

# Introduction: Semiotics and history revisited

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**Abstract:** The introductory article proposes to offer a general frame for the special issue, discussing the emergence of semiotics of history as a new discipline or approach in the humanities. It presents an overview on the attempts of joining the history and semiotics in the Western world since the early 1980s, with a special focus on the United States, and examines the contribution of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics to the semiotic study of history, paying the main attention to the work of Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij. Finally, a survey of the articles that make up the special issue dedicated to the 80th anniversary of Boris Uspenskij is presented.

**Keywords:** Juri Lotman; Boris Uspenskij; Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics; semiotics of history; historical semiotics

*Historia sub specie semioticae* is the title of a paper given by Boris Uspenskij at the First All-Soviet-Union Symposium on Secondary Modelling Systems organized by Juri Lotman in Tartu in early February 1974. In the same year it was published in the proceedings of the symposium, a rotaprint booklet with a small print run (Uspenskij 1974). Two years later, a slightly modified version appeared in the collective volume *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnej Rusi* [Cultural Heritage of Old Rus'], published in Moscow on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Dmitrij Lihachev (for more details, see the articles of Taras Boyko and Mikhail Trunin in this issue). In many respects, the publication of Uspenskij's text marks the beginning of a new approach, if not of a new discipline in the humanities – 'historical semiotics' or 'semiotics of history'. More than forty years later, and with an intention to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Boris Uspenskij, this special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* aims to take stock of the current situation in the study of history *sub specie semioticae*, but also to analyse more specifically the contribution of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School to semiotics of history.

As the readers of this journal well know, this is not the first special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* dedicated to semiotics of history. The last volume of the journal published in the lifetime of Juri Lotman (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam* [*Sign Systems Studies*] 25) was entitled “Semiotics and history” and it collected the papers of the last Semiotics Summer School of the Soviet period held in Kääriku in 1986. The editorial preface of the volume, written by Lotman, has not lost its relevance and has been guiding the preparation of this special issue to a considerable extent:

[...] Semiotics has changed during the past decades. One of its accomplishments along its difficult path was its joining with history. The perception of history has become semiotic, and semiotic thinking has acquired historical features.

Traditional historical research proceeded from the presumption that history deals with the finite past. Historical matter was placed in the past, the historian in the present, and the reader in the future. History was seen as static or at least something that came to a halt when the historical work was being written. The semiotic approach wants to avoid this conventional halting of the historical process. To achieve this, the historian-semiotician’s own point of view must become one of the objects of his research, as a part of the historical process in its own right. This does not refer to a system of ideological or political prejudices, which, according to Pokrovskij<sup>1</sup>, define the very essence of history. The inclusion of the historian’s perspective into the historical process changes the nature of the historical fact. The fact or event becomes the only one possible, unavoidable, causally conditioned and natural. If such a perspective from the past is carried over to the future, the future begins to seem predictable and thus redundant.

Hegel’s idea that history ends when he puts it to paper is neither a mistake nor an inconsistency, as has been often contended; on the contrary, it is an absurd consistency which requires the boldness of a great mind.

The joining of history and semiotics puts us on the threshold of revise of such fundamental concepts as causality. The currently experienced revolution of scholarly thought does not contradict the currently experienced social revolution. There is a deep, though not immediately obvious, connection between them.

One conclusion from what has been said is that each generation has a language to describe yesterday, but in principle does not have one to describe tomorrow. Therefore, involuntarily, just like the hero of one of the “Roman” poems of Joseph Brodsky, “Turning back, we look but only see old ruins”<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, new structures are emerging from under the ruins. (Lotman 1992: 3–4)

<sup>1</sup> Mihail Nikolaevich Pokrovskij (1868–1932), a Russian Marxist historian, one the most influential historians in Soviet Russia of the 1920s. – M.T.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “Letter to a Roman friend”. (Kline, George L., trans.) In: *A Part of Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, 52–55. – M.T.

