpretive anthropology is a kind of parallel to cultural semiotics. Geertz suggests to get introduced to a science, not to turn into theories but to look what those who practice that science are doing. In his opinion social anthropologists “do” ethnography: “In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practioners do is ethnography” (Geertz 1993: 5). Talking about ethnography Geertz presents two treatments. According to the first treatment with the nature of the text book, ethnography is a compilation of reports on expeditions, transcription of texts, choice of informants, mapping of studies, etc. He personally offers another treatment from which it derives that ethnography is thick description, i.e. in reality the ethnographer meets the set of different and often intertwined conceptual structures in which there is no explicit regularity and which do not

always exist in an easily graspable explicated shape. Interviews, observations and recordings belong to the field work. But “doing” ethnography must mean an attempt to read a strange, figurative, incoherent manuscript in which the graphic signs of ordinary language are replaced by behavioral examples. And, in the framework of this conception, the culture described becomes itself an “acted document” that can be interpreted by communicating with it (Geertz 1993: 10). Geertz has surprisingly many similarities with Lotman and the Tartu–Moscow school, although the direct contacts between their conceptions were evidently missing.

In 1973, in Paris, there appeared a tiny book by the French semiologist R.Barthes “*La plaisir du texte*” (Barthes 1973) in which the analysis of intracultural contentment guides (differently from extracultural contentment) to individuality instead of subjectivity. The text corresponds to individuality as a thread in which infinite generation of meanings takes place, and at the same time it is an intertext that makes life outside the text impossible, be this text Proust, everyday newspaper or television screen: “book shapes thought, thought shapes life” (Barthes 1973: 59).

In this treatment intertextuality is connected with intermediality: intertwining of texts and mediums, as well as obscurity and unimportance lead us already to postmodern and poststructuralist pluralistic tolerance, but also to epistemological uncertainty.

In 1973, in Munich, there appeared a book of caution by the Austrian ethologist K. Lorenz — “*Die acht Todsünden der zivilisierten Menschheit*” (Lorenz 1973). Without stopping here at the dangers delineated by him (although amongst the sins there is also the negligence of traditions that comes to mind in the case of the Tartu–Moscow school as the one that binds traditions together), I would like to stress that in this book K. Lorenz analyses organic systems which form the basis of the social being of mankind, and inspects the relationship between nature and civilization, as well as the self-regulation of systems or homeostasis that connects them. Against the background of Lotman’s later discussions on explosiveness, casualty, etc. in culture this treatment also belongs into the occasional whole of works presented.

These books that have occasionally happened to meet in time reflect in their scarceness still a certain and more general trend in which there could intertwine cultural semiotics, anthropology, post-



structuralism and ecology. This is a movement towards the analysis of a complex system, the results of which depend on the ability of the analyst to define his/her viewpoint, but also the ontological borders (a possible world) of the system analyzed, the parameters of his/her evaluation and criteria of exactness of results of evaluation.

Cultural semiotics, born in 1973 and in the environment referred, moved by its internal developmental tradition with the baggage of Russian formalism and the Prague Linguistic Circle away from structuralism. In this it is similar to the movement of French structuralist semiology into a poststructuralist paradigm and J. Kristeva, one who attended this movement and was one of those who propagated Lotman since the end of 1960s, as well as one of those who replaced the notion of text with that of intertextuality, has noted also in Lotman's development the change of semiotics into intercommunicative (Kristeva 1994: 376).

One more accidental coincidence. In 1984, in London, there appeared a twin volume of high level cultural semiotics in which A. R. Kelkar tried to bind cultural semiotics with other disciplines oriented towards culture. In the Tartu–Moscow school, the use of the notion of semiosis, so common in classical semiotics, was not too actively circulated. At the same time semiosis, as a state or process in which something functions as a sign, can be used when specifying the research object of (cultural) semiotics. So, Kelkar offered a classification in which cultural semiotics correlates with semiosis in culture and cultural semiosis with ethnology of semiosis (Kelkar 1984: 132). This reminds of Geertz's two treatments of ethnography and the Tartu–Moscow school's dynamic inspection of the relationship between the sign and the sign system, as well as I. Portis-Winner's attempt to describe ethnic texts by the help of Lotman's cultural semiotics (Portis Winner 1989).

In 1984, there appeared Lotman's article on semiosphere that in fact conceptualizes these accidental connections between those books published in 1973 that were already mentioned. Casualness has turned into regularity. The notion of semiosphere has been derived from V. Vernadski's biosphere, or in connection with the notion of living environment. As life on earth depends not only on cosmic solar energy but also on human activity, then by growth of man's part in the fate of the planet one can start talking about noosphere, the intelligent living environment. Man can develop and destroy, but his activity oriented at

noosphere is traceable and describable. Noosphere itself is substantial-spatial, whereas semiosphere is abstract space in which languages, texts, and cultures intertwine. In the opinion of V. Ivanov, one of the most bright scholars in the Tartu–Moscow school, the task of semiotics is to describe semiosphere without which noosphere is unthinkable (Ivanov 1998: 792).

Semiosphere is this conditional space without which semiosis would be impossible, but at the same time the notion of semiosphere rather presupposes implication of the notion of intersemiosis. This means that the medley of sign systems that looks chaotic becomes organized on different levels of confining them. Thus the most important notion of semiosphere is the boundary. Once Lotman needed the notion of framedness in order to confine the text. Now it is boundary what frames the semiosphere, but the entanglement of boundaries inside semiosphere is just as important: “the boundary of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position of this space that determines the essence of the semiotic mechanism of it. Boundary is a bilingual mechanism that translates external messages into the internal language of semiosphere and vice versa. So it is only through the boundary the semiosphere can be in contact with the non-semiotic and alien semiotic space.” The same mechanism functions also inside semiosphere: “Thus the semiosphere is perforated by multiple inner boundaries that specify its regions in the semiotic sense. Translation of information across these borders, play between different structures and substructures, consistent semiotic “irruption” of one or another structure to an “alien territory” evoke the birth of meaning, emergence of new information”.

