

## On the semiotic description of autogenesis in culture

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the notion of autogenesis and mechanism of unpredictable emergence in culture. The notion is treated in the context of the semiotics of culture and the theory of semiosphere. The examples are drawn mainly from Russian avant-garde culture.

The idea that everything in culture exists in a historical continuum of tradition and intellectual communication is one of the essential features of semiosphere. In analyzing the dynamic cultural space of constant dialogue, intellectual interaction and communication, Juri Lotman turned to Vladimir Vernadskij and concluded that nothing in culture is created out of nothing. On the contrary, everything is related to other formations and to the whole culture (see Lotman 1997: 629–630). Semiosphere as a continuum of texts means constant interactivity and intertextuality, and this space surrounding all intellectual activity presupposes the dialogic situation. Intersemiotic and intertextual features are thus taken as part of culture's essential being.

Because of the semiosphere, studying innovation in culture, i.e. spontaneous phenomena of self-creation, means studying declarations of autogenesis rather than autogenetic phenomena in themselves. Such a declaration is often emphasized within abrupt and unexpected phenomena in culture. More generally, the question of autogenesis in culture could be translated as a dialogue between creation and evolution and their often paradoxical interaction in cultural history.

In discussing autogenesis in culture one must turn to Lotman's last works, which were dedicated to unpredictability. However, before these works the

notion of dialogue had become extremely important to him: “Consciousness is impossible without communication. In this sense it can be said that dialogue precedes language and generates the language.” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 218). The “dialogocentric” theory of the semiosphere emphasizes the idea that in culture there are no pre-existing components, except for dialogue (Lotman, Kull, Torop 2004; see also Kull 2005: 179 and Torop 2009: xxxii). Eventually, this dialogo-centrism was taken to another level and developed further in *Universe of the Mind*, where Lotman (1990: 143–144) underlined that “the need for dialogue, the dialogic situation, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis”.

In his final books Lotman tried to synthesize his earlier findings by concentrating on two features of historical cultural progress: gradual (predictable) and explosive (unpredictable) processes. As Peeter Torop (2009: xxvii) has shown, the distinction between static and dynamic aspects of culture was also already present in the earlier Lotman and was very significant in discussing the theory of unpredictability. In Torop’s interview Lotman talks about combining artistic signification with unpredictability: “Art has always been oriented towards unpredictability” (Torop 2005: 160).

In discussing unpredictability, Lotman turned to Ilya Prigogine and his studies on stability and instability. The gradual processes of motivated predictability in culture came to mean something that is understood with certainty and inescapably received by its consumers – it meant processuality, continuity and the logical evolution of consistency (Lotman 1992: 17–18). Against the background of cultural semiotics, these gradual processes should be understood as a neutral dialogue from the point of view of cultural history, since Lotman was mainly interested in cultural formations that would revolt against norms, even against our understanding.

Lotman was approaching the question of autogenesis in Russian culture from the same perspective, and Prigogine explicitly discussed self-organization as an argument that would develop Vernadskij’s ideas in a new direction: “The early appearance of life is certainly an argument in favour of the idea that life is the result of spontaneous self-organization that occurs whenever conditions for it permit” (Prigogine, Stengers 1984: 176).

Studying unpredictability by analysing autogenetic phenomena in culture means an attempt to describe the indescribable, that is, to predict ultimate unpredictability in culture. In order to make some statements about auto-

genesis in relation to the theory of predictability/unpredictability, I shall turn to the following diagram which describes the semiotic process of gradual understanding in the case of a phenomenon, a process which declares its own unpredictability and its own autogenetic origin. An unexpected, spontaneously formed, theoretically incomprehensible phenomenon – a genuinely innovative artistic text in culture, for example – is transformed into a gradual, predictable process and appears in dialogue with more predictable processes in the following way:

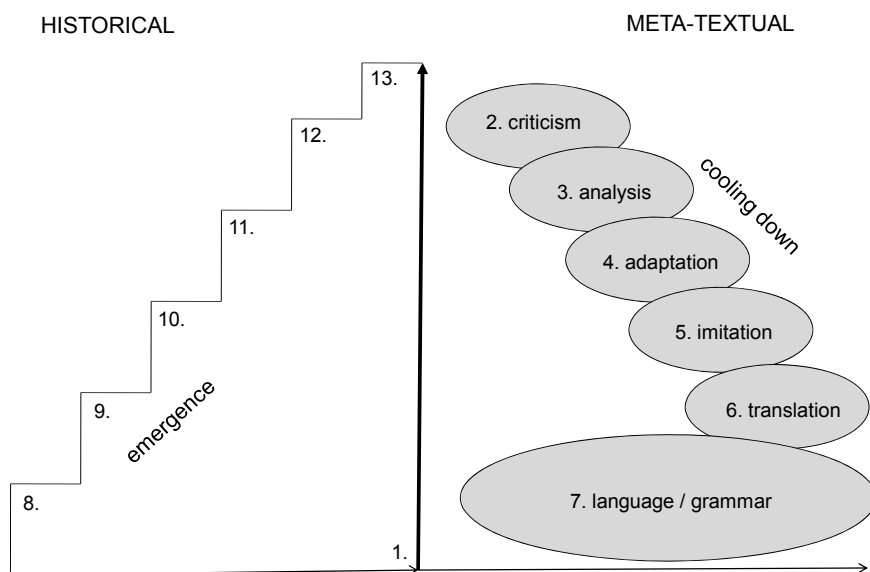


Figure 1. Diagram describing the semiotics of an autogenetic phenomenon in culture.

An artistic text, for example, which is not understood by contemporary readers/recipients, is described here as a spontaneous appearance at a certain moment in time. Its autogenetic nature relies on the fact that it has – or it seems to have – no language. Here it is shown as the vertical arrow in the middle of the diagram (1). For example, in the Bible the idea of linguistic autogenesis in the Book of Genesis was further emphasized in the Gospel according to John, especially in the prologue called the “Hymn to *Logos*”, which introduces the conception that Jesus Christ is the *Logos*: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”

(John 1:1). According to John, the Word, which had participated in the creation, in fact gave birth to itself. It was not created nor was it given birth; it existed before the world was created, and it was realized by being “made flesh” (John 1:14). However, the Word was not understood by people. Christ as *Logos* remained misunderstood. The autogenetic word was born out of itself and was received with confusion. The hymn to *Logos* is obviously an autogenetic motif, but at the same time we can speak of a word being difficult to understand as an expression of an unknown language, which people in their “darkness” (Gr. σκοτία) do not “comprehend” (Gr. κατέλαβεν). Theologically, the idea of people not comprehending *Logos* was soon considered highly problematic, especially as the idea is further emphasized in the Gospel itself.

Returning to the diagram, such unexpected phenomena can easily be found in the historical avant-garde, declaring its innovativeness and its non-belonging to the existing cultural context of its arrival. In Igor Smirnov’s (1986) terminology, such a spontaneously formed artistic text represents catachresis, which ignores the inevitable contact with existing tradition, other contemporary texts, or the culture as a whole. Its reception in the culture could be described as a gradual emergence of a sign system for a previously unknown phenomenon, because it is followed in time by semiospherical activity, by different metatextual processes or practices of culture (circles 2–6 on the diagram; see Fig. 1). The language of the text emerges after the text itself, from the dialogic space of metatextual, semiospherical activity.

Metatexts are attempts to understand unknown phenomena: immediate criticism (circle 2 on the diagram), for example, generating new paraphrases, concepts or fragments of a language. Or analyses (3), typical attempts to apply a specific metalanguage to describe the text in question. Adaptations (4) and imitations (5) are fascinating phenomena, being obviously more predictable than the text reflected upon. Thus, adaptations and imitations are much better understood by representatives of the culture. This could be one of the reasons why imitations usually become bestsellers in literature or blockbusters in the cinema. In this context Lotman (2009: 8–9) often refers to the language of fashion and especially to the question of dandyism in culture: an authentic dandy is not understood by the viewers of his *entrée*, since he is a creator of a new fashion and strives not to be understood at all. To be misunderstood is not a problem for him. However, to be left unnoticed – that is the real tragedy for a dandy. But before a real dandy becomes something that is understood (before an original is transformed into an imitation or before the clothes created by an

innovative fashion maker appear in clothing stores), we can discern a category of something unnoticed that is noticeable. It is a paradoxical formation between an authentic dandy and his imitator. It is a category of oxymoron and catachresis.

For the Russian Futurists, the idea of self-emergence was essential. Paradoxically, in declaring their independent appearance in the history of culture they would turn, for example, to the Novgorod iconographic tradition, which flourished especially during the 13th century. One of the major motifs developed from the Byzantine tradition among the Novgorod school was the motif of *Spas Nerukotvornyj* (Holy Mandylion). The story of Mandylion is essentially about an autogenetic image of Christ. The icon (Fig. 2) is, typically of the Novgorod school of iconography, exceptionally expressive and dynamic in its simplicity – at the same time it is one of the images related to the legend about the emergence of icon painting itself.

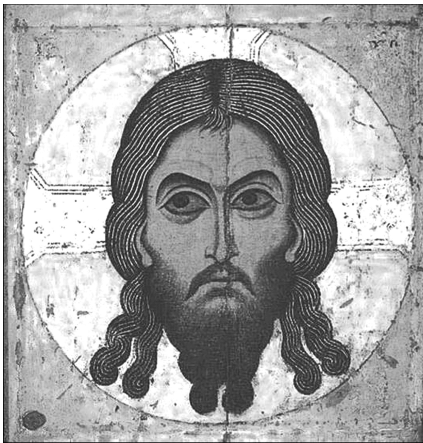


Figure 2. *Spas Nerukotvornyj*.  
Novgorod, 12th c.

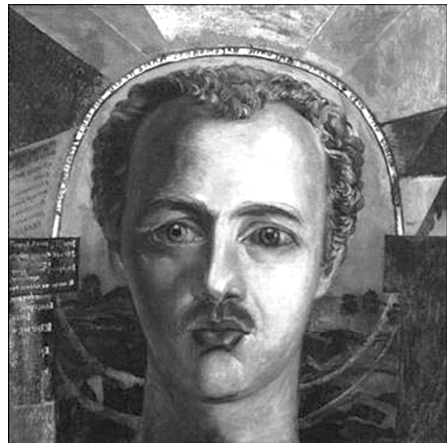


Figure 3. David Burlyuk: *Portret poeta V. Kamenskogo*, 1917.

It is exactly through this primitively simple, yet expressive iconographic tradition of *Spas Nerukotvornyj* that there is a logical way of relating the question of autogenesis to the aesthetics of Russian avant-garde painting. The most striking likeness with this particular tradition can be seen in David Burlyuk's (the so-called "father of Russian Futurism") portrait of the Futurist poet Vasilij Kamenskij (the so-called "mother of Russian Futurism") – a portrait, which is an obvious imitation of *Spas Nerukotvornyj* (Fig. 3).

The influence of traditional icon painting on Russian avant-garde art was enormous. Even Kazimir Malevich called his *Black Square on White Canvas* (1915) "the icon of icons", and the Suprematists generally used icons as their source of inspiration. Analogous intertextual pairs to *Spas* and *Portrait of Kamenskij* are easy to find from the avant-garde art of the early 20th century (Spira 2008: 46, 56). One exciting example from the mid-1920s' avant-garde art is Kliment Red'ko's *Revolt* (*Vosstanie*, 1924), a dynamic painting (Fig. 4) that is filled with contrastive elements and whose relation to icon painting has not, to my knowledge, been previously studied (see, however, Zlydneva 2007: 281). Red'ko's painting was one of the many art works made on the occasion of Lenin's death:



Figure 4. Kliment Red'ko, *Vosstanie*, 1923–25.

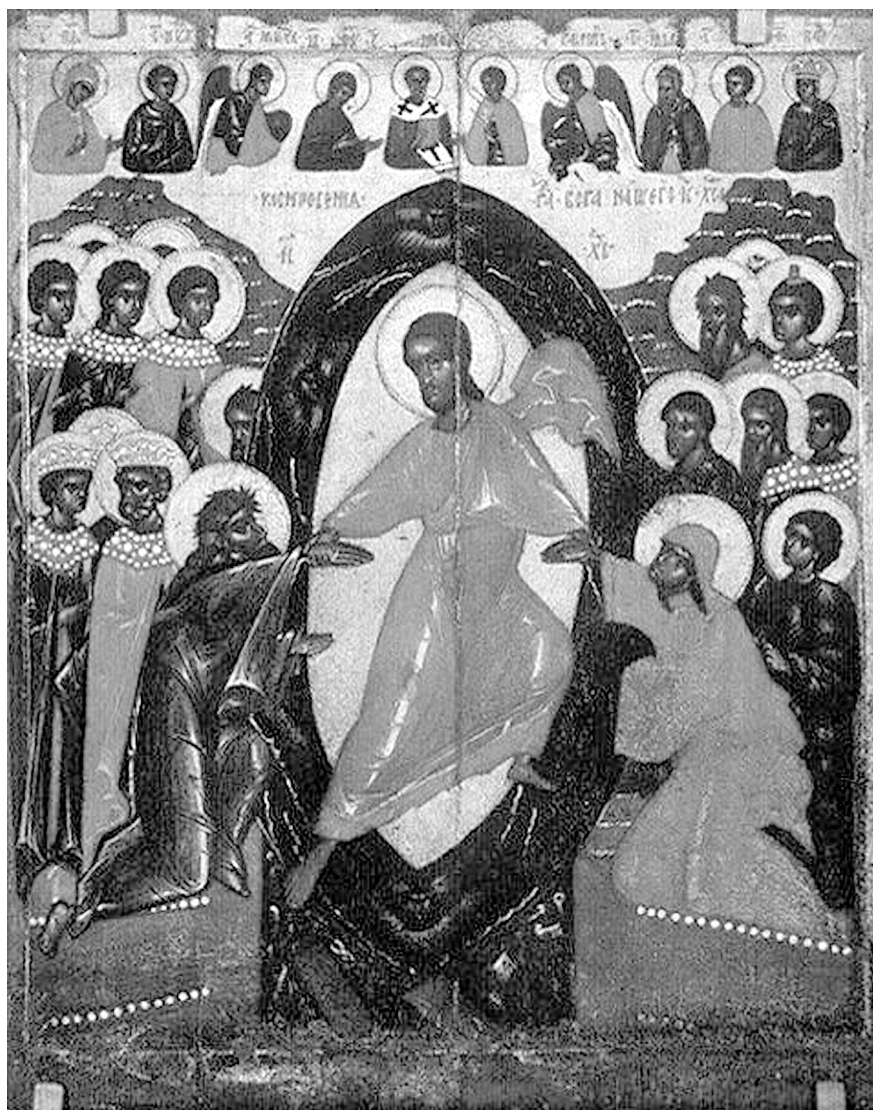


Figure 5. *Soshestvie v ad s izbrannymi svjatyymi*. Pskov, 15th–16th cc.

This dramatic and apocalyptic scene with its strong geometrical forms and hierarchical representations of Bolshevik party officials in Moscow's Red Square calls for comparison with a particular Russian iconographic tradition. First, the Russian title of the painting can be read as a reference to *Vosstanie iz mertvyh* (Resurrection from the dead), which is also known as *Soshestvie v ad*

(Descent into Hell). This tradition had already reached its formal unity in the 10th-century icon painting. Kliment Red'ko, well educated in icons, had by the time the picture was painted left the group of Malevich's Suprematists, who relied heavily on themes and styles derived from traditional Russian icons. He was now active in planning his own ideas of *elektro-organizm* and *lyuminizm*, participated in the work of the Projectionists, and had turned from abstractionism to figurative art (Zlydneva 2007: 278). Considering the contrasting combination of red and black with occasional golden light (a typical combination of the Pskov school of iconography), as well as the political hierarchy and Lenin's posed gesture at the centre of the painting (the dialogue between dynamics and stability), there is all the more reason to juxtapose Red'ko's avant-garde creation with one of the most famous icons from the Pskov school, the extraordinarily dynamic *Descent into Hell* (Fig. 5).

What is common to all four images presented is the theme of resurrection. It is taken as a means of re-contextualization in avant-garde art with its specific cultural and political contexts. This mechanism of auto-communicative self-references, highly typical of Russian culture, could also be characterized as a cultural analogy to self-replicating phenomena.

The Futurist Burlyuk's intertextual treatment of Vasilij Kamenskij's portrait refers not so much to the Christ-likeness of the Futurist poet, but rather to the Russian culture's general autocommunicative need for self-references and to the Futurists' way of declaring themselves a self-emerging spontaneous phenomenon without any possible connection with Filippo Tommasi Marinetti's Italian Futurism, even though Marinetti's manifestos had been published years before the first Russian Futurists' declarations. Apart from rejecting Marinetti and the Italians, the Futurists wanted to reject everything that they had learned from their own culture. In 1912 they signed the famous declaration "A Slap in the Face of the Public Taste". Symptomatically enough, it was entitled "Unexpected".

To the readers of our New First Unexpected.

We alone are the *face of our* Time. Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the word.

The past is too tight. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics.

Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.

He who does not forget his *first* love will not recognize his last. [...]



And if *for the time being* the filthy stigmas of Your “Common sense” and “good taste” are still present in our lines, these same lines *for the first time* already glimmer with the Summer Lightening of the New Coming Beauty of the Self-sufficient (self-centered) Word. (Lawton 1988: 51–52, italics original)

This kind of declaration of autogenetic rootlessness was typical of the Russian avant-garde. The poets, painters, filmmakers and performing artists were eager to declare themselves the newest, the most innovative, independent and impressive artists of their time. Their predecessors, the Symbolists, were rejected just as aggressively as the Western European influences, though both were, inevitably, sources for Russian avant-garde writers. This is one of the most obvious reasons why these artists turned to the idea of autogenesis. Declaring themselves self-created implied the rejection of tradition. Paradoxically, autogenesis in the Russian avant-garde is very often related to the image of Christ, as we can see in the way icons were reproduced, even though it clearly belongs to the rejected world of the old and is an essential part of the past culture’s language. However, the Christian motif of autogenesis is related not only to the *image* of Christ and thus to the paradoxical rejection of previous tradition, but also to the emergence of human language according to the Bible.

Returning to the diagram (Fig. 1), translation (circle 6) is the last metatext before reaching the emergence of language. Of course, even a partial translatability of an “unknown” and incomprehensible phenomenon already proves that it has created a language of its own in culture. However, it is possible to speak of intersemiotic translation in all of the above cases of meta-textual mechanisms.

Thus, according to the diagram, we have reached the moment where unpredictable becomes predictable – text achieves a language (circle 7) that is going to be understood by the recipients, by the culture where the originally autogenetic text had appeared. Only in time, through the emergence of a language and with the help of heterogeneous texts and metatexts that interact with the spontaneously formed text, does the reconstruction of logical chains become possible. This could be described as a historical process of reconstructing steps that lead to the unpredictable event or phenomenon. According to Lotman (2009: 154), these steps turn out to be gradual and predictable, so that eventually the occasional and spontaneous phenomenon becomes the only possible conclusion in this particular situation.

All the above-mentioned metatextual processes represent the act of gradually relating the spontaneous phenomenon to its contemporary culture. They are more stable, structured and predictable in the cultural context of the event. Typical of the semiosphere's activity, these metatextual processes appear in the form of a dialogue between cultural languages. At the same time, these metatextual processes eventually lead to the formation of the *language* of the phenomenon which was originally unknown, since it did not have a language in the culture. So, the result is its structuration. Only this kind of emergence of language makes it possible for contemporaries to reconstruct certain historical causalities, leading to understanding the incomprehensible, predicting the non-predictable, knowing the unknown.

After an autogenetic phenomenon, in all its ultimate unpredictability, has turned into a gradual, predictable process in culture (achieving its own language with the help of metatexts and other languages), it is possible for the recipients to begin, on the one hand, to understand the phenomenon, and thus its historical framing becomes possible. In other words, after the explosion has changed into a more gradual process, people are able to decipher reasons behind it and processes leading to it. This is the case with wider cultural, historical and even political explosions as well as revolutionary phenomena. For contemporaries they are eschatological, but for future generations they are understandable phenomena with their own laws. Suddenly something that had seemingly happened by chance, unexpectedly, appears as the only possible choice. The unpredictability comes to be replaced by predictable regularity.

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### **К семиотическому описанию автогенезиса в культуре**

Статья посвящена понятию автогенезиса и механизму непредсказуемости явлений культуры. Понятие обсуждается в контексте семиотики культуры и теории семиосферы. Примеры приводятся преимущественно из культуры русского авангарда.

### **Kultuuri autogeneesi semiootilisest kirjeldamisest**

Artikkel on pühendatud autogeneesi mõistele ja ennustamatuse mehhanismile kultuuris. Mõistet käsitletakse kultuurisemiootika ja semiosfääri teooria kontekstis. Näitematerjal pärineb peamiselt vene avangardkultuurist.