## Varieties of historical semiotics

Historical semiotics was first conceptualized within the Tartu-Moscow School, but there have been some other examples of joining history and semiotics since the 1970s. For instance, Algirdas Julien Greimas, the hero of the previous special issue of *Sign Systems Studies*, called in his book *Sémiotique et sciences sociales* (1976) for a foundation of a 'historical semiotics' (*une sémiotique historique*), which "would have the task of establishing a typology of historiographic narrative structures" (Greimas 1976: 169). Unfortunately his call did not find many followers, but Greimas' ideas inspired many semiotically minded scholars around the world, not least Peter Haidu, who was among the first to plea for linking history and semiotics in the English-speaking world in the early 1980s (see below). One of the best examples of *historia sub specie semioticae* written in France, although not in the spirit of Greimas, is probably Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America*, published in 1982. This study offers an original interpretation of the discovery of America by Columbus and of the subsequent conquest and colonization of Mexico by the Spaniards. According to Todorov, what took place in America after 1492 was not merely a subjugation of the local population by the Spanish conquistadors, but it was also an encounter between two semiotic systems. The Spaniards defeated the Indians by means of signs, not of arms, the author argues (Todorov 1982). In an interview given in 1999 on the occasion of the Estonian translation of *The Conquest of America*, Todorov admitted that the semiotic perspective was crucial for him to make sense of the historical situation in the New World and that this remains the main contribution of his book: "I believe that it is namely the analysis of semiotic behaviour, i.e. of comprehension, interpretation and communication, that helps us to understand the conquest of America" (Tamm 2007: 190).

In the early 1980s we can witness an increasing rapprochement of semiotics and history in the United States (see Williams 1990), reflected primarily on the pages of the journal *Semiotica*, including two special issues, in 1986 (Boklund-Lagopolous, Lagapoulos 1986) and in 1991 (Pencak, Williams 1991). As mentioned above, Peter Haidu, a scholar of medieval literature, was among the first to advocate "coordination of semiotics and history" in the English-speaking world (Haidu 1982: 188; but see also Finlay-Pelinski 1982). In his article "History and semiotics", published in *Semiotica* in 1982, he aims "to demonstrate the availability, within the present stock of semiotic techniques, of procedures that can found a historical semiotics" (Haidu 1982: 191). According to Haidu, "semiotics must consider history, not as phenomenal event, but as an entity producing meaning, as a signifier capable of being assigned a signified. The events of history, that is, must be considered as 'event-messages'; it is their meaningfulness that allows the imposition of semiotic analysis" (Haidu 1982: 198). Haidu is clearly inspired by the semiotic theories of Greimas (see also Haidu 1980,

1981, 1985), but his proposition to consider “history as text” (Haidu 1982: 199) also comes very close to the ideas of the Tartu-Moscow School.

Another American historian who contributed prominently to the converging of history and semiotics in the 1980s was Brooke Williams (Deely). In a recent article she recalled her shift from history to semiotics with great precision:

I drifted outside my discipline, one fall day, on October 3, 1978, to register at the third annual meeting of the Semiotic Society of America (SSA), as the first historian who became a member of this society. In my discipline “semiotics” was a suspect word. Historians confused it with “semiology”, which they saw as an exclusively linguistic model of human experience, one which visited upon the discipline a theory accruing from modern philosophical idealism, a theory that provided no frame of reference for the mode of inquiry historians use. (Williams Deely 2011: 372)

Five years later, already deeply engaged in semiotic discussions, Williams declared at the 8th annual meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, held in Snowbird, Utah, on 6–9 October, 1983: “The time has come for history to be classified within semiotics according to its proper characteristics both as a discipline in its own right and in terms of its transdisciplinary place in the development of signs” (Williams 1987b: 409, see also Williams 1987a). In a more detailed way, Williams presented her ideas on the relationship between history and semiotics in the article “What has history to do with semiotics”, published in *Semiotica* in 1985. For Williams, semiotics permits us to rethink the very concept of history: “History in its proper being is not first of all a discipline, but precisely is the anthroposemiotic transmission and generation of culture wherein nature and mind mutually influence each other in the shaping and constitution of ‘reality’” (Williams 1985: 281; cf. Williams 1986: 219). Historical past is an outcome of semiosis, of semiotic mediation and transmission, and the study of history is therefore crucial in order to understand the question how and why sign systems change. She draws an important conclusion: “History is always being rewritten because that is its semiotic role in culture” (Williams 1985: 321).

