

Lotman on mimesis

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Abstract. The article considers some basic notions of semiotics of mimesis by Juri Lotman, such as model, similarity, and relations between an object and its representation. The way Lotman defines and interprets these notions is compared with definitions given by adherents of the “semiotics of the transcendence” (German and Russian romanticism and Neoplatonism, Russian symbolism, theory of mystical symbol). A certain typological proximity of some important theoretical statements ensures the necessity to revise the traditional image of Tartu semiotics as a purely positivistic school of thought.

From the diverse variety of Juri Lotman’s writings on art some constant “favourite” ideas can be extracted. Among them we find the concept of a piece of art being a specific model of reality and an intent interest in reciprocal interrelation between “life” and art. The problem of borderline between *what* is presented and *how* it is presented was addressed in the very early Lotman’s works on general problems of visual art. In this contribution I dare to revisit some of the early theoretical statements on the matter.

What is Lotman’s attitude to mimesis in art and semiotics?

Visual art here sets a starting point but also becomes a point of destination. Writing about the problem of mimesis, Lotman did not use this very term explicitly, but he was constantly engaged in the problem of the borderline between art and life, sign and non-sign. He also showed a vital interest towards the mechanism of mirror and text in text. Still he seems to be permanently avoiding the question of the primacy of patterns. He proves in his works that theatre influences individual behaviour and everyday life, that folk pictures have no strict borders separating them from reality, that periphery phenomena (non-signs) can be transformed into signs in the course of cultural

evolution, and so forth, but he never makes any statements of the late Wittgenstein's kind. Thus, we deal with a rather complicated picture resembling the Möbius strip with no beginning and no end of mimesis. This question, however, seems to be still inevitable even in an implicit form. To remind of the notorious paradox with egg and hen: although nobody can give a solution to this very local task, being philosophically expanded this problem is solved by humanity in quite a few, yet antagonistic, ways. Either we follow the evolutionary theory or religious doctrine, or agnostically refuse to solve the problem because of the lack of information.

The evolution of the scholar's thought concerning the question of primacy of reality and representation is to be seen as a way of searching for the next paradox in turn.

In his early article "The problem of similarity of art and life from the point of view of structural approach" (1962), Lotman attempts to give a dialectic solution to this basic question. His main idea is that evolution of similarity between art and life is subjected to reductive strategy. This statement is proved with several examples and even algebraic formulas. Essentially, he states that the higher is the degree of metonymy convention the higher is the extent of characteristic individuality of the represented thing. To quote his words:

The more in a represented phenomenon is "taken out of brackets" [...] the more sharply will the phenomenon's specifics be stressed. "The scarcest is the most characteristic" — has nothing of a paradox, but a mathematical truth.¹ (Lotman 1998: 385)

Although it is stated that it is not, it is an evident case of dialectic paradox, one of which semiotics is based upon.

This statement apparently makes a link to Juri Tynyanov's notion of the "density of the verse line" ("The Problem of Verse Language" [1924] — see: Tynyanov 1981) which also arises in the context of the problem of mimesis. It is not a secret that Russian semiotics thoroughly studied and widely used theoretical heritage of Russian formalists; this heritage is generally recognised. In his works Tynyanov discusses the notion of what he calls the "equivalents of

¹ "Чем больше в изображаемом явлении "вынесено за скобки", чем меньше то, к чему приравнивается вещь, тем резче подчеркнута его специфика. "Чем скупее, тем характеристичнее" — совсем не парадокс, а математическая истина" (Lotman 1998: 385).

meaning". This notion presupposes high mimetic quality of the language of verse. Lotman in the wake of Tynyanov's thought emphatically insists on the concept that the "density" directly determines mimetic quality of the poetic language. Thus, the situation of representation is described in a paradoxical way: the less similar (more reduced or sublimed) occurs as the most similar. This kind of logic also refers to the dialectics of Christian exegesis (compare — "many who now are last will be first" Matt. 19:30) and Hegel. Here we can detect another paradox — already of socio-political nature — we see that Russian semiotics, although always considered by Soviet officials as standing in the definite opposition to them, follows the same left-oriented line in philosophy as French structuralism and, especially, post-structuralism. In the climax point of such kind of reasoning we find ourselves submerged into the so-called apathetic strategy of definition. Silence is the extreme form of the "scarcest" description, isn't it? So we approached too close to Wittgenstein's claim at the very end of the Tractates: "Of that whereof we cannot speak, we must keep silence". Lotman does not proclaim anything of this kind. One can immediately notice a certain contradiction in placing Lotman's formula and Wittgenstein's words together. Lotman does not discuss the nature of what is represented as it appears by Wittgenstein. But it is clear that such a reductive definition of means of expression turns this formula into a reciprocal one. Silence means silence, because whereof is nothing to say mostly occurs to be nothing.

