

Semiotics of “the fourth generation” – an unfinished project?

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Review of *W kręgu metody semiotycznej* [*In the Circle of the Semiotic Method*],
by Władysław Panas. Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu
Lubelskiego, 1991.

In 1991, a book version of the doctoral dissertation written by Władysław Panas (1947–2005), a Polish literary scholar, appeared under the imprint of a university publishing house from Lublin – a big city in Eastern Poland. Its title in its entirety – *In the circle of the semiotic method* – stayed within the stream of research proposed by Juri Lotman and his associates. Due to objective circumstances, however, the publication's reception did not measure up to its significance, and except for the recognition from specialists interested in the subject raised in the book, a further, detailed discussion of the theses presented therein remained missing. It happened so for a number of reasons. First of all, even at the time of it being published, Panas' book was slightly belated. Even the dates of coming into existence of the studies making up this volume (they were written in the years 1977–1983) prove it. Another testimony is the author's introduction expounding his theory, which refers directly to situations in semiotic research from the beginning of the 1980s. Naturally, one might argue that ten years is not a long period of time in research. This, however, is a statement only partially true. For if we take into consideration the unique situation of Polish research at that time (by that I mean its exceptional susceptibility to any sort of novelties coming in from the West which was violently opening up for scholars, especially as regards different kinds of post-structuralist inspirations) as well as an unusually dynamic development of semiotics (though not in Poland), it will turn out that it was long enough a period in order for the most important research postulates of the Lublin scholar to remain without a major influence on the overall shape of the scholarly discipline that he was involved in. It is the truth that when the book

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in question appeared in print, the earlier great interest in the works of Lotman and other researchers of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics was slowly disappearing². The extremely prosaic fact that Panas' dissertation came out in an edition of not too many copies for those days was certainly not an unimportant matter; also, its further distribution left a lot to be desired. And thus, the publication which did not rely solely on reporting on other researchers' findings but also had well-founded ambitions to set new directions in studying products of culture (literary texts above all) did not wholly fulfil the role it was intended for.

Panas' initial idea was quite obvious and ambitious at the same time. For his intention was to create a full monograph of the semiotic school connected with the centre in Tartu, and in particular to get involved in a many-sided and in-depth presentation of Lotman's thought. The author promptly came across difficulties, though, which to a large extent made it impossible for him to achieve the intended research aims. Among them were objective problems with free access to source texts published outside Poland and lack of long-lasting, direct contact with the most important scholars who determined the intellectual specificity of the described scholarly environment. The researcher was trying to fill that gap to a certain extent during his scholarship stay in Moscow at the end of 1976, where he personally encountered Lotman and other representatives of the Tartu–Moscow School. One of the direct effects of that visit was the later interesting correspondence. However, there was another circumstance that was of fundamental significance. It was the lack of real time distance from the described facts. While Panas was writing his dissertation, Lotman and Uspenskij's semiotic school was still in full bloom, other works appeared as part of it and – which may be the most significant factor – as the paradigm itself also evolved in a natural way, sometimes fundamental propositions of conceptions presented earlier underwent a transformation.

All that made it difficult or impossible to make a fully responsible attempt at presenting a moderately complete and systematic perspective which is intended by every monograph effort³. Therefore the Polish scholar finally took a view that was different from the original one, referring to the project of “operational history” (*l'histoire opérationnelle*) proposed by Fernand Braudel (1969). The conception assumes, to put it simply, that in case of a lack of time distance typical of historical sciences, we are dealing with a situation in which the description as it were accompanies the presented reality, becoming part of its course, and it does so independently of the direct attitude towards the subject of its consideration (that is, in extreme cases it refers to affirmation or questioning). It means that every kind of

² On the Polish reception of the Tartu–Moscow School see Faryno 2000.

³ The first Polish monograph on the Tartu–Moscow School appeared much later (Żyłko 2009).

statement – also statements made on the metatextual level – does not only present the discourse, but at the same time also modifies it (completing or creatively modifying it), thereby not remaining indifferent to the studied material. An inevitable part of such an approach is its fragmentary nature. The final description is not definite, but instead it is well able to capture the specificity of a certain form at a certain time as well as the dynamics of its internal transformation. It seems that accepting such a conception turned out to be unusually illuminating; at the same time it enabled the researcher from within the centre of the semiotic discourse to arrive at interesting theses concerning its potential further evolution.

