

Critique of ideology or/and analysis of culture? Barthes and Lotman on secondary semiotic systems

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Abstract. The article compares Roland Barthes's and Juri Lotman's notions of 'second-order semiological systems' [*systemes sémiologique seconds*] and 'secondary modelling systems' [*вторичные моделирующие системы*]. It investigates the shared presuppositions of the two theories and their important divergences from each other, explaining them in terms of the opposite strategic roles that the notions of 'ideology' and 'culture' play in the work of Barthes and Lotman, respectively. The immersion of secondary modelling systems in culture as a "system of systems" characterized by internal heterogeneity, allows Lotman to evidence their positive creative potential: the result of the tensions arising from cultural systemic plurality and heterogeneity may coincide with the emergence of new, unpredictable meanings in translation. The context of Barthes's second-order semiological systems is instead provided by highly homogeneous ideological frames that appropriate the signs of the first-order system and make them into forms for significations which confirm, reproduce and transmit previously existing information generated by hegemonic social and cultural discourses. The article shows how these differences resurface and, partially, fade away in the theories of the text that Barthes and Lotman elaborated in the 1970s. The discussion is concluded by some remarks on the possible topicality of Barthes's and Lotman's approaches for contemporary semiotics and the humanities in general.

Keywords: Barthes; Lotman; second-order semiological systems; secondary modelling systems; culture; ideology; text

From time to time the history of ideas offers surprising examples of synchronization in the thematic focus and research development of thinkers between whom there is no direct contact. For some this represents clear evidence of a *Zeitgeist*, while for others it is simply a matter of coincidence. Roland Barthes's and Juri Lotman's work from the 1960s on the foundations of semiotics represents a particularly intriguing case

of intellectual synchronization. Although some of Lotman's texts started to circulate in French translation in the journal *Tel Quel* as early as 1968, the Parisian thinker never refers in his work to the Tartu scholar. Considering that Julia Kristeva, the other leading figure of French semiology at that time, was, in contrast, deeply interested in Lotman's ideas and actively advocated and mediated them to the Parisian intellectual circles,¹ Barthes's silence may even be interpreted as an explicit lack of interest or as an index of the distance between the two theoreticians. A shift of attention from Paris to Tartu seems to confirm the reciprocity of this attitude: Lotman rarely mentions Barthes in his research work and the judgement he expresses on the French semiotician in a couple of private letters is far from favourable. However, in an overview of the international development of semiotics written in 1968, Lotman describes Barthes's seminal analyses of mode and mass culture (*Mythologies*) as a "very interesting" application of the structuralist method to the study of everyday life in France. He gives more general praise to French semioticians for they share the Soviet scholars' attention to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the discipline *vis-à-vis* the empirical orientation of the American semiotics at the time.² Yet Lotman (1968: 582–584) also detects a certain carelessness and superficiality in the application of semiotic methods to literary analysis by French scholars. What we cannot find either in this overview nor anywhere else in Lotman's work is a real theoretical engagement with the new conceptual tools that Barthes bestowed to the rising science of semiotics.

All this appears particularly puzzling when we consider the striking similarities in some of the concepts that come to occupy a central position in the attempts by Lotman – and more generally the Tartu-Moscow School – and Barthes to lay down the bases of semiology/semiotics as the new general science of sign systems prefigured by Ferdinand de Saussure. First of all, pursuing the task proposed by Saussure yet left unachieved in his work, Barthes and Lotman focus their attention on the relations between natural language and other sign systems. Secondly, and most importantly, the study of these relations brings them to a similar general typology of sign systems that distinguishes language as a "primary system" from what Barthes calls "second-order semiological systems" [*systemes sémiologique seconds*] and Lotman "secondary modelling systems" [*вторичные моделирующие системы*]. This is something completely new and unknown to Saussure, particularly if we consider that this is not just one idea among others, but the central key concept in both Barthes's semiology and Lotman's semiotics. In *Elements of Semiology* (1964) Barthes thus describes semiology as that part of linguistics which takes as an object the "great signifying

¹ See e.g. Kristeva 1969. Kristeva has recently been criticized for her tendentious misunderstanding of Lotman's ideas (Landolt 2012). This certainly did not hinder the reception of Lotman in France, but rather facilitated it.

² In his overview Lotman praises for instance Barthes' *Elements of Semiotics*.

units of discourse”, “a second-order language”, whose units are no longer monemes or phonemes, but “larger fragments of discourse referring to objects and episodes whose meaning underlies language, but can never exist independently of it” (Barthes 2010[1964]: 11).³ As for the “secondary modelling systems” of the Tartu-Moscow school, it has even been claimed that they were nothing other than a synonym *tout court* for semiotics, which was considered a suspicious notion in the Soviet Union in the 1960s (Uspenskij 1995: 106–107). Thus, in the same year that Barthes published his *Elements of Semiology*, the first Summer School on Secondary Modelling Systems (not ‘Semiotics’) took place in the small Southern-Estonian village of Kääriku.

Last, but not least, Barthes and Lotman also share the extension of the notion of ‘language’ to include not only the primary, but also the secondary systems. Barthes (1991: 109) refers to this extension in *Mythologies* as “a generic way of conceiving language” that he defines as “any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual”.⁴ While in the classic structuralist approach this constitutes the premise for the consequent extension of the (Saussurean) linguistic method from the study of natural languages to the study of all other sign systems/languages, Tartu-Moscow scholars stress already in 1965, in their first collective volume, the possible limits that a method elaborated exclusively on the basis of evidence from natural languages may encounter in the attempt to explain secondary systems whose specificity has not yet been investigated, but needs to be:

[...] one of the fundamental issues in the investigation of secondary modelling systems is the determination of their relationship with linguistic structures. This is why it is important to explain what we mean by the notion of ‘linguistic structure’. It is undisputable that every sign system (secondary systems included) can be considered as a language. [...] A consequence of this is the conviction that any system of signs can be, in principle, investigated with linguistic methods, and the special role of contemporary linguistics as a methodological discipline. However, from “linguistic methods” in this broad sense, we must distinguish those scientific principles which come from the habit of dealing with natural languages – which are a particular kind of linguistic system. It appears that it is taking this path that makes the search for the *peculiarity* [*своеобразие*] of secondary modelling systems and the *means of studying them* [*способы их изучения*] possible. (Lotman 1965: 6; my translation, D. M.)⁵

³ Barthes thus coins the term ‘trans-linguistics’ (where the prefix ‘trans-’ denotes the passage to the second-order) as a synonym of ‘semiology’.

⁴ Barthes stresses in this respect that semiology will treat words and images in the same way, that is, as signs (Barthes 1957: 188).

⁵ “[...] одним из основных вопросов изучения вторичных моделирующих систем является определение их отношения к языковым структурам. При этом необходимо оговорить содержание, которое мы вкладываем в понятие «языковая структура».

This represents an important deviation (shared, even if not so explicitly, by Barthes) from Saussure's project for a science of semiology. While Saussure (2000: 17) stressed that "[i]f one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind", Lotman (and Barthes) are rather interested in determining how some of these "other systems", or "secondary systems" differ from natural language as the primary system.

Summing up these introductory remarks, we can say that Barthes's and Lotman's theories share: (1) a division of semiotic systems into primary and secondary ones; (2) the understanding of secondary systems as "languages" of a specific kind; and (3) the centrality of the notion of the secondary system and its study for the advancement of the new science of semiology/semiotics.

However, the two thinkers importantly diverge in the way they come to understand the "peculiarity" of secondary systems in relation to primary ones and, consequently, the "means of their study". In what follows I will compare Barthes's and Lotman's understanding of secondary systems, investigating the most important divergences in the two theories and explaining them in terms of the opposite strategic roles that the notions of 'ideology' and of 'culture' play in the work of Barthes and Lotman respectively. Further I will show how these differences resurface and, partially, fade away in their theories of the text. This discussion will allow me to draw some conclusions on the relevance of Barthes's and Lotman's approaches for contemporary semiotics and, possibly, the humanities in general.

First- and second-order semiological systems: Barthes

The concept of the 'second-order semiological system' was first introduced by Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957), where it occupies the most fundamental position in the definition of the myth, which constitutes the topic of the entire book. Though the myth shares with any other semiological system the Saussurean "tri-dimensional scheme" of the signifier, the signified and the sign, the latter being no more than the correlation which unites the first two, the specificity of the myth lies for Barthes (1991[1957]: 113) precisely in its "secondness":

Бесспорно, что всякая знаковая система (в том числе и вторичная) может рассматриваться как особого рода язык. [...] Отсюда вытекает убеждение, что любая знаковая система в принципе может изучаться лингвистическими методами, а также особая роль современного языкознания как методологической дисциплины. Однако от «лингвистических методов» в этом, широком, смысле следует отличать те научные принципы, которые подсказаны привычкой оперировать естественными языками – особой, частной разновидностью, языковых систем. Видимо, на этом пути возможны поиски своеобразия вторичных моделирующих систем и способов их изучения."

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.

The metaphorical spatialization of the relations between the first and second semiological systems presented by Barthes in the famous scheme reproduced here in Figure 1 evidences the first paradoxical issue: although the second-order system is semiologically “construed” [*sédifie*] upon the primary system that it presupposes, from an ideological point of view the secondary system subjugates, as we will see, the primary one, replacing it as the surreptitious starting point (natural basis) of the semiological chain as a whole.

<i>1. signifier</i>	<i>2. signified</i>	
<i>3. sign</i>		(langue)
I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED	
III. SIGN		(myth)

Figure 1. The semiological scheme of myth in Barthes’s *Mythologies*.

Before investigating this crucial aspect of Barthes’s theory, we must consider the development of the notion of the second-order semiological system in *Elements of Semiology* where it occupies the central position in the definition of the notion of connotation. Connotation is indeed the means by which Barthes translates the definition of myth quoted above into the more general and abstract terms of his new theory of semiology:

[...] connotation, that is, the development of a system of second-order meanings, which are so to speak parasitic on the language proper. This second-order system is also a “language”. (Barthes 2010[1964]: 30)⁶

⁶ There are some important differences between the theory of myth and that of connotation, which have to do with Barthes’s understanding of metalanguage. Whereas in *Mythologies* he describes the relation between the primary language and myth as also being a relation between an object-language and a meta-language (Barthes 1957: 188), in *Elements of Semiology* he distinguishes between two different ways of deriving the second system from the first: connotation and metalanguage (Barthes 2010[1964]: 89–94). In so far as the issue of metalanguage is not relevant for my argument, I will not pursue this line of analysis in what