On the initiative of Williams, a session on history and semiotics was presented in December 1987, as part of the 102nd Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, DC. The purpose of the session, Williams reported next year, was to initiate dialogue between the discipline of history and the transdisciplinary movement of semiotics concerning how a semiotic understanding of history can enhance communication across fields within the discipline, as well as open up avenues of understanding between history and semiotics (Williams 1988: 821). In her summary of the panel discussion, Williams emphasized once again the deeper meaning of semiotics for history:

Panelists pointed out that a ‘semiotic perspective’ is a transdisciplinary perspective not to be confused or equated with any particular semiotic ‘approach’ or ‘method’, as semiotic can deepen understanding of the process of doing history, as well as offer the first *intrinsically* interdisciplinary bridge of communication between disciplines. As such, panellists clarified that a semiotic perspective is useful for all historians: first of all, as a new paradigm advancing a theoretical understanding of what the best of historians already ‘do’ (regardless of any given ‘field’ or ‘approach’); and second, as a tool with the potential to transform historiography as historians themselves, informed by a semiotic consciousness, develop the discipline in community with one another, across fields and generations, in the decades ahead. (Williams 1988: 830)

On the invitation of Thomas Sebeok, in 1991, Williams, together with William Pencak edited what has so far remained the last special issue on history and semiotics of *Semiotica* (Williams, Pencak 1991). Unlike the previous special issue *Signs of the Past: Semiotics and History*, edited by Karin Boklund-Lagopolous and Alexandros-Phaidon Lagopoulos in 1986, it was written exclusively by practising historians, in order to show, as Pencak (1993: 1) would explain it a few years later, “how historians can use semiotics to ask and answer better the sorts of questions and interpret the sorts of data they usually do, rather than using history as a springboard for semiotic theorizing”. Pencak was indeed the second key figure in the United States to promote the dialogue between history and semiotics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1993 he gathered his relevant publications in a volume titled *History, Signing In: Essays in History and Semiotics*. From the outset, he declared that his main aim with this volume was to show “how a historian aware of semiotics but unwilling to become a semiotic theorist – or drown his writing with semiotic jargon incomprehensible to his normal audience – can employ semiotics in historical work” (Pencak 1993: 1). Unlike Williams, who was interested in “what has history to do with semiotics”, Pencak would like to inquire into “what has semiotic to do with history”, while suggesting “to historians wary wading too deeply into the waters of semiotic theory the reverse propositions” (Pencak 1993: 86). To his mind, too “much of the work on ‘history and semiotics’ [...] consists of the musings of non-historians about the meaning of history” (Pencak 1993: 1) and therefore there is a need for a serious engagement of professional historians in semiotic theories and methods.

Some other American examples from the same period can be mentioned, especially the work of the Yale literary scholar Thomas M. Green, who in 1986 formulated a need for “historical semiotics” (Green 1986). However, ten years later he had to admit that very little progress had been made in developing this new (sub)discipline:

One purpose of the essay, in fact, is to dramatize the effective absence of a missing sub-discipline which the humanities grievously need – namely, historical semiotics. We possess many sketchy contributions like the forgoing paper which this future sub-discipline might incorporate, but to my knowledge we have no organized effort, no single scholarly journal, no academic program, which might focus the cross-disciplinary collaboration that is required. (Green 1996: 33)

When historical semiotics is nowadays evoked in the English-speaking world, and this happens fairly seldom, the dominant mood is still longing for a semiotic approach in history, considered very promising, but somehow always in the state of emerging. In 1999, the historian Luisa Passerini published an article “History and semiotics”, trying to integrate the historical semiotics of Uspenskij with contemporary approaches in cultural history and historical theory. But in her conclusion she points once again to the old *desiderata*: “We would argue [...] that much is left to be done in order to draw out the full consequences of a semiotic conception of history as a communicative process. [...] The development of a semiotics of history might be the essential step that historians have to take in order to assume their role on the cultural scene of the present.” (Passerini 1999: 19). So, in a recent article Youzheng Li (2017: 49) still talks about historical semiotics in terms of “a recently emerging new discipline”.