All the studies collected in the book can be easily divided into three fundamental parts: the metacritical, the historical and the interpretational one. Two extensive studies concerning the question fundamental to the whole of humanistic thought – that is, the question of interpretation, its determinants, assumptions and theory – should be grouped into the metacritical category. Panas’ approach can be regarded as holistic for he is interested in the exegesis of theoretical and critical discourses, as well as the interpretation of individual cultural facts. The researcher looks at these issues from the point of view of structural semiotics, trying to find “the golden mean” between analytical procedures and hypotheses of the concealed whole – as the desirable results of a hermeneutic process were defined by the outstanding Polish literary scholar Janusz Sławiński (2006). While the structuralist approach developed some descriptive tools, which help adequately present the analysed object, the semiotic approach becomes a kind of a keystone of an intellectual operation designed in this way and makes it possible to capture the semantic properties of the structure. Obviously, the original incompatibility of both ways of thinking coupled here causes a lot of specific problems. Panas, however, is fully aware of these, and voices his awareness in his detailed deliberations.

The part that I refer to as the “historical” one contains two studies dedicated to the birth and formation of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics. However, it is not history as traditionally understood. What we are really dealing with in case of both of writings is an attempt at a proper analysis of intellectual processes, which more or less directly led to the development of a certain intellectual group on the basis of which Lotman’s and his circle’s propositions could arise in later years.⁴ These deliberations can be regarded as an application of the methodological assumptions made earlier. They are also a direct test of their usefulness in the difficult process of discovering the truth, ideological and rhetorical aspects of a scientific discourse. What is particularly interesting in this context is the deliberations concerning the works of Vladimir Propp whose conceptions are treated by the Polish scholar as a final shape of formalism, as well as a turning point in the history of humanistic thought – and

⁴ On this topic see also Boris Uspenskij 1987.

Г-ну Владиславу

П а н а с у

Уважаемый коллега!

Обращаюсь к Вашему великодушию, ибо ничто другое не может извинить такого позднего с моей стороны ответа на Ваше письмо от 10 марта 1978 г. Конечно, дело в моей безобразной душевной лени, которая притворяется загруженностью делами и успокаивает свою совесть ссылками на болезни. Но есть и одна уважительная причина: я решительно не знаю, что отвечать на Ваше письмо. Я могу попытаться рассказать Вам о своих нынешних научных интересах, но решительно отказываюсь характеризовать себя как человека. Единственное, что я могу по этому поводу сказать, что я совсем не таков, каким хотел бы быть, прежде это доставляло мне страдания. Не надеюсь уже избавиться от своих недостатков /мне уже 56 лет/, я стараюсь, по крайней мере, о них не забывать.

Итак, перейдем к научным проблемам. Мыслью, которая меня в последнее время наиболее занимает, является изоморфизм между индивидуальным сознанием отдельного человека и коллективным интеллектом /культурой/. Я полагаю, что основной ячейкой всякого мыслящего устройства является асимметрия — соединение минимально двух различных и разноустроенных мыслительных механизмов. Это объясняет и асимметрию /функциональную/ больших полушарий человеческого мозга, и полиглотизм культуры. Это же объясняет, почему человеку необходим для мыслительного процесса другой человек, и то, что ценность другого именно в том, что он другой, хотя потребность коммуникации заставляет нас все время стремиться уподобить его моему "я" или уподобиться ему. Процесс нивелировки и процесс расподобления, роста разницы, составляют две взаимодействующие силы любого мыслящего устройства;

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подавление любой из этих функций и гипертрофия другой – психическая или социо-культурная болезнь и порождает кризисные явления. В связи с этим усложненность во взаимопонимании есть зло лишь с позиции коммуникативности, но есть и благо как свидетельство возрастания различий между "я" и "он" и, следовательно, возрастания ценности для них коммуникативного акта /чем коммуникативный акт труднее, чем мое "я" неперебиваемее на твое "ты", тем сильнее *elan* к коммуникации и выше ценность этого, почти невозможного, акта. Такой подход, с одной стороны, выделяет проблемы перевода / проблемы неперебиваемости, циркуляции текстов между взаимнонеперебиваемыми языками/ культуры /экранизации романов, иллюстрации, соотношения ^{е)} устной и письменной речи, мимики и графики и проч./ . С другой, возникает вопрос о минимальной ячейке /сознания, мыслящего устройства, культурн, текста – текст представляется мыслящим устройством/. Это обращает внимание на метафору, риторику / я сейчас написал довольно большую работу о риторике/, на любые "неравномерные" тексты, тексты, спаянные из двух половин, между которыми существует отношение не адекватного перевода, а конвенциональной эквивалентности.

Наконец возникает еще один вопрос: для того, чтобы мыслящая машина /напр., человек или культура/ начала работать, нужно, чтобы вне ее мысль уже была. Например, стихотворение или картина выделяют новые мысли, но для этого нужен мыслящий, который читает или смотрит. Мысль требует пресуществования мысли. Это очевидно, если наблюдать детей: их мысль "включается" взрослыми. Это, с одной стороны, показывает ложность машинобязности: машины, как домашние животные, не вытеснят нас, а включатся в общий хоровод мышления. С другой, это ставит под вопрос возможность эволюционного происхождения мысли.

Вот некоторые вопросы теории, которые меня занимают. Но ^{так} как

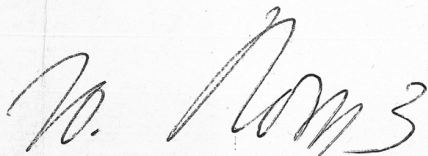
каждый человек имеет право на отдых, то я еще занимаюсь историко-культурными проблемами, различными специальными вопросами русской культуры XVIII в., комментирую некоторые тексты, пишу для школьников биографии старых поэтов.

Вот, кажется, коротко все. Пусть мне будет извинением подробность этого письма – никогда не пишу так много.

Поздравляю Вас с радостным событием – *валетис разам!*

С уважением

Ваш



СССР, Эстония, 202400

Тарту, Турденко ул., д.63, кв.6,

Ю.М.Лотману

that is by no means due to the significance of Propp’s discoveries as concerns breaking down the plot structure into its constituents, but due to an entirely unconscious opening of the discourse to thought that is strictly semiotic, which makes a vital complement to the brilliant deliberations of the Russian ethnologist.

And last but not least, there are the last two of the texts that make up the discussed book. What they have in common is the interpretational approach, although they refer to completely different issues. The first one proposes a detailed analysis of the matter of subjectivity in semiotic thinking. Coming from the theory of fascination formulated by Yuri Knorozov, through its creative elaboration in the works of Lotman who is writing about the issue of self-communication, up to the author’s proposition of understanding the subject as a sign reality revealing itself in an internal tension between information and fascination – these are the next stages of the Polish scholar’s line of reasoning. The second text, however, is an analysis of some semiotic aspects of Pavel Florenski’s writings. Panas focuses his attention on the conception of art as iconostasis, making references to earlier deliberations by constantly emphasizing the distinct tension between information and fascination that is present in Florenski’s conceptions – a tension that is making a difference, a foundation of the whole semiotics.

Undoubtedly, it is worth asking an additional question about the common denominator of the studies making up the book. What do all the texts mentioned so far have in common, of course apart from their constant and direct references to the conceptions that were born as part of the Tartu–Moscow semioticians’ environment? Here we come to what is probably the most interesting aspect of Panas’ deliberations. According to consciously assumed principles of “operational history”, the Polish researcher’s book does not only describe a certain historical-discursive reality, but also has an ambition to establish new fields of interest: it attempts to propose an original viewpoint and to develop scientific tools required for it. Therefore, already in the introduction, the author writes about semiotics of “the fourth generation”, which was initially indicated in some speeches by Vladimir Toporov and Roland Barthes. The characteristic features of the new approach are to be, firstly, its anthropological attitude, and, secondly, a deliberate “escape from systematicity”. Admittedly, in those times and against the backdrop of semiotics with very clear structuralist underpinnings (since such was the natural research environment in which the scholar’s work was coming into existence), such postulates had to sound quite revolutionary. So how were they supposed to be realized in further research practice? The answer that Panas brings us is partial and opens up a new area for discussion rather than resolving anything categorically. When we look carefully at the successive studies, we can come to the conclusion that for Panas the key concept is

difference, and in this sense his way of thinking is semiotic through and through. In one of his letters to Lotman he wrote:

Here, I would like to stress that it was the article “The phenomenon of culture” that left the strongest impression on me. A deep piece and – simply – wise. Semiotics is often accused of ignoring individual occurrences, precisely “phenomena”; it is claimed that its methods are only fit for studying a series of occurrences, typical ones, that it studies patterns, things that are invariable and the like. And in fact, in your article I can see an attempt to work out the semiotics of “the phenomenon”, “the new”, the thing that is individual. In your writing there are terms such as “phenomenon”, “personality” [личность], “assessment”, “choice”, the notion of “difference”, “dissimilarity” appear as principles of culture, there is Bakhtin’s innovative perspective on “the other” – all that creates a vision of new possibilities and new areas for semiotic research.

And then:

For me, the biggest trouble is, when I’m trying to describe all that you have written since 1963, to achieve a Difference. My whole work about your conceptions is an attempt to work out a difference, an attempt to say “the new”.

The difference that the researcher is seeking is therefore being realized in two ways. Firstly, through a comparison of structure with a self-contained subject (an individual phenomenon) – hence, for instance, the postulates of anthropological inclination. At the same time, it should be clearly emphasized that they are formulated exclusively within the area of semiotics. It means that the researcher does not care about strengthening or emphasizing the difference between the sphere of individuality and the province of systematicity, but on the contrary, he searches for a possibility of self-realization of subject phenomena within the consolidated sign structures. That is why he refers to, with full conviction, Knorozov’s theory of fascination, which does not have a destructive character, but at the same time it carries enormous individualizing potential.

Secondly, the difference is also an effect of the interpretational operation, which produces a text about a text, a word about a word, a sign about a sign. Every time, therefore, it is a meeting of two discourses, but also two subjects: the studying one and the one being studied. It is not a coincidence that in Panas’ texts the surname of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas keeps coming back repeatedly in this context. Thus, the achieved difference is a guarantee of sense but at the same time becomes a certain sign of subjectivity. And this is also an extremely important theme in the Polish researcher’s book. When one is reading the subsequent dissertations, it is indeed difficult not to notice that it is not a classic scientific discourse,

Тарту, 11 февраля 1979

Глубокоуважаемый коллега!

Сердечно благодарю Вас за письмо от 22 декабря 1978, которое я прочитал с большим интересом. Я совершенно согласен с Вами, что личность ученого не только отражается в его писаниях, но и является своеобразным кодом для их понимания. Дело здесь, как мне кажется, в том, что, когда мы имеем дело с системами большой сложности, то описания их средствами формального языка / в принципе, конечно, возможное / превращается в дело исключительно громоздкое. При наличии у пишущего и читающего общей культурной памяти, общих навыков мышления и, следовательно, сходного типа интуиции это делается ненужным. Кроме того, существует еще один фактор: доверие. Современная наука оперирует весьма сложными построениями и обильными фактами. Это затрудняет реализацию основного научного постулата: повторяемости эксперимента и проверяемости выводов. В этих случаях знание личности ученого может, в какой-то мере, компенсировать эту трудность. Однако у доверия есть еще одна грань. То доверие, о котором я говорил выше последует за пониманием текста. Однако необходимо доверие, которое предшествовало бы получению и пониманию текста, ибо без доверия общение невозможно. При устном общении мы обращаемся к экстратекстовой паралингвистике – интонации, мимике, при письменном такую экстратекстовую роль играет личность отправителя.

Мне, например, легче всего понимать тексты авторов, которых я знаю лично

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и интонацию которых я могу восстановить. Если же я не знаю автора, то мне необходимо его сконструировать. Если же текст настолько безличен, что сконструировать автора не удается, то мне читать его невыразимо трудно и скучно, а к тому же я, часто убеждаюсь в его научной бесплодности.

Мне показались весьма интересными выделенные Вами три функции научного текста. Особенно новым мне кажется поставленный Вами вопрос о научной риторике. Как только появятся мои статьи по риторике, я не замедлю прислать Вам оттиски их.

Сердечно желаю Вам всего самого лучшего



PS.

Псылаю Вам некоторые оттиски моих статей, которых у Вас, вероятно, нет.

that emotions creep into the deliberations, that it is not only analyses and concepts that matter but also characters hidden behind them are of equally great significance, either Bakhtin, Florensky or Lotman. It is an element typical of Panas' way (style) of thinking, but one might also fairly say that it is one of the essential features of the whole project.

I started with the statement that the concepts presented in the book *In the circle of the semiotic method* have never been verified in a detailed and critical way. It happened so due to a combination of all sorts of circumstances. It is worth, however, to ask oneself whether the issues that Panas wrote about are still unreal, thus far unsolved problems of semiotics? Has the experience of the project of semiotics of "the fourth generation" been really assimilated and is it totally uninspiring for us today? It is difficult to answer the questions unequivocally, yet, it is worth asking them again today.

Appendix

The text is supplemented with two, hitherto unpublished letters from Lotman to Panas from 1978 and 1979 (the only ones that survived in the home archive of the latter).⁵ The whole correspondence was an interesting evidence of thought sharing at the time when the book was being written, as well as a sign of its times – truly exceptional in this context is Lotman's handwritten note referring directly to the election of Pope John Paul II.

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⁵ See also the Polish publication about this correspondence in Panas 2013.