It can be noticed as well that this theoretical point on mimetic qualities of reduction proceeds from the definition of the model which is given in another Lotman's work — "Art among the other modelling systems" (1967): "Model is an analogy of a perceived object which replaces this object in the process of the perception" (Lotman 1998: 387). It is clear that a model is a kind of reduction. Still it seems that this notion of model is more ambivalent (also in Juri Lotman's works) than in this formulation. The main question that arises immediately from this definition is — at what moment is the object replaced by a model and then by a piece of art? A series of problems follows: where does the borderline between these three different logical notions lie? Up to what extent can we speak of a "real" object and then of its model? Is a model equal to a piece of art, *i.e.* dependent on its signified object?

This set of logical riddles can be perfectly illustrated with examples delivered by Ernst Gombrich in his famous work written on a very close topic — “The Mask and the Face: the perception of physiognomic likeness in life and art” (Gombrich 1972: 1–46). Gombrich places the problem of likeness between two poles of interpretation suggested by two great painters:

One is summed up in the answer which Michelangelo is reported to have given when someone remarked that the Medici portraits in the *Sagrestia Nuova* were not good likeness — what will it matter a thousand years’ time what these men looked like? He had created a work of art and that was what counted. The other line goes back to Raphael and beyond to a panegyric on Fillipino Lippi who is there said to have painted a portrait that is more like the sitter than he does himself. The background of this praise is the Neo-Platonic idea of the genius whose eyes can penetrate through the veil of mere appearances and reveal the truth. (Gombrich 1972: 2)

The first cynical quip of Michelangelo stresses conventionality of the notion of similarity in painting. The second, on the contrary, extols art as an instrument of unveiling a higher truth which is more “real” than “reality” itself.

Solving the problem of interdependence of art and life, Lotman manages to encompass both poles of this dichotomy. From the one hand in multiple theoretical works he stresses conventionality and theatricality of any art language. But from the other hand sometimes his position seems to fit more into the second mentioned “Raphael’s” approach. The above quoted definition of the model implicitly assumes that a piece of art being a reductive model deprives “reality” of accidental features and reaches the essence of it. This concept belongs also to archetypal ones, at least in European cultural mentality. One can think of the Russian symbolists’ art theory (this Neo-Romantic school in Russian literature is far-fetched to Neo-Platonic school in philosophy) which considers art to be a perfect if not unique instrument for unveiling the true order of things, *i.e.* mostly regarded as Beauty. Lotman studied both Russian romanticism and its close connection to German philosophy and literature and Russian symbolism; therefore, it has nothing of a simple coincidence that he made use of this concept in his own constructions.

In the program work of Zara G. Mints, Lotman’s wife, colleague and co-author, “Symbol by Alexander Blok”, we find a clear and accurate description of the symbolists’ understanding of the semiotics of the transcendence:

Poetry of V. Solov'ev [...] is inseparably connected with such a symbolicalness that naturally arises from the Platonic romantic "dvoemirie" ("bi-worldness") and with the understanding of the *symbolic, sign nature of the very mundane life*. At the same time dialectic character of Solov'ev's Weltanschauung allowed him to recognise not only the otherness within material world, but also to see it as an inevitable stage of the evolution of the Universal Spirit and to understand the higher meaning of the earthy world, human's life and history. That is why the ideas of Platonism are realised in his works in two ways. "This world" is represented sometimes as a "heavy sleep" of the mundane pseudo-being [...] and sometimes as a set of signs of the same ideas but filled already not only with the other's but also with its own meaning, not "ill-wresting" the initial harmony of the world but introducing a new, supplemental melody into it.² (Mints 1999: 337 — emphasis is mine, J. G.)³

For Tartu scholars Symbolism in literature and philosophy was foremost a subject of studies, and in their works they distanced themselves from representation of such thoughts and ideas. But at the same time it is difficult to separate symbolists' fiction from their theory, and the theory of art already affected modernists' meta-thought including formalists' one. We cannot exclude for example writings of Andrei Belyi on the theory of verse from the history of analytic prosody. The same can be said about his writings on the theory of symbol manifestly based on V. Solov'ev's philosophic statements. This period in art history in Russia is strongly marked with the tendency to meta-creation.

² "Поэзия Вл. Соловьева, мистическая, мистико-эротическая и мистико-утопическая в своей основной мировоззренческой и эмоциональной основе, нерасторжимо связана с той символичностью, которая естественно вытекает из платоновско-романтического "двоемирия" и из представления о *символической, знаковой природе всей земной жизни*. Вместе с тем диалектический характер мировоззрения Вл. Соловьева позволил ему увидеть в материальном мире не только инобытие, но и неизбежный этап развития мирового духа, понять высокий смысл земного, посюстороннего мира, человеческой жизни и истории. Поэтому идеи платонизма реализуются в его творчестве двояко. "Этот" мир предстает то как "тяжелый сон" земного псевдобытия, как "тени" и "отзвук искаженный" истинного мира вечных идей [...], то как знаки тех же идей, однако наполненные не только чужим, но и собственным смыслом, не "искажающие" гармонию миров, а вносящие в нее новую, дополняющую мелодию. Отсюда и два пути символообразования" (Mints 1999: 337).

³ On the tradition of gemitism and mysticism also in the form of the kabbalah numerology by Russian Symbolism see also Silard (2002).