The parasitic relationship used here to characterize the development of the second-order system from the first is a good illustration of the paradox mentioned above: the parasite needs its host, but may end up suffocating it. If we take a look at Barthes's metaphorical spatialization of connotation (see Figure 2), it is interesting to observe that the scheme reproduces the one suggested for myth (see Figure 1)⁷, but reverses the positions of the first-order and the second-order systems, bringing to the fore the idea of “construction upon” and “development from” and, at the same time, the hierarchical relation between the two systems – what is above comes to occupy the most preeminent position by covering and hiding what lies underneath it.⁸

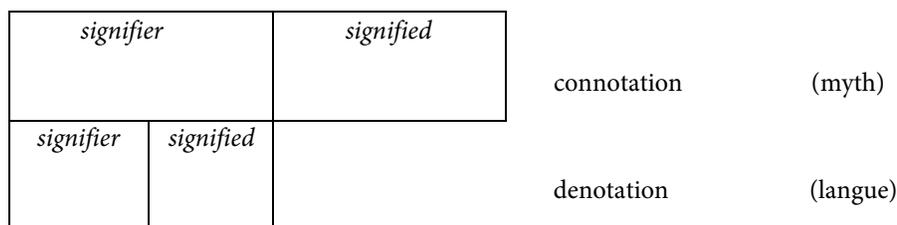


Figure 2. The semiological scheme of connotation in Barthes's *Elements*.

This is of paramount importance in understanding the peculiarity of second-order semiological systems and their difference from (natural) language in Barthes.

The passage to the ‘second-order’ provokes a decrease in the differential and arbitrary nature of the ‘first-order’ linguistic sign, as defined by Saussure. In *Elements*, Barthes (2010[1964]: 73) pays particular attention to the first aspect as he comments:

follows, focusing the attention rather on the common elements of myth and connotation as second-order semiological systems.

⁷ The disappearance of the third term (the sign) of the “tri-dimensional pattern” from the scheme of connotation only appears to occur. In fact, Barthes introduces the chapter on connotation of *Elements of Semiology* with a new reference to the tri-dimensionality of any system of signification that he represents there as the E (expression = signifier) R (relation between the plan of expression and the plan of content = the ‘sign’) and C (content = signified) scheme. Before presenting the scheme reproduced in Figure 2, he consistently illustrates connotation as:

2 E R C (connotation)
 1 ERC (denotation)

⁸ The canonical English translation ‘second-order semiological system’ for the French *systemes sémiologique seconds* contributes to increase this hierarchical reading. The similarity with Marxist ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ is not just a coincidence, given the central place of ideology in Barthes’s understanding of second-order systems.

The absolutely differential value of the language is therefore probable only if we mean the articulated language; in the secondary systems [...] the language is 'impure', so to speak: it does contain a differential element (that is, pure 'language') [...] but also something positive.

In *Mythologies*, it is the arbitrariness of the sign that is brought into question by the second-order system of the myth:

We know that in language the sign is arbitrary: nothing compels the acoustic image *tree* 'naturally' to mean the concept *tree*: the sign, here, is unmotivated. [...] The mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy. (Barthes 1991[1957]: 124)

The decrease in the differentiability and the arbitrariness of the sign is thus a direct consequence of secondariness: while first-order signs institute the otherwise inexistent and consequently arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, second-order signs on the contrary rest on an already existing whole – connotation rests on denotation, myth on *langue*. Different elements of the first-order system thus become a single element for the second-order system. Let us consider, for instance, Barthes's well known analysis of the cover of *Paris Match* where a "young Negro" in a military uniform presumably salutes, "with his eyes uplifted", the French tricolour (Barthes 1991[1957]: 115; see Figure 3). This description of the picture in the "articulated language" can be considered as the sign of the first-order system which unites pictorial signifiers (different colours and shades on paper in a specific composition) with their signifieds (a young black male, a saluting hand on one side of the face, a military hat, *etc.*).



Figure 3. Cover of *Paris Match* commented on by Barthes in *Mythologies*.

Now this sign as a whole becomes the new signifier of the second-order system (see Figure 1 above), where it starts to signify Frenchness and militarism. The relation between the second-order signifier and signified is the mythical sign which Barthes names ‘signification’. Signification grows as if naturally out of the final result of the underlying, first-order semiological process. In the case of the Paris Match cover, the good assimilating impact of the French colonial Empire grows naturally out of this “young Negro” who salutes “just like our good French kids”. The passage from the first- to the second-order system of myth thus brings about a passage from the arbitrary to the motivated, the artificial to the natural, the value to the fact:

In the second (mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature. This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalized.

In fact, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of value; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts. (Barthes 1991[1957]: 130)

Barthes (1991[1957]: 128) describes all this as a passage from semiology to ideology to which he refers also in *Elements*, where he defines the “signified of connotation” as a “fragment of ideology” (Barthes 2010[1964]: 91). The second-order semiological system of myth and connotation functions therefore as a superstructure which, grounded as it is in its base-structure (the first-order system of *langue* and denotation), nevertheless results in an ideological distortion of the latter achieved through naturalization of second-order mythical and connotational signifieds. We can see this with particular clarity by juxtaposing the two schemes of myth (Figure 1) and connotation (Figure 2): the second-order system lies on the primary system as a construction occupying a higher hierarchical position (Figure 2) and it functions, at the same time, as a retrospective anchoring, through ideological naturalization, of the otherwise ungrounded and possibly drifting signs of the primary system (Figure 1).

Primary and secondary modelling systems: Lotman

Turning now to Lotman’s and the Tartu-Moscow semioticians’ understanding of “secondary modelling systems”, it is interesting to observe that references to “ideology” are also present in their definitions, although they do not have the central function we have just observed in the case of Barthes. Let us take, for instance, possibly the

first definition of a secondary system launched by Lotman in the article “The issue of meaning in secondary modelling systems” (1965), later republished as a chapter of *The Structure of the Artistic Text*:

A secondary modelling system is a structure based on a natural language. Later the system takes on an additional secondary structure which may be ideological, ethical, artistic, etc. Meanings in this secondary system can be formed according to the means inherent to natural languages or through means employed in other semiotic systems. (Lotman 1977[1970]: 35)

Just as clearly as Barthes, Lotman here proposes the image of a superstructure built upon the base of natural language. He also considers ideology as one of the possible secondary structures, but does not exclusively concentrate on it. The typology of secondary structures apparently remains open for him (“*etc.*”) and, in addition to ideology, he explicitly mentions ethics and art – the latter of which will, as we know, occupy a preeminent position in Lotman’s later works.⁹ Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow semioticians do not offer in their works a graphic illustration of the relationship between primary and secondary systems that would make explicit the modalities of the construction of second-order meanings on the basis of first-order ones. However, these relationships and modalities are described in *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures*, the seminal collective work on the semiotics of culture first published in 1973:

Under secondary modelling systems we understand such semiotic systems, with the aid of which models of the world or its fragments are constructed. These systems are secondary in relation to the primary system of natural language, over which they are built – directly (the supralinguistic system of literature) or in the shape parallel to it (music, painting). (Lotman *et al.* 2013[1973]: 72)¹⁰

This definition contains important notions which help to clarify both the similarity and the differences between the peculiar characteristics of Barthes’s second-order semiological systems and Lotman’s secondary modelling systems. First of all comes the notion of the ‘model’, which occupies a central position in the Tartu-Moscow semiotics of the 1960s and 1970s. Taken as constructions arising from the secondary system, in Lotman’s theory models also introduce a fundamentally distinctive feature

⁹ From this point of view, it is interesting to observe that the notion of a ‘secondary modelling system’ in the title of the 1965 article is replaced in the title of the equivalent chapter of the 1970 book with the notion of ‘artistic text’: “The problem of meaning in an artistic text”.

¹⁰ Talking about the “parallelism” of systems, Lotman means the coexistence and juxtaposition of the different languages of cultures which, on the one hand, model one and the same reality in different ways and, on the other, enter in complex intersemiotic interaction with one another. I will return to this later.

of Barthes's second-order semiological systems: the causality and motivation of the relations between the signifier and the signified in myth and connotation. Lotman makes a similar point about models:

Therefore, if the relation of language with its denotation is historical-conventional in natural languages, the relation of the model with its object is determined by the structure of the modelling system. In this respect only one kind of signs – *iconic signs* – can be identified with a model. (Lotman 1967: 131; my translation, D. M.)¹¹

In *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Lotman writes in this respect of an 'archimeaning', which emerges in those secondary systems that aspire to a "monopolistic grasp on worldview" and universal validity. Like Barthes's mythical 'signification', Lotman's 'archimeaning' transforms a bundle of elements of the primary system into a single element of the secondary one. As Lotman (1977: 47) also writes,

[t]he equivalence of nonequivalent elements forces us to assume that signs which have different denotata on the linguistic level have a common denotatum on the level of a secondary system. [...] A secondary modelling system of the artistic type constructs its *own* system of denotata, one which is not a copy, but a model of the world of denotata with their general linguistic meaning.

In *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture*, the Tartu-Moscow semioticians consequently claim that phenomena revealed in secondary modelling systems point to a decrease in semiotic complexity and an increase in simplicity (Lotman *et al.* 2013: 69) that seems, once again, to match the decrease in differentiability and arbitrariness (the passage from semiology to ideology) brought about by connotation and myth according to Barthes.

Despite these convergences, it would be incorrect to push Lotman further in the direction of Barthes. In fact, in the passages from the *Theses* quoted above, the Tartu-Moscow semioticians already distinguish between two different modalities of the relations between the primary and secondary systems. The first is clearly hierarchical in nature, involving the articulation of a base and a superstructure. For instance, their description of the relations between 'the primary system of natural language' and the 'supralinguistic system of literature' almost coincides with Barthes's illustration of the relations between first-order and second-order semiological systems in *Elements*:

¹¹ "Поэтому, если отношение языка к денотату в естественном языке исторически-конвенционально, то отношение модели к объекту определено структурой моделирующей системы. В этом смысле только один тип знаков – иконические знаки – может быть приравнен моделям." From this point of view it is interesting to observe that Barthes's Saussurean terminology similarly brings him to affirm the iconicity of mythical signification: "But for the myth-reader [...] everything happens as if the picture *naturally* conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a *foundation* to the signified" (Barthes 1991: 129).

a connoted system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system: the common case of connotation will consist of complex systems of which language forms the first system (this is, for instance, the case with literature). (Barthes 2010[1964]: 90)

The second modality of the relation between the primary and secondary modelling systems mentioned in the *Theses*' passage, i.e. the parallelism of the systems involved, their being side by side instead of one above the other, never occurs in Barthes's description of myth and connotation by contrast. This is an important issue, because it allows us to introduce a fundamental principle of the semiotics of culture, which also constitutes the main reason for the divergence between Barthes's and Lotman's understandings of secondary systems. I am thinking here of the impossibility for any system, be it primary or secondary, of being thought of in isolation; any attempt to do so brings about an idealized (and, therefore, ideological) description of the given system. Semiotic reality always implies, on the contrary, a plurality of at least two juxtaposed systems which interact and intersect, entering into a complex relation of dialogue and conflict (Lotman 1997: 10; 2009: 4–6).¹²

Culture vs. ideology

It is at this point that the notion of culture comes to occupy its strategic place for the understanding of secondary modelling systems in Lotman's works. This emerges with particular clarity in a definition to be found in Lotman's book *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, originally published in 1972:

Secondary modelling systems: semiotic systems constructed on the basis of a natural language but having a more complex structure. Secondary modelling systems include ritual, all aggregates of social and ideological sign communications, and art, all of which merge into a single complex semiotic whole – a culture. (Lotman 1976[1972]: 19)¹³

The relation between the primary and the secondary systems, and the relation between secondary systems and culture as a whole is presented here in terms of a progressive

¹² For a discussion of these aspects of Lotman's semiotics of culture see Monticelli 2012, 2008: 185–210.

¹³ “Вторичные моделирующие системы – семиотические системы, построенные на основе естественного языка, но имеющие более сложную структуру. Вторичные моделирующие системы, ритуал, все совокупности социальных и идеологических знаковых коммуникаций, искусство складываются в единое сложное семиотическое целое – культуру” (Lotman 1972: 21).

increase in structural complexity, quite the opposite of what was stated above on the basis of an incidental remark in the *Theses*. From this point of view, the word ‘homogeneous’ may be misleading when employed by Lotman in the passage quoted above to describe culture as a “complex semiotic whole” or, as elsewhere (e.g. Lotman et al 2013: 71), a “system of systems”. In his works, Lotman rather and repeatedly stresses the heterogeneity of culture: internal polyglotism is its essential and vital property,¹⁴ and this means that cultural dynamics is always crossed by an irreducible tension between homogenizing and differentiating forces, as first described by the Tartu-Moscow semioticians in the *Theses* (Lotman et al. 2013: 76–77). Lotman often defines this tension in terms of a translation between incommensurable systems or languages, which is a paradoxical translation in a situation of untranslatability where the movement across the boundaries of differently structured subsystems represents a fundamental prerequisite of cultural dynamism. As Lotman (1974: 226; my translation, D. M.)¹⁵ explains:

[...] disharmony between these subsystems is a source of pathological phenomena if we consider culture from a synchronic point of view, while diachronically it works as a source of dynamism for the system as a whole.

In this respect it is interesting to observe that if secondary modelling systems were the fundamental object of study for the Tartu-Moscow semioticians, the development of the semiotics of culture clearly brought about a shift of attention from the (structuralist) investigation of isolated sign systems to the interaction between different systems. It is in this respect interesting to read the new definition of the ‘semiotics of culture’ proposed by Lotman in 1981, seventeen years after the first summer school on ‘secondary modelling systems’ and eight years after the *Theses*. According to this definition the semiotics of culture investigates

[...] the mutual interaction of semiotic systems with different structures, the internal heterogeneity of semiotic space, the inevitability of cultural and semiotic polyglotism. (Lotman 1981: 3; my translation, D. M.)¹⁶

¹⁴ As Lotman and Uspenskij state for instance in the article “On the semiotic mechanism of culture”, originally published in 1971, “the heterogeneity of the inner organisation is a law for the existence of culture” (Lotman, Uspenskij 1978: 226).

¹⁵ “дисгармония между этими подсистемами, являясь при рассмотрении культуры в синхронном аспекте источником болезненных явлений, в диахронном освещении выступает как источник динамики системы в целом”.

¹⁶ “Оформление семиотики культуры – дисциплины, рассматривающей взаимодействие разноуровневых семиотических систем, внутреннюю неравномерность семиотического пространства, необходимость культурного и семиотического полиглотизма, – в значительной мере сдвинуло традиционные семиотические представления”.

The immersion of secondary modelling systems in a cultural whole characterized by internal heterogeneity allows Lotman to stress their positive creative potentiality: the result of the tensions arising from the plurality and heterogeneity of culture as a system of systems may coincide with the emergence of new, unpredictable meanings in translation. As Lotman was to claim in his last book *Culture and Explosion* (1992), the focus of the semiotics of culture thus shifted to the study of communication in situations that complicate it or render it utterly impossible, but from which valuable novelty might arise: “You could say that the translation of the untranslatable may become the carrier of information of the highest value” (Lotman 2009: 6).

Barthes’s second-order systems do not enter such paradoxical communication with other structurally incommensurable systems, as their context is not provided by the cultural system of systems with its heterogeneity and polyglotism, but by highly homogeneous ideological frames. They appropriate the signs of the first-order system and turn them into forms for signification which confirms, reproduces and transmits pre-existing information generated by hegemonic social and cultural discourses. Barthes (1991[1957]: 131) imagines this as a potentially all-encompassing mechanism: “In fact, nothing can be safe from myth, myth can develop its second-order schema from any meaning”. This is why in *Mythologies*, he writes of myth as “stolen language”, defining semiology as critique of ideology and the *sémiologue* as an agent of demystification:

he [the *sémiologue*] therefore seems to have the objective function of decipherer (his language is an operation) in relation to the world which naturalizes or conceals the signs of the first system under the signifiers of the second. (Barthes 2010[1964]: 94)¹⁷

Why does Barthes’s theory of second-order systems not reserve any place for the Lotmanian system of systems (culture) as a possible pluralistic and polyglottal alternative to the homogenizing force of ideology? I think there are two reasons for this. First of all, when Barthes refers to culture in *Mythologies*, he seems to have only “mass culture” in mind, as he writes in the preface added to the 1970 edition of the book, where he identifies as a fundamental task of his work the “ideological critique bearing on the language of so called mass-culture” (Barthes 1991[1957]: 8).¹⁸ Lotman’s understanding of culture as a system of systems admits, on the contrary, a complex,

¹⁷ This deciphering has, for Barthes, the nature of a social necessity in so far as society continually develops second-order semiological systems from natural languages and the future “probably belongs to a linguistics of connotation” (Barthes 2010[1964]: 90–91). The preeminence of second-order systems among the objects of semiology is therefore the immediate consequence of social developments.

¹⁸ Regarding this, it has been argued that Barthes’s semiology could be considered as a “scientific way of understanding popular culture” (Strinati 2004: 97).

multi-level interpretation which includes different cultural layers. Secondly, in contrast with Lotman's notion of culture as a dynamic *milieu* for the generation of new meanings, Barthes tends to see culture as a synonym of tradition and conformism.¹⁹

Though the word 'culture' is almost completely missing from *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology*, it repeatedly pops up in Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* where it is almost without exception employed in oppositions which involve the 'text of pleasure' [*texte de plaisir*] and the 'text of bliss' [*texte de jouissance*] – the first being characterized by moderate, controlled and predictable reading gratification, the second by unbounded linguistic play and drift. Culture unequivocally associates there with the moderation, comfort and predictability of 'pleasure', while it is brought into question by the unmanageable power of 'bliss'. Here are just a couple of passages from Barthes's book, which clearly illustrate the nature of this opposition and the understanding of culture which functions as its rationale:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfords [...] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 1975[1973]: 14)

And later on, more synthetically, but even more incisively:

Pleasure [plaisir] of the text. Classics. Culture (the more culture, the greater, more diverse, the pleasure will be). Intelligence. Irony. Delicacy. Euphoria. Mastery. Security: art of living. [...] Texts of bliss [*jouissance*]. Pleasure in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces [...] an extreme continually shifted, an empty, mobile, unpredictable extreme. (Barthes 1975[1973]: 51–52)

Considering Barthes's terminology and rhetorical emphasis in the passages just quoted, it would be tempting to reread the opposition between 'pleasure' and 'bliss' in terms of Lotman's conceptual pair of 'culture' and 'explosion'. Yet the fundamental difference between the scholars nevertheless remains that, despite the title of his last book, for Lotman the opposite of 'explosion' is not 'culture', but 'continuous, predictable processes' (such as Barthes's *comfortable* practice of reading). Culture is rather the general environment for the alternation and dialogical confrontation of explosions

¹⁹ Notice that also in Lotman's theory, culture has an important function of preservation and transmission of knowledge and traditions, being, as Lotman and Uspenskij claim, the "non-hereditary memory" of the community (Lotman, Uspensky 1978[1971]: 213). This conservative aspect of culture is, however, always counterbalanced by the heterogeneous and dynamic environment of the system of systems as described above.

and continuous processes, which are both, in this respect, cultural phenomena. It is interesting to observe that in *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes also refers to a “contradictory interplay” between the two poles of his opposition, but while doing this, he once again and unmistakably characterizes them as ‘(cultural) pleasure’ and ‘(non-cultural) bliss’.²⁰

Theory of the text

I will now turn to the notion of ‘text’ which from the 1970s comes to occupy an increasingly central position in the works of both Barthes and Lotman.²¹ This is important from our point of view, because their understandings of the text converge in many respects, helping to mitigate the differences evidenced in our analysis of their theories of secondary systems.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes thus advances the idea of the linguistic plurality of texts, describing it as the point of access to that ‘bliss’ which constituted, as we have seen, a repository of unpredictability and explosion:

Thus the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss [*jouissance*] by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side* [*qui travaillent côte à côte*]: the text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel (Barthes 1975[1973]: 3–4).

Here, it is important to stress the horizontal (“cohabitation”), non-hierarchical (“working side by side”) understanding of the relations between different languages (systems), because it seems to be in direct opposition with the hierarchical articulation between first-order and second-order systems that characterized myth and connotation in the earlier Barthes. This line of thought is developed by Barthes in *S/Z*, where he opposes Ideology as a “singular system” which “reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (Barthes 1990[1979]: 5) to interpretation, which is a question of “asserting the very existence of plurality”: “to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but, on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it” (Barthes 1990[1979]: 6,

²⁰ We could raise a similar argument for the case of Lotman and ideology. The notion of ideology is almost completely absent from his theory of secondary modelling systems and of culture in general. As can be observed in a couple of the quotes above, ‘ideological structures’ are briefly mentioned by Lotman within an open list of other second-order structures and never considered separately. Lotman’s caution with ideology may be in part due to the abuse of the notion in the Soviet context.

²¹ Barthes’ *S/Z* and Lotman’s *Structure of the Artistic Text*, both published in 1970, can be considered fundamental signposts of this conceptual shift of attention.

5). In *S/Z* Barthes “appreciates” this plurality through the choice of the famous five codes for his reading of Balzac’s *Sarrazine*. He calls one of these “cultural codes” (in the plural) and defines it as a “body of knowledge or wisdom” (Barthes 1990[1979]: 18). However, Barthes also promptly adds that “all codes are cultural”, coming here possibly the closest to Lotman’s idea of culture as a system of systems.

It seems therefore justified to speak of a shift in Barthes’s critique of ideology and his elaboration of instruments of semiological resistance to the “stealing of language” by second-order systems. For the earlier Barthes of *Mythologies* and *Elements*, ideological appropriation could be opposed through what he called the “degree zero” [*degré zero*] (Barthes 2010[1964]), exemplified by contemporary poetry as a “regressive semiological system” which brings language to a “pre-semiological state” (Barthes 1991[1957]: 132–33), where the second-order schema fails to steal it, lacking the necessary basis upon which to construct its significations.²² In *The Pleasure of the Text* and *S/Z*, semiological resistance to ideological subjection relies instead on the irreducible plurality of connotations that cannot possibly be mastered by a single and univocal second-order system. This brings Barthes closer to Lotman, for whom cultural polyglotism and its potential for generating new meanings is activated only in the text and thanks to the plurality of textual codes. As Lotman (1981: 7; my translation, D. M.) observes,

The text does not appear to us as the realization of a message in a single language, but as a complex construction including various codes which is able to transform existing messages and generate new ones.²³

In “From work to text”, an article written in 1971, Barthes interestingly employs the notion of ‘explosion’ – which he suggests should replace ‘interpretation’ – to describe the consequences of ‘irreducible plurality’ (1989: 59–61). There, he defines his notion of ‘intertextuality’ with a reference to the different ‘cultural languages’ which traverse the text in what he calls a vast ‘stereophony’ (60). Three years later Lotman would use the analogous notion of ‘stereoscopy’ in order to define the fundamental property of culture, which is its polyglotism (Lotman 1974). For Lotman, explosion clearly also stems out of plurality, from the co-existence of incommensurable languages within the same text: “It is precisely the translatability of the untranslatable, which produces

²² “At bottom, it would only be the zero degree which could resist myth” (Barthes 1991[1957]: 131). In this respect, Jonathan Culler (2002: 28) speaks of the “destruction of the sign” as Barthes’s most radical form of ideological demystification.

²³ “текст предстает перед нами не как реализация сообщения на каком-либо одном языке, а как сложное устройство, хранящее многообразные коды, способное трансформировать получаемые сообщения и породить новые.” Commenting on Lotman’s theory of the text, Julia Kristeva (1994: 376) thus observes, “Engendered by cultural dialogue [...], the text generates the meaning of language – not the other way around, as one might readily think”.

a high degree of tension, that creates the conditions for an explosion in meaning” (Lotman 2013: 31).²⁴

Starting from the second half of the 1970s, this converging understanding of the text as the place of plurality and the emergence of new meanings is elaborated by Barthes and Lotman in different directions. For reasons that should be clear by now, in the semiotics of culture the notion of text increasingly comes to overlap with the notion of culture itself: “one might say that what turns a culture into a Text is internal polyglottism” (Lotman 1979: 507). Barthes develops the idea into his new understanding of “literature” as the place for a “permanent revolution of language” Barthes – “I can say without differentiation: literature, writing, or text,” (Barthes 1996[1978]: 367), he claims in the inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*. In this 1977 lecture, the semiology of the 1950s retains its function as an “activator of social critique”, but has by now become a “literary semiotics” which does not coincide with linguistics but with the “deconstruction of linguistics”, insofar as language is now defined by Barthes as the (in)famously “fascist” place of power. This kind of semiology finds its natural ally in the text: “If the semiology I am speaking of then returned to the Text, it is because [...] the Text itself appeared as the very index of *nonpower*” (Barthes 1996[1978] : 373).

Conclusion

It is important to ask what contemporary semiotics has to learn from the convergences and divergences in the approaches of Barthes and Lotman to the study of secondary semiotic systems. An unavoidable starting point for a tentative answer to this question is represented by the important changes that have occurred since the 1970s in the status of semiotics as a discipline and, more generally, in the notions of ‘ideology’ and ‘culture’ within both the academic and the public discourses.

On the disciplinary front, semiotics has clearly lost its centrality and dynamic function for the humanities, so that today many scholars consider semiotics to be a relic of structuralism that is unable to enter a serious dialogue with new emerging research trends in cultural analysis. On the conceptual front, the notion of ‘ideology’ is being handled with an increasing suspicion, due to the tendency, widespread in the humanities and social sciences, to consider our times to be a “post-ideological era”, in which ideologies have stopped shaping our social behaviour. However, phenomena in contemporary mass culture seem rather to confirm the validity of Barthes’s analysis

²⁴ While Lotman and Barthes agree on the plurality of the text, they seem to disagree on its “infinity”. Barthes (1989) explicitly makes a difference between the finitude and closure of the ‘work’ and the infinity and openness of the text, while Lotman (1977: 209–217) considers framing, closure and finitude as essential features of the ‘text’. This is an important difference that surely needs to be investigated, but here I have decided to focus my attention rather on the issue of textual plurality.

of second-order semiological systems (myth, connotation) and their fundamentally ideological nature. Ideology, as described by Barthes, is alive and kicking in contemporary mass culture and the announcement of its death rather coincides with an ongoing withdrawal of the critique of ideology, leaving us with what French thinkers call *la pensée unique*, or ideological conformism to hegemonic discourses.²⁵

The notion of 'culture' enjoys, in contrast, an unprecedented popularity nowadays. It can be said to have become as self-evident and natural as Barthes's myth, and it has progressively acquired a universal explicative power. Economic, social, political and religious relations and conflicts are thus increasingly handled by reducing them to cultural issues, which are often presented in public rhetoric in strongly mythologizing, simplifying and essentialist terms. 'Culture' as the inescapable determinant of all human understandings and behaviours thus tends to replace ideology, finally naturalizing its contents.

Contemporary semiotics could regain its lost position within the humanities and social sciences precisely by challenging these mystifications of both ideology and culture. Semioticians are in a privileged position to do this, particularly thanks to Barthes's, Lotman's and the Tartu-Moscow School's thorough work on secondary semiotic systems. While this gives us critical instruments for the demystification of ideological mechanisms and constructions in the case of Barthes, in the case of Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School it elaborates analytical tools for a complex, plural and critical understanding of culture and its functioning. This is why, although Barthes's and Lotman's approaches to secondary semiotic systems contain important differences, opposing them as two absolute and reciprocally excluding research programmes is not the most productive theoretical attitude for contemporary semiotics. On the contrary, I am convinced that Barthes's and Lotman's ideas may, at least to a certain degree, complement each other in the elaboration of a renewed semiotic toolkit for cultural analysis that is up to meeting the challenges of its contemporary context and objects of study. The semiological critique of ideology and the semiotic analysis of culture are both necessary instruments for investigating the myths of our "post-ideological era of cultures" and the potentialities for cultural dynamics and change that those myths conceal and distort.

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²⁵ See for instance Chardon, Lensel 1998.

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Критика идеологии или анализ культуры? Барт и Лотман о вторичных семиотических системах

В статье сравниваются понятия Ролана Барта и Юрия Лотмана «семиологическая система второго порядка» (*systemes sémiologique seconds*) и «вторичные моделирующие системы». Рассматриваются общие предпосылки этих двух теорий и их важные расхождения. Расхождения объясняются с помощью противоположных стратегических ролей, которые понятия «идеология» и «культура» играют в работах Барта и Лотмана. Погружение вторичных моделирующих систем в культуру как «систему систем», характеризующейся внутренней разнородностью, позволяет Лотману отметить их положительный творческий потенциал: результат напряженных отношений как следствие системного многообразия и разнородности культуры может совпасть с появлением новых непредсказуемых значений при переводе. Контекстом для бартовских семиологических систем второго порядка являются крайне гомогенные идеологические обрамления, которые присваивают знаки систем первого порядка и превращают их в формы сигнификации. Эти формы подтверждают, воспроизводят и передают ранее существующую информацию, произведенную гегемонными дискурсами социума и культуры. В статье показано, как эти различия вновь проявляются и частично исчезают в теориях текста, которые Барт и Лотман усовершенствовали в 1970-х гг. Завершает статью обсуждение актуальности подходов Барта и Лотмана для современной семиотики и для гуманитарных наук в целом.

Ideoloogia kriitika või kultuurianalüüs? Barthes ja Lotman teisestest semiootilistest süsteemidest

Artiklis kõrvutatakse Roland Barthes'i ja Juri Lotmani mõisteid 'teise tasandi semioloogilised süsteemid' (*systemes sémiologique seconds*) ja 'teiseseid modelleerivad süsteemid' (*вторичные моделирующие системы*). Vaadeldakse kahe teooria ühiseid eeldusi ning nendevahelisi olulisi erinevusi; viimaseid selgitatakse vastandlike strateegiliste rollide abil, mida mõisted 'ideoloogia' ja 'kultuur' mängivad vastavalt Barthes'i ja Lotmani teostes. Teiseste modelleerivate süsteemide ümbritsetus kultuurist kui "süsteemide süsteemist", mida iseloomustab sisemine heterogeensus, võimaldab Lotmanil märgata nende positiivset loomingulist potentsiaali: kultuuri süsteemse paljususe ja heterogeensuse põhjustatud pingete tulemus võib ühte langeda uute, ennustamatute tähenduste esilekerkimisega tõlkimisel. Barthes'i teise tasandi semioloogiliste süsteemide kontekstiks on selle asemel ülihomogeensed ideoloogilised raamid, mis omastavad esmatasandi süsteemide märke ning muudavad need tähistusvormideks, mis kinnitavad, taastoodavad ja edastavad varem olemas olnud informatsiooni, mida loovad hegemoonsed ühiskondlikud ja kultuuridiskursused. Artiklis näidatakse, kuidas need erinevused tulevad taas esile ja osaliselt ka hajuvad tekstiteooriates, mida Barthes ja Lotman täiustasid 1970. aastatel. Arutelu lõpetavad mõned märkused Barthes'i ja Lotmani lähenemiste võimaliku aktuaalsuse kohta tänapäeva semiootikas ning humanitaarteadustes laiemalt.