## **Semiotics of history in the Tartu-Moscow School**

While rather marginal and still emerging in Western semiotic studies, historical semiotics has been one of the main avenues of research within the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics.<sup>3</sup> To understand this contrast, it is important to keep in mind a fundamental difference between the two traditions of semiotics: atomistic and holistic semiotics (M. Lotman 2002). The former, which can be called also semiotics of sign, derives from Peirce and Morris, and the latter, semiotics of language or sign systems, from Saussure. As explained by Lotman and Uspenskij (1984b: ix), within the first tradition, the researchers’ attention is focussed on the sign in isolation, that is, on the relationship of sign to meaning, to addressee, and so on, whereas in the case of the second tradition, the researchers concentrate their attention on a language, that is, a mechanism which uses a certain set of elementary signs for the communication of content. This fundamental difference brings along a different approach to non-semiotic reality and to the semiotic study of history:

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to notice that the entry ‘history’ introduces the standpoints expressed, on the one hand, by North American scholars in the journal *Semiotica* and, on the other hand, by the Tartu-Moscow semioticians in the two main handbooks/encyclopaedias of semiotics (Nöth 1990: 33; Živov 1986), respectively. Yet another encyclopaedic perspective is offered by Theuerkauf 2003. See also Tamm 1995.

There is a crucial difference between the understanding of non-semiotic reality in the Peircean and the Saussurean approaches. If in the former it exists as the object of logical models, then in the latter it acquires features of empirical reality. For this reason the first approach opens the way only to logical models, while the second affords the hope of reconstructing extratextual empirical reality by means of the text. At this point the aims of semiotics converge with traditional aims of historical research. (Lotman, Uspenskij 1984b: x)

The attempts to build a historical semiotics in the English-speaking world, especially in North America, have been predominantly based on the Peircean or atomistic tradition of semiotics. This epistemic foundation is probably one of the reasons why American historical semiotics has produced very little in terms of historical-empirical studies and why genuine collaboration, regardless of its many appeals, between semioticians and historians has never really taken place. In the Tartu-Moscow School, it is not the logical analysis of the isolated signs that has attracted attention, but the process of semiosis and communication. Unlike their American colleagues, the Tartu-Moscow semioticians depart from the basic premise that the domain of semiotic phenomena is coextensive with that of cultural phenomena. Culture is seen as a system of semiotic relationships between humans and the world (including other people) and this relationship can be regarded as a communicatory dialogue. “This approach,” Lotman and Uspenskij (1984b: x–xi) argue, “makes it possible to look at history from the semiotic perspective: from this angle the historical process appears as a system of communications between the social group and the reality surrounding it – in particular between various social groups – and, at the same time, as a dialogue between the historical personage and the social group.”

True enough, history has not always been in the centre of interests of the Tartu-Moscow School: up to the late 1960s, the main paradigm was structuralism and the emphasis was on synchronic and static aspects of culture. However, since the early 1970s, the dynamic and diachronic aspect became increasingly important for Tartu-Moscow semioticians, especially for Lotman, culminating in his views as to the importance of unpredictable mechanisms and explosive situations in the development of culture. In 1971, Lotman and Uspenskij postulated the fundamental principle of culture as a dynamic system, connecting it with the dynamism of the social life of human society: “The necessity for continual self-renewal, to become different and yet remain the same, constitutes one of the chief working mechanisms of culture” (Lotman, Uspenskij 1978[1971]: 226). It is in this context of dynamic study of cultural semiotics that Uspenskij, in close collaboration with Lotman, formulated his programme of semiotics of history. Both together and separately they wrote an extended series of studies in the semiotics of Russian cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s, available also in two English-language anthologies (Lotman, Uspenskij 1984a;

Nakhimovsky, Nakhimovsky 1985; for a discussion, see Danow 1987). Since the 1970s, semiotics of culture has been first and foremost historical cultural semiotics for the Tartu-Moscow semioticians (cf. Grzybek 1994).

Retrospectively, Lotman (1993: 41) also admitted that “the semiotic movement began from the denial of historical studies,” but immediately added that “abandoning the historical study was necessary in order *to return* to it later”. In his last, posthumously published book *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, he explains the argument in more detail:

At the inception of semiotic studies, the isolation of the field of culture from the sphere of history was in part necessary and in part polemical in nature. The dissemination of the object of semiotics within the broad field of the science of history has made the very border between semiotics and the world outside it an object of study. At this stage it is possible to define semiotics as the study of the theory and history of culture. (Lotman 2013[2010]: 53)

In 1983, after several unsuccessful attempts, Lotman was able to establish a laboratory of history and semiotics at the University of Tartu. The new lab, which existed up to 1991, never had a substantial budget and included only a small group of researchers, reflects, however, the great interest in semiotics of history felt by Lotman and his colleagues. The initiative to dedicate the following Summer School in Semiotics, held, after a long pause, in Kääriku in 1986, to history and semiotics, is yet another confirmation of the importance of the semiotic study of history for Tartu-Moscow semioticians. Lotman’s preface to the proceedings of the Summer School (Lotman 1992), quoted above, perfectly captures the new hopes for a close dialogue between the two disciplines. In a relatively little known article, “Semiotics and the historical sciences”, published in English in 1991, Lotman (1991: 165) admits that “the transformation of an entire group of the humanities in relation to the establishment of semiotics as an independent discipline has yet to sufficiently impress history as a science,” but adds in the next sentence: “However, the very nature of history makes the introduction of semiotic methods into it particularly important.”

Although in many ways similar and developed in close cooperation, Lotman’s and Uspenskij’s approaches to historical semiotics present some important differences (see also Kalinin 2003, 2009; Pern 2012; Trunin in this issue).<sup>4</sup> In the centre of

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<sup>4</sup> I will focus here only on the contribution of Lotman and Uspenskij to semiotics of history, but a more comprehensive analysis would also demand the inclusion of many other scholars of the Tartu-Moscow School. While arguing for the importance of historical semiotics (“the most promising way forwards”), Lotman (1990: 232–233) himself mentions the following colleagues as the main contributors to the new field: V. N. Toporov, B. A. Uspenskij, V. V. Ivanov, A. A. Zaliznyak and A. M. Piatigorskij. See also Żyłko 2006, 2014; Jewdokimow 2014; Demin 2015.

Uspenskij's theory of semiotics of history stands the concept of communication. Even more generally it can be argued that communication is the cornerstone of Uspenskij's semiotic theory in general, as he made it very clear in a recent interview: "So communication is the initial point, the point of departure, the initial stage of the building, of the construction of our idea of the existence" (Mazzali-Lurati 2014: 115). Uspenskij departs from the premise that in various fields of culture we can see the same mechanisms that operate in language. The same applies to history and therefore he builds his model of semiotics of history on the basis of an analogy with the linguistic act or communication in a natural language. Uspenskij depicts history as a cultural process, consisting in communication, in which new information (text) is interpreted by the addressee (society), and the meaning ascribed to this text generates a new text, communicated in the addressee's reflexive reaction. This process takes place in a specific historical-cultural context, where acts of communication are founded in a certain code (Uspenskij 1976b: 64; 1996[1988]: 10). In other words, a semiotic model of history constructed in this way consists in linking two planes – of action or performance and of thought or interpretation (Hałas 2013: 70). Uspenskij is primarily interested in the study of the second plane, "the cultural semiotic approach to history presupposes the emphasizing of the inner viewpoint of the participants in the historical process: only what is important from *their* perspective matters" (Uspenskij 1996[1988]: 9). Historical events are therefore communicative events, the meaning of which changes along with the emerging new present. This leads Uspenskij to an important epistemological conclusion:

From this point of view, it is thus not the objective meaning of events (if anything of the kind be presumed to exist) that matters, but the way they are perceived, the way they are read. Under these circumstances, the fact that some events are perceived as momentous – regardless of whether they are products of symbolic activity or not – gains key importance: the way a sequence of events is interpreted determines the further course of events. (Uspenskij 1996[1988]: 10)

Up to this day, Uspenskij has remained faithful to his theory of the semiotics of history, formulated first in 1974 and developed into a more systematic theory in the late 1980s, that serves as the basis for his many explorations into Russian cultural historical semiotics. In 2008 he founded a new scholarly series *Facts and Signs: Studies in Semiotics of History* (*Fakty i znaki: issledovaniya po semiotike istorii*) together with Fedor Uspenskij; three issues have been published so far (Uspenskij, