

Lotman's tradition: Semiotics of culture from a Latin American perspective

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Based on the theory of semiotics of culture developed by Juri Lotman, the *Grupo de Estudios de Retórica* at Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (Córdoba, Argentina) has been working intensely for the past thirteen years in a field that seeks to expand rhetoric, extending its boundaries beyond its traditional conceptualization and enabling description of cultural semiosis. Our research team has taken up Lotman's semiotics in order to support a theory of rhetoric that studies the tropical operation that samples the multiple textualities in different orders of Latin American culture, including art, science, myth and daily life.

Directed by Silvia Barei, Vice-rector of Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and a specialist in literary theory and criticism, the *Grupo de Estudios de Retórica* research team is made up of researchers and professors from different disciplines such as linguistics, translation, communication and literature: Marijó Villa, María Inés Arrizabalaga, Pablo Molina Ahumada, Ana Inés Leunda and Ariel Gómez Ponce.

For over ten years, our team has relied on Lotman's postulates (1990) to study the way in which tropes of analogue (namely metaphors) function in the creation and preservation of cultural information:² it revises the way in which tropes build up networks of meaning and define order and disorder according to the tropes' own ideological baggage in the light of each author-creator's vantage point. This prompted us to focus on the ideas of otherness generated by rhetorical means such as the "immigrant/foreigner", analyzing how hospitality in some cases, and hostility in others, bring up highly complex coexistence policies whose importance is key to understanding Latin American reality.

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² Studies gathered in the collection *Cuestiones Retóricas. Vols. I–VII*. Córdoba: Editorial Facultad de Lenguas. This collection is composed of individual works produced during the last periods of work. In them, we reflect on the current state of what we call "cultural rhetoric", which allows us to think of texts of our society (myth, literature, film, rights, communication, everyday life).

In our current research, we have deemed it necessary to include questions on the human being as a category in which different languages of culture are condensed and which is at the same time projected towards life imaginaries and world models. Specifically, from a cross-disciplinary perspective, we look into the theoretical and epistemological basis of the emerging paradigm of biosemiotics. This field seeks to understand the operation of living systems from a semiotic point of view relying on the works of authors such as Thomas Sebeok (2001), Claus Emmeche *et al.* (2002), Jesper Hoffmeyer (1996). Following these lines of thought, we have found categories that can be useful in the analysis of the kinds of otherness, drawing an analogy between different aspects of the behaviour of living beings, such as mimesis and camouflage, compared to the behaviour of certain animals, for example changes in colour and movement among other aspects. Considering the notion of the human, the ways in which we incorporate the “cultural other” into new spaces making a connection between the one and the other and between the subject and the environment can be considered both an act of creation and one of alienation in which the subject no longer recognizes itself.

One of the team's main concerns is recovering the theory developed by Juri Lotman and relating it to new lines of research that allow us to think about the tension between culture and nature taking into account the articulation of the concepts of semiosphere as well as biosphere. Thus, in the way we textualize nature (the cultural figures that represent it), discursive construction and rhetorical mechanisms allow us to account for nature as an *other* (and a *cultural other* at that) considering diverse logics of equivalences and differences between the human and the animal, deities, heroes and monsters, for instance.

As a way to encourage the spreading and development of semiotics throughout our continent, and particularly in the Spanish-speaking countries, we have recently held an international conference to gather the local contributions to cultural semiotics. This event, where we commemorated the 20th anniversary of the decease of Juri Lotman, took place in September 2013 in the Mediterranean city of Córdoba, in Argentina.

This city, which holds an immense cultural wealth and is key to the understanding of the Jesuitical history in Latin American, was declared UNESCO World Heritage in 2006. Córdoba is home to the first Argentinian university, and one of the oldest ones in America. Founded in 1613, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba is celebrating 400 years of commitment to education. In this context, and more precisely at *Facultad de Lenguas*, its school of languages, we held the conference *Encuentro Internacional Juri Lotman in memoriam* organized by our research team.

The event took place on September 19–20, 2013 and comprised six sessions of presentations, five plenary sessions, and a roundtable for discussions specially set up

for our students. In the framework of this latter activity, different contributions from the Latin American reading of Juri Lotman's semiotics were revised, discussed and analysed. We enjoyed the presence of both graduate and undergraduate students as well as general public interested in Juri Lotman's theory. The participants actively took part in the debates and were captivated by the concepts brought into discussion.

In general terms, the topics that were dealt with are related to the concepts of semiosphere, boundary, continuum, memory, Lotman's view on rhetoric, mythology, animal behaviour, history, and postulates on literary, scientific, theatrical and cinematographic texts, among others. These research lines were developed by the semiotician over several decades of work in the search for a new theory in order to think about culture. The wide variety of phenomena studied by Lotman gave evidence of the major impact that his semiotic theory has had on a large number of studies in South America. Over those two days, works that ranged from literature to street performances were read from his semiotic perspective. Those who participated in the event made contributions that blended their personal interests and research projects with some of the many aspects that Juri Lotman described in connection with the dynamic operation of cultures.

The keynote speech was presented by Silvia Barei, whose opening lines "*Desde esta frontera*" [From this boundary] led towards the impact Lotman's theory has had in our country and its contribution as a way of thinking about cultures from a semiotic perspective. This semiotic line is defined as a "critique of boundaries", in which the relevance of the concept of responsibility and the link to the ecosemiotic and biosemiotic fields responds to the ways of relating with other cultures and with the natural environment.

Next, the special guest from the University of Tartu Kalevi Kull delivered a lecture titled "Juri Lotman's legacy in the modelling of semiosis", in which he explored general principles deriving from Lotman's formulations that characterize the core aspects of semiosis, a line combining semiotics of culture and biosemiotics which, in the past few years, has started to forcefully emerge in Latin America.

Kalevi Kull's visit implied a deeply relevant encounter between scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, scholars who study the perspectives that the University of Tartu has been developing for decades. The debate held after the conference allowed the participants to engage in an enriching exchange and to deepen the concept of semiosis as an understanding of life.

In the plenary sessions that took place during both days, several national specialists presented their works. Adriana Boria (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba) was concerned with Lotman's cross-disciplinary outlook in relation to studies on gender; Zulma Palermo (Universidad Nacional de Salta) spoke on the notion of boundary as a decentralization policy; Cecilia Grana (Università degli Studi di Verona) addressed the link between poetic text and mythical text; and, through video

conferencing from Mexico, Katya Mandoki (Universidad Autónoma de México) reflected upon the construction of the semiosphere and its close relationship with the *umwelt* postulated by Uexküll. Apart from these authorities, the next generation of Lotman scholars was represented in a debate in which students from *Facultad de Lenguas* discussed the notion of semiosphere among such concepts as boundary, centre and periphery, translating filter and dynamism in order to ground the theory on certain phenomena typical in Córdoba: Argentinian comics, urban legends, street performances, graffiti, and architectural designs. Additionally, our students contributed with posters which applied Lotman's theory in different ways.

As regards the closing ceremony, a final talk was delivered by two of the main specialists in semiotics in Argentina (both from Universidad Nacional de Córdoba), Pampa Arán (Professor Emeritus and Alternate Director of the Doctorate in Semiotics of Universidad Nacional de Córdoba), who concentrated on science, history and art in Lotman's last production, and José Amícola (Universidad Nacional de La Plata), who focused on the concepts of "beginning" and "end" as modelling systems.

As regards the Grupo de Estudios de Retórica research team, we took part in a series of conferences in which we revisited Lotman to analyse particular problems in specific phenomena within contemporary culture. Thus, Ana Leunda worked on boundary and culture in Latin American conquest narratives; Pablo Molina Ahumada dealt with urban boundaries and myth in the figure of the literary hero; Marijó Villa spoke about the concept of text and auditorium in Argentinian epic cinema; María Inés Arrizabalaga presented the topic of intersemiotic translation in the fantasy genre, and Ariel Gómez Ponce delved into Lotman's zoosemiotic contributions in order to think about the tension between the human and the animal. Moreover, we presented our latest publications: the first volumes of a collection that seeks to link cultural semiotics and biosemiotics, *Cultura y formas de la vida. Vols. I and II*, (Barei, Gómez Ponce 2013; Barei, Leunda 2013) and a collection of translations *Biosemiótica / Ecosemiótica / Biorretórica*, which encompasses texts on biosemiotics, ecosemiotics and biorhetoric translated into Spanish for the first time (Arrizabalaga *et al.* 2013). Among the authors of this selection, we can mention Kalevi Kull, Mihhail Lotman, Marcel Danesi and Stephen Pain. These publications are the result of years of work and study and aim at spreading these groundbreaking lines of research throughout the Spanish-speaking countries.

This fulfilling event made it possible to share multiple views and interpretations of studies pioneered by Juri Lotman over fifty years ago. Latin America, and Argentina in particular, is keenly involved in the way of thinking of the constitution of the human being from a cultural theory that takes into account its history, its creations, and its memory as characteristic traits of humanity and as an indispensable part of cultural dynamism. Within the field of semiotics, Lotman offers solutions to the

interpretation of human culture and knowledge production, to the consideration and constitution of the Other, and to thinking about a way of building identity from the peripheries and boundaries. Lotman's contributions are endless and they come to life and are enriching every time they are reread and discussed. We strongly believe this event held right "at the end of the world" has accounted for it.

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