In this connection another name must be introduced. It should be mentioned that symbolists' theoretical approach has very much in common with the analytic practice of Pavel Florensky and, what especially interests us, with his work on visual art "Iconostasys" (Florensky 1993; on connection between Florensky and Belyi — see Silard 1987).

Pavel Florensky in his turn was one of the most important thinkers for the semiotic school in Tartu. Florensky's works were re-discovered and published anew in "Semiotics" after a long period of soviet silence (Florensky 1967). It is not a casual point in my reasoning that Florensky was under the most powerful influence of the tradition of kabbalah symbolism (this is evident from his theological tractates "Pillar, or Confirmation of the Truth"). This fact must be stressed specifically since Florensky's anti-Semitism was detected. He was ambivalent and discrepant in his theory and ideology — apparently using the tradition of Jewish mysticism he forced this fact out from his ideology. However, in his theoretical studies Florensky still must be considered as the closest source of the Tartu branch of Semiotics. Here is a quotation from his article "Reversed Perspective" (1919), that was first published in Tartu: "The perspective truth, if it only exists, if it is really the veracity, is true not because of the exterior similarity but because of the deviation from it, *i.e.* due to its inner sense, — it is true because it is *symbolic*"⁴ (Florensky 1993: 239; emphasis by Florensky). From this point we can see links both to Tynyanov's notion of the density of artistic text and Lotman's idea of reduction being the best means of similarity.

Then what is the symbolic in the Florensky's perspective?

Thus a picture, no matter what principle of correspondence between the represented and the representation it follows, inevitably only *signifies, points at, hints, turns at* the idea of the original, but by no means reproduces this image in some copy or model. There is *no* bridge from the real to the picture in the sense of similarity: here is hiatus that is jumped over first by a creative mind of an artist, and then by an intellect that re-creates a picture in itself. The latter, I repeat, is by no means a duplication of reality in its wholeness, but, moreover, is unable to give even geometric similarity of the skin of things. It is necessarily a symbol of a symbol, because the very skin is already a symbol

⁴ "Перспективная правдивость, если она есть, если вообще она есть правдивость, такова не по внешнему сходству, но по отступлению от него, — т.е. по внутреннему смыслу, — поскольку она *символична*" (Florensky 1993: 239).

of the thing. The beholder moves from a picture to the skin of things, and from the skin to the thing itself. (Florensky 1993: 252; emphasis in the original)

This description could be included in a natural way into C. S. Peirce writings and simultaneously seems to fit accurately into the positivistic semiotics of Lotman. What makes here the difference, is that Florensky does not regard the notion of model to be a symbol, so he seems to be less a symbolist than his follower is.

In fact, Florensky was not very consistent in his terminology. Some of his statements concerning the problem of mimesis lead to a distinct understanding of the connection between “what” and “how” of signification. This seems to be determined by the general ambivalence of the theory of “*dvoemirie*”, which Zara Mints commented on referring to V. Solov’ev’s reasoning. Florensky distinguishes two different types of representation: false naturalistic and true symbolic ones.

Moving from the real into the imaginary naturalism proceeds in a sham image of reality, empty double of an everyday life; the inverse art — symbolism — embodies *another* experience in real images and thus what is given by it becomes the higher reality.”⁵ (Florensky 1993: 19–20; emphasis in the original)

Then he adds: “The same happens in mysticism” (Florensky 1993: 20). So here we see an apparent connection to the philosophy of Symbolism that also made use of the parallel between the true language (symbolic signification) and revelation of the truth. We even can observe here that a sign (symbol) appears as the highest reality, *i.e.* replaces naturalistic everyday reality with itself. Orthodox icons and the temple as a whole are analysed in “Iconostasys” as such symbols-models of the higher reality. It can be stated that this strategy of defining symbol is compatible with the notion of model by Juri Lotman. Again the difference between mystic semiotics of Florensky and positivistic semiotics of Lotman lies not within formal aspects but rather in the sphere of evaluation. Whereas Florensky uses generously such words as “higher, highest, false, improper”, Lotman thoroughly

⁵ “Идя от действительности в мнимое, натурализм дает мнимый образ действительного, пустое подобие повседневной жизни; искусство же обратное – символизм – воплощает в действительных образах иной опыт, и тем даваемое им делается высшею реальностью” (Florensky 1993: 19–20).

avoids this language mode. My question is — whether this is enough in order to stay a true and consistent positivist?

Here I would like to deliver a long quotation from A. Losev's writings, the most faithful and successive disciple of Florensky, concerning the problem of defining the notion of symbol, in order to demonstrate the result of a candid following the mystic dialectic concept of the process of signification.

Within *symbol* “idea” introduces something new into “image”, likewise “image” introduces something new, unprecedented into “idea”; and “idea” is equated here not with the simple “imaginary” but with the *identity* of “idea”, as well as “image” is equated not with the simple abstract “idea” but with the *identity* of “idea” and “image”. It is “indifferent” within a *symbol* what to start with; it is impossible to see in it neither “idea” without “image”, nor “image” without “idea”. Symbol is an independent reality. Although it represents an appointment of two aspects they are given here in a complete, absolute indivisibility, so that it is already impossible to know where is an “idea” and where is a “thing”. It does not mean, of course, that “idea” and “image” cannot be distinguished from each other within a symbol. They differ obligatory because otherwise symbol would not be an expression. But they differ in such a manner that a point of their absolute equivalence is clearly seen.⁶ (Losev 1991: 48; emphasis in the original)

This definition could be used for illustration of the dialectics of form and content and at the same time is a precise description of transcendent symbolism. Losev concludes in a natural way: “In *symbol* the very fact of the “inner” is equated with the very *fact* of the “outer”, *it is not simply semantic but substantial, real identity between “idea” and “thing”*” (Losev 1991: 49; italic and bold font by Losev).

⁶ “В *символе* и “идея” привносит новое в “образ”, и “образ” привносит новое, небывалое в “идею”; и “идея” отождествляется тут не простой “образностью”, но с *тождеством* “образа” и “идеи”, как и “образ” отождествляется не с простой отвлеченной “идеей”, но с *тождеством* “идеи” и “образа”. В *символе* все “равно”, с чего начинать; в нем нельзя узреть ни “идеи” без “образа”, ни “образа” без “идеи”. Символ есть самостоятельная действительность. Хотя это и есть встреча двух планов бытия, но они даны в полной, *абсолютной неразличимости*, так что уже нельзя сказать, где “идея” и где “вещь”. *Это, конечно, не значит, что в символе никак не различаются между собою “образ” и “идея”*. Они обязательно различаются, так как иначе символ не был бы выражением. Однако они различаются так, что видна и точка их абсолютного отождествления, видна сфера их отождествления” (Losev 1991: 48).

Losev was not able to state openly that this understanding of symbol belongs to the mystic tradition because of his publicity in Soviet time. Compare the above description with the one made by the most authoritative researcher in Jewish mysticism Gershom G. Sholem in the book "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism":

In mystical symbol reality which has no visible form or image for a man, becomes clear and as-if-visible by means of the other reality that couch its content with visible and expressible meaning, that can be exemplified with Christian cross. (Sholem 1989: 52)

So we must state that seemingly positivistic definition of symbol is not in contradiction with the definition of symbol in true mysticism at all. Christian cross is one of such symbols-models that apparently "replace" the object in the process of perception. Use of the cross in all its objective materiality can cardinaly change symbolic reality of everyday mundial life. People become brothers or sisters by exchanging crosses. In this process the cross replaces consanguinity. The cross means blood. Reading Lotman's works on relationship between reality and representation from this "symbolists'" point of view, one can discover that they, to a great extent describe exactly this "magic" kind of situations. That is, a situation when model or "second reality" or "secondary modelling system" becomes as significant as the object itself.

At the same time Lotman's model is of a specific hierarchical character and can work in a rather complicated regime of interplay between different levels of "reality". He demonstrates the mobile nature of the borderline between model and representation and model and reality in different kinds of visual art: in folk pictures ("Artistic nature of Russian folk pictures" 1976), still life ("Still life in semiotic perspective" 1986), portrait ("Portrait" 1993). The last mentioned work, "Portrait", shows the evolution of Lotman's position towards a very complicated and refined picture of interplay between different levels of art and reality and even their mutual transformation when both can swap the roles. This situation can be defined as "theatrical" behaviour of artist and his model. We may state it was precisely Lotman's works on semiotics of theatre (see Lotman 1973a; 1973b; 1978; 1980; 1989) that influenced his approach to static forms of visual art. Theatre becomes a metamodel for any kind of art and gives a perspective to all investigations into artistic text. Nevertheless, this whole witty and intelligent construction makes the problem "*what is a*

model of what” even more complicated than one could have expected at the starting point of the reasoning. The language ambivalence of the word “model” (model as a person or object of representation, model as a representation itself) stays unconditioned. This situation reminds us of the specific ambivalence of such notions as “beginning” and “end” (in the Sanscrit proto-language they have common radical), “birth” and “death”, “father” and “son” within mythological mental world-picture.

Let us analyse this article more rigorously. The article is so important and demonstrative because it belongs to the very last works of Juri Lotman, showing, therefore, in the upshot the result of his thought.

Lotman starts his consideration of the genre of portrait in painting with one of his beloved paradoxes: “We dare assert that portrait fully verifies more general truth: the more obvious, the less comprehensible” (Lotman 1998: 500). He fills this paradox with concrete content of mimetic function and internal of portrait. Thus, from the one hand, he points at magic quality of representation, that makes an image able to replace a person. This corresponds to the definition of a model given by Lotman himself, or definition of symbol by mystical semiotics, or indexical sign in Peircean comprehension. In this aspect a piece of art (portrait in particular) is compared with a proper name. The latter notion is described in fully mythological way as the identity of a name and a person: “A word of language is given to a man as something ready-made, meanwhile a proper name seems to be created each time anew, specially for a concrete person” (Lotman 1998: 501). Remarkably, this was written in Russian, whereas in the Russian tradition the set of proper names is, in fact, quite limited. Moreover, the other widely spread tendency for classifying proper names, forming groups which ascribe common characteristics to them, even numerological generalisation which appears both within esoteric practices and, equally, in the mass culture, seems to be simply omitted by Lotman here. It must be noted, that the whole study is written from the positivist distant position, describing the cultural mentality as an object and not a personal outlook. But still this personal ideology or position of the scholar can be extracted from this objective, external exposition. The selective approach towards cultural phenomenon serves as a checkpoint on this way here.

From the other hand, similarity between a person and his/her image is considered as a result of pure convention, i.e. cultural agreement.

According to Lotman, portrait as a genre of art is much less subjected to this convention than “technical” photo, and he is inclined to consider it mainly within this “model-symbolic” paradigm.

Portrait in its contemporary function is a result of the European culture of modernity with its idea of value of individuality in man, that the ideal does not contradict the individual but is realised in and through it. But the individual in such comprehension occurs to be inseparable from the corporeal, on the one side, and from the real — on the other. [...] In a system of cultural values full identity of the real and the ideal results in the effect of annihilation. A unit must constantly be reminiscent of the possibility of separation. (Lotman 1998: 502)

Here the reader deals again with the dialectic of the transcendence because what is considered here is the notion of the ideal and its realisation. “Reality” in this construction is much less stable, intensive and even vivid. In the extreme point of this reasoning the author even states that the absence of any realisation within a representation as well (i.e. absent, negative representation) is more vivid, more expressive than its presence. This paradox is supported with the example of missing portraits from the “Gallery of 1812” of the Hermitage. Here Lotman mentions the words of Lavater who spoke of reflection as “intensification of existence”. It can be added that the above quoted statement of Rafael’s fits into the same idea. According to Lotman, some very important deviations still can be followed — not reflection or visible image itself but their absence increases, intensifies the existence of a “non-represented” person. This corresponds to the famous term of Lotman — “minus-method”, but in historical perspective points at the semiotic of the transcendence or romantic idealism that proclaimed the negative characteristics of the world to be the most valuable.

The reflected and reflection stand in conflict with each other. But the borderline between these opposite to each other entities is mobile and unstable. So the binary opposition is transformed into hierarchical or multidimensional construction. Analysing Pushkin’s poem Lotman writes: “So we approach to the borderline between a portrait and a man represented by it” (Lotman 1998: 507). And next to this: “The relation “picture–reality” gains complex vividness and multidimensional conventionality. This seems to constitute an overture to even more complicated comprehension...” (Lotman 1998: 507). The complicated is growing into more complicated. “By this an important

artistic method is exposed: text is running out of its own borders, as if an open space is drawn inside artistic text, that transforms incompleteness into an element of meaning expression” (Lotman 1998: 508). This statement indicates that incompleteness, mobility, dynamics, temporality are attributed to a piece of art. But all these are traditional distinctive features of the positivistic understanding of reality which are in the opposition to complete, stable, spatial, bordered nature of an artefact.

Further Lotman introduces some more intermediary stages within the situation of signification or rather with the process of likening, making similar. These are intermediary models such as pets incorporated in a portrait and compared with their masters. This is a very important moment in the discussion on mimesis, because such figures introduce additional mirror-effect in a piece of art. Actually the whole genre of still life painting is based on this mirror effect of inanimate, static objects reflecting in different ways a man in absentia.⁷ Lotman, in his turn, analysing this genre from the position of semiotics states that it is not the direct similarity of a thing with its representation that is a subject and aim of still life, but mainly representation of illusion of the similarity, i.e. of illusion of the second or even higher degree. This is really a break into infinite perspective of illusionist reflections: “Summarising, the matter concerns here not the illusion of naturalness but rather the semiotics of such illusion” (Lotman 1998: 497). As always with Lotman, this kind of signification can be complementarily paired to another type, i.e. belonging to cultural conventions: “A counterpart of this kind of still life [...] is allegoric still life, the peculiar top of which become the *Vanitas* type” (Lotman 1998: 497). We see that in the case of visual art both kinds of signification have for their signified nothing of the “real object”. In the first case the very procedure of signification itself is signified or represented, in the second case — a cultural tradition or convention. The question of what stands beyond the semiotic phenomenon is even not mentioned.

Still life seems to be the most evident and simple case of signification. The same situation is projected to the genre of portrait and even in a more extreme variant.

I think I must explain here my position on what can be called extreme in semiotics. From the one hand it is everything concerned

⁷ This statement on certain parallelism of still life and portrait was studied by Danilova (1998) and Grigorjeva (2003).

with the situation of the “mouse-trap” of text in text, when a text points always at its textual mirrored double, and from the other hand, this extremity characterises all magic aspects of manipulating with symbols. The latter case can be also formulated as using Peircean symbol for the symbol of the transcendent semiotics of kabbalah and of that ilk.

This is exactly the method of semiotic description of the situation of similarity, mimesis by Lotman:

Portrait constantly oscillates on the border between artistic duplication and mystic reflection of reality. That is why a portrait is a mythogenic object in its essence. [...] Exactly due to its genre portrait seems to be destined for embodying the very essence of a human. Portrait is located on the half way between reflection and face, between what is created and what is not made by hands. (Lotman 1998: 509)

This problem’s field is already quite close to the main philosophic question on the origin of man and mind. And it could be predicted that the question of mimesis would lead to the question of transcendence and divinity. So Lotman points at the representation of Christ being an archetype of portrait as such. And in this connection the notion and idea of the so-called “*bogochelovechestvo*” is mentioned:

En face image of Christ represents in itself the highest manifestation of the idea of portrait, divine and human at the same time. This ambivalence as a matter of fact reveals the nature of portrait as such. [...] At the same time the problem of “*bogochelovechestvo*” is concentrated in the image of Christ. (Lotman 1998: 510)

A discussion on the term “*bogochelovechestvo*” (usually poorly translated as Godmanhood), which was one of the most important in the philosophic system of V. Solov’ev, one can find in Judith Kornblatt’s article “Vladimir Solov’ev on spiritual nationhood, Russia and the Jews” (Kornblatt 1997: 158–159). Remarkably, Lotman describes this semiotic case with the term of the godfather of Russian symbolism.

The fact that Lotman’s thought was linked to the Neo-platonic one with multiple ties can also be supported by a minor adoption and allusion. For example, one can find a certain similarity between the attitude to the museum practice shown by Lotman and by Florensky. Florensky (1993: 287): “The task of a museum is precisely tearing off [*otryv*] an artistic piece that is falsely understood as a thing that could

be taken anywhere away and that could be placed anywhere, i.e. annihilation of a piece of art as an alive entity"; Lotman (1998: 517): "There is nothing so monstrous and alien to real movement of art than contemporary museum practice. In Middle Ages an executed offender was cut up into parts that were hanged out along city streets. Contemporary museums remind us of something similar". It must be also stressed that Florensky writes about sacral space-time of religious ceremony in orthodox temple, so all his claim concerns with is keeping and preserving not only artistic wholeness of the celebration but its mystic transcendent character above all. Lotman applies the same claim with comparable pathos to the problem of art in general. Of course, this replacement is done in a strict academic manner, so the "synesthesia" of temple ceremony is transformed into "cultural and historical context", but the content remains quite close to that of the symbolic art theory. "A piece of art never exists as taken apart in a clear-cut of its context: it constitute a part of life, religious ideas, simple non-artistic life and, finally, of the whole complex of diverse passions and aspirations of contemporary reality" (Lotman 1998: 517). We can make an obvious conclusion from this statement, that art, being an inevitable part of reality, has a potency to give the fullest and the most complete picture or reflection of it.

At this point we are again facing the question of the teleology of art by Juri Lotman. This question opens a key text on art analysis "Structure of artistic text" (1970). The reasoning starts with confirming the idea that art is a form of knowledge, gnosis, but of a specific nature. Here Lotman argues the words of Hegel that art is too reduced, bordered in its form which determines its content, to represent truth in all completeness (Lotman 1998: 15). Lotman suggests another picture of the cognitive value of art. According to his position, art forms a sphere for semiotic experiment, i.e. semiotic range of transforming some hypothetical "reality" into signs and forming sign systems (languages). "Art is perfectly organised generator of languages of special kind" (Lotman 1998: 17). Then the "reality" imitated, duplicated by art is also a mechanism constantly generating languages and messages which should be read and deciphered. I give here a long quotation because of the crucial importance of the content:

Life of any being is a complicated interaction with its environment. An organism incapable to react to external impulses would perish inevitably. Interaction with the environment can be interpreted as receiving and deciphering certain information. A man is inevitably involved into an intensive process: he

is surrounded with flows of information; life sends him its signals. But those signals will stay unperceived, information will not be understood and important chances in the struggle for surviving will be missed, if the humanity does not keep up with constantly increasing needs to decipher and transform those flows into signs which are ready for communication among the humans. At the same time it proves to be necessary not only to increase the number of various messages in the already existing languages (natural, scientific), but also to increase constantly the number of languages, which can be used for translating flows of the environmental information appropriating them for humans. Humanity has a need for a special mechanism — a generator of an enormous mass of “languages” which could serve its need for knowledge. And the problem concerns not only the fact that creation of a language hierarchy is more compact in storing information than endless multiplication of messages in one language. Certain kinds of information can be stored and spread only by means of specially organised languages. Thus, chemical and algebraic information can claim to a personal (distinct) language, which is the most suitable for this particular type of modelling and communication.⁸ (Lotman 1998: 17)

On this way of treating the whole universe as a set of languages and messages in them Lotman points out his predecessors who happened

⁸ “Жизнь всякого существа представляет собой сложное взаимодействие с окружающей средой. Организм, не способный реагировать на внешние воздействия и к ним приспособляться, неизбежно погиб бы. Взаимодействие с внешней средой можно представить себе как получение и дешифровку определенной информации. Человек оказывается с неизбежностью втянутым в напряженный процесс: он окружен потоками информации, жизнь посылает ему свои сигналы. Но сигналы эти останутся неуслышанными, информация — непонятой и важные шансы в борьбе за выживание упущенными, если человечество не будет поспевать за все возрастающей потребностью эти потоки сигналов дешифровать и превращать в знаки, обладающие способностью коммуникации в человеческом обществе. При этом оказывается необходимым не только увеличивать количество разнообразных сообщений на уже имеющихся языках (естественных, языках различных наук), но и постоянно увеличивать количество языков, на которые можно переводить потоки окружающей информации, делая их достоянием людей. Человечество нуждается в особом механизме — генераторе все новых и новых “языков”, которые могли бы обслуживать его потребность в знании. При этом оказывается, что дело не только в том, что создание иерархии языков является более компактным способом хранения информации, чем увеличение до бесконечности сообщений на одном. Определенные виды информации могут храниться только с помощью специально организованных языков, — так химическая или алгебраическая информация требуют своих языков, которые были бы принципиально приспособлены для данного типа моделирования и коммуникации” (Lotman 1998: 17).

to be Baratynsky and Pushkin as representatives of the Russian philosophic romanticism. Lotman especially stresses the lines of Pushkin from “insomnia verse”: “Я понять тебя хочу, / Смысла я в тебе ищу...” (“I want to understand you, I am looking for a sense in you”), which were transformed by Zhukovskiy into “Темный твой язык учу...” (“I am learning your obscure language...”). These lines were of major importance also for Russian symbolists guiding their interest towards germetism and occultism (see Silard 2002). It seems to be impossible to deny that the idea of the universe that can be read in the languages of signs and symbols belongs to the most ancient mystic tradition which includes cognitive mysticism of the Gnosticism and kabbalah. But at the same time this idea constitutes the very basis of Semiotics in all its branches and manifestations. The disciples of this discipline count among them Thomas Sebeok, who proclaimed the genome being the basic cipher providing us with a key to the mystery of life, and Umberto Eco, who gives the perspective of links from kabbalah to computerising of the universe in his novels.

Art according to Lotman’s semiotics is a model of life in its semiotic activity. In this formula a very important difference with the transcendent semiotics should be traced. This difference concerns the ontology of the two mutually reflecting entities. Whereas the transcendent semiotics is considered as the borderline between the natural and supernatural (God), positive semiotics is believed to observe the interrelation of the natural and artificial. In fact, the situation is rather different from this ideological expectation. The situation of the totality of semiosis that is depicted by Lotman’s reasoning does not leave any space to something that would not be subjected to the process of signification. The whole universe seems to work as a mechanism producing languages and composing messages in them. Art simply models this mechanism, repeats it for the reasons of training practice to keep humans ready for all possible information the world would deign to share with them. This logic naturally leads to the later notion elaborated by the scholar, i.e. what he calls semiosphere. The problem which remains and which seems to be avoided by Lotman’s thought, is the following: is if language is a model, then a model of what is this language activity of nature?

In other words, we can describe the situation as the problem of the authority for generating language. Who or what is responsible for generating the primer language in this process? Another aspect of this problem can be formulated as: does the fact of permanent linguistic

and semiotic activity of the humans give a strong enough evidence for proving that language is organised as a model? And another question: does the fact that the humans are involved in what is called by intellectuals a semiotic activity allow us to expand this notion onto all the processes and elements of the universe? Is nature already codified in itself or is this code implicated by a man? In the way of Lotman's reasoning I see the only consistent answer (although not formulated by him) that nature is already "written" in multiple languages, which already provide situation of a dialog, and a man only makes use of this natural phenomenon consciously. So the difference between human language and languages of natural communication is important but not essential.

I guess that exactly this concept of biological nature of sign and signification (and thus — primacy of "consciousness" in nature) underlies Lotman's theory of semiosphere (see Lotman 2001). Although again he never allows himself to assert this explicitly. This kind of argumentation can be described as the replaced responsibility: semiotics of communication, i.e. of dialogue in asymmetric systems, starts simultaneously with life itself, so let biologists and scientists decide the problem of its origin. Evidently, Lotman erects his theory of semiosphere on the basis of "biosphere" by Vernadsky and, moreover, makes frequent parallels to Vernadsky's writings, but avoids direct causative conclusions.

Communicative act can exist only in semiotic space. To come into a dialog participants must already possess some skills and language of communication. Life gives birth to life, semiosphere to language. A culture is preceded by a previous culture. In his lectures and presentations Lotman used to repeat that even archaeological data show that each settlement is found at the place of a previous settlement. There are no voids in culture.

While the biosphere is a cumulative and organic unit of the live entity, the semiosphere is a result and condition of the cultural evolution. Lotman extends Vernadsky's statement, that life on Earth is lived in a special space-time continuum, which life itself creates:

Conscious human life, i.e. life of culture, also demands a special space-time structure, for culture organizes itself in the form of a special space-time and cannot exist without it. This organization is realized in the form of the

semiosphere and at the same time comes into being with the help of the semiosphere.⁹ (Lotman 2001: 133)

Here we see that similarity between life and culture is clearly expressed. Perhaps, the next step can be done and life itself can be proclaimed to equal semiosis.

The most important difference between the biological information and the cultural one mentioned by Lotman relates to the different character of memory they possess. The third part of the book “Universe of the Mind” (or, in the Russian version, “Inside the Thinking Worlds”) contains the special chapter on memory — “Cultural memory, history and semiotics”. Lotman clarifies the distinction between the two types of memory. Culture retains memory which can be activated after an indefinite period of time, while the biological memory fails:

Evolutionary development in biology is connected with dying out of species rejected by the natural selection. The only objects which are alive are synchronous to the observer.¹⁰ [...] In the history of art a piece which originated in a far past époque of culture still actively continues to participate in the cultural evolution as a factor which is still alive. (Lotman 1999: 253)

This statement can be argued, because the genetic memory seems to maintain its validity to not a lesser extent than culture itself. But this argument, in its turn, can be criticised if we involve the factor of individuality or personality in our scope. In this sense bio-information will always be identical but never the same. The precedent with cloning that it made possible to activate genetic information or genetic memory demonstrated with evidence that the sameness is still unattainable here. And what is irreproducible by the means of cloning is first of all the symbolic, conventional content of a reproduced brain. Yet we can never be sure whether what we see or read in art is equal to what it was thought to be by the artist or contemporaries. Lotman’s works on history of Russian culture give by themselves the best example of analysis of such deviation. Thus, this set of reasons leaves

⁹ “Сознательная человеческая жизнь, то есть жизнь культуры, также требует особой структуры “пространства-времени” Культура организует себя в форме определенного “пространства-времени” и вне такой организации существовать не может. Эта организация реализуется как семиосфера и одновременно с помощью семиосферы” (Lotman 1999: 259).

¹⁰ “Живет лишь то, что синхронно исследователю”.

us again in the situation of impossibility to discern culture and nature. It seems that they are homogeneous from the point of semiosis. So we cannot discuss the problem of model-representation for the nature-culture pair in the semiotic terms.

Real opposition and real distinction lies in another sphere.

The functioning mechanism of semiosphere, its evolution, and thus, perhaps, its origin, is explained by Lotman by the asymmetry and exchange between central and periphery realms. It is possible that exactly this productive dialog between the center and the periphery can give us a clue to the paradox of model and representation. Something in culture is reserved for being a model and something for being a representation of it, and then they can change their roles in a complicated and non-predictable mode. The same principle can describe the situation of interdependence between nature and culture: something that was beyond signification and reflection is included into human's culture and something is else dissolved in the non-semiotic spheres. If we admit the equality of life and semiosis, then this situation of de-semiotisation can be called death. And death is the strongest moving power of a new cycle of semiosis. This idea was developed in one of the latest Lotman's works "Death as a problem of plot" (Lotman 1994). Lotman again quotes the words of Pushkin on "vague language of nature" and then states: "What has no end — has no sense" (Lotman 1994: 417). Non-semiotic nature of death was emphatically insisted upon by Lotman's close friend, great Russian philosopher Alexander Pyatigorsky in his plenary lecture on the Congress dedicated to 80th Anniversary of Juri Lotman on March 2, 2002, in Tallinn Academy of Sciences: "Death is not a sign". But Lotman has gone further, he has demonstrated that meaning proceeds from non-meaning, that this no-sign state of things is inevitable condition of each case of meaning-production. To accomplish this thought, it can be stated that each sign inevitably contains non-sign component and only with this premise can mean something. It reminds us of a basic chemical or physical composition, but translated into the language of culture and consciousness those components will gain names of memory and forgetting or, rather, information and entropy. Yet this regularity demonstrates its total homogeneity and compatibility with the natural stuff of things at least as traditionally described by positive European natural science. This statement can be reverted, so we can speak of language nature of the universe in all its manifestations. But language is always a communicative vehicle.

Then who communicates with whom by codifying a program of phylo- or ontogenesis with genes? To stay within positivistic dialectics (however it is really problematic here) we can only say that the sphere of signs communicates with the sphere of non-signs although we can judge nothing of the latter.

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Лотман о мимесисе

В статье рассматриваются некоторые базовые понятия семиотики подобия по Ю. Лотману. В первую очередь, такие как модель, сходство, соотношение объекта и репрезентации. Трактовка этих понятий по Лотману сопоставляется с определениями представителей “трансцендирующей семиотики” (немецкие и русские романтики-неоплатоники, символисты, теоретики мистического символа). Определенное типологическое сходство основных теоретических положений убеждает в необходимости пересмотреть традиционное представление о тартуской семиотике как об исключительно позитивистской школе мысли.

Lotman mimeesist

Vaadeldakse mõningaid mimeesi semiootika alusmõisteid Juri Lotmani töödes. Eelkõige selliseid nagu mudel, sarnasus, objekti ja selle representatsiooni suhe. Nende mõistete tõlgitsus Lotmanil suhestatakse “transsendentse semiootika” esindajate (saksa ja vene romantikud-neoplatoonikud, sümbolistid, müstilise sümboli teoreetikud) määratlustega. Teoreetiliste aluste teatud tüpoloogiline sarnasus veenab vajaduses vaadata üle traditsiooniline ettekujutus Tartu semiootikast kui puhtpositivistlikust koolkonnast.