The quality of the semiosphere to bind diachrony and synchrony, organize memory, transform systems turns it into a very functional mechanism that has been connected even with the Jungian term of collective unconscious (Cornwell 1992: 166).

On the other hand, in criticism, there have been made references to Lotman’s approximation to the views of M. Bakhtin together with whom Lotman has directed Russian structuralism to paths parallel to poststructuralism. Thus, between the biosphere and the semiosphere there appears Bakhtin’s notion of the logosphere (Mandelker 1994: 390). It really is possible to see connection between Lotman and Bakhtin exactly from the viewpoint of the notion of semiosphere, or more correctly the notion of boundary.

But this connection does not mean sameness. Lotman's notion of the boundary is inseparable from the term of individuality. Individuality is inside the boundary and the boundary is a mechanism of translation, i.e. between the own and the alien there exists difference. But Bakhtin maintains: "Man does not have inner independent territory, he is wholly and always on the border, looking himself into an eye he looks into an eye of the other or with the eyes of the other" (Bahtin 1979: 312).

Lotman's treatment is related to Bakhtin's attitude to culture in which he indeed excludes bordered territory, but marks borders with significance. In his opinion culture does indeed locate on boundaries: "One must not imagine culture as a spatial whole that has borders and also an inner territory. Culture does not possess inner territory: it is wholly located on borders, boundaries route everywhere, pierce all its moments, culture's inner unity fuses into atoms of cultural life, reflects like the sun in every of its drops. Every cultural act lives significantly on boundaries: in this lies its seriousness and importance; being separated from borders it loses its ground, becomes empty, tedious, degenerates and decays" (Bahtin 1986: 44). This short comparison allows to maintain that understanding of dynamism of the two scholars is different. For Lotman, it is important to find the border also in the biggest entanglement of boundaries, the dimension of wholeness, and principally it would be possible to create a typology in which boundaries of different level would be in complementary relationship (see also Torop 1998). In Bakhtin's treatment, the border (like dialogism, polyphony, etc.) is connected with ambivalence, and the notion of boundary is seen as a translation mechanism in both treatments. However, deeper comparison of Bakhtin and Lotman is becoming an object of wider interest (see Shukman 1989; Danow 1991; Grzybek 1994; Bethea 1997; Petrilli 1998). This comparison, however brings Lotman nearer to the poststructuralist paradigm in which Bakhtin's name has been actively used.

Cultural semiotics, having been developing as an international science, has expanded also disciplinarily. When leaving aside the use of semiotics in disciplines that study culture on the level of method or an aspect (e.g. cultural studies), two poles between which the development is going on have to be fixed (see also an overview: Bernard 1993 and an attempt to put diagnosis to the current state: Koch 1989). On the one hand, one can notify the attempts to revise the conceptions

pertaining to general semiotics and to analyze their culturo-semiotic productivity for the sake of interest of cultural semiotics (see e.g. Portis-Winner 1994). On the other hand, there can be notified the globalization of cultural semiotics, a wish to become an integrative cultural theory that treats both history of mankind (and the semiogenetic period in it) and synchronic typologies (Koch 1986). Several conceptions from different countries have not been switched into this context yet. But this means that the connections between culture and semiotics have not frozen yet, they create new forms of knowledge.

In 1973, it was possible to write in “Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures” about cultural semiotics as a science studying functional correlation between different sign systems. The present volume reflects both interest in different sign systems and cultural texts, and also relationships between sign systems. The editorial board is happy to attend the arrival of new names in our publication and the multitude of viewpoints related to these names. Materials of this collection reflect well the influence of material studied on the way of thought of scholars and choice of method. And like that this collection fits well to celebrate the anniversary of cultural semiotics. A large part of this collection’s material is formed by presentations of two conferences (“Problems of Description of Literary Text” and “25 Years from the Birth of Cultural Semiotics”).

For culture, it is inherent to be diverse, contain different sign systems and texts in complex thread. But at the same time the influence of the media environment on culture is deepening and due to this otherwise autonomous sign systems and texts happen to be side by side. They intertwine and transform, and the identification of their elements or signs turns out to be very difficult through one system or one text. This means that the specific conditions of semiosis also force us to talk about intersemiosis, associations of signs and texts that can not be studied hierarchically or that are too difficult to be studied so; however it may be possible to study them complexly or complementarily.

On the grounds of this we announce the next issue of Sign System Studies to be thematic and would like to discuss with our dear colleagues about the theme essential to contemporary culture — INTERSEMIOSIS AND SPACE OF INTERSEMIOSIS. Taking into account the youth of cultural semiotics and its centeredness at the object, the choice of this theme means an intention to find possibilities

of complex analysis, i.e. to search for objects of research enriching cultural semiotics itself, and at the same time to describe the environment generating them. In cultural semiotics, there are different traditions of research. Likewise, semiotics has become a natural part of many disciplines pertaining to cultural analysis and cultural theory. Therefore, cultural semiotics is not a detaching boundary here — cultural semiotician and semiotician in culture are, in the global plane, still located in the same space. We look for contributions by the beginning of the academic year of the new century — 1st of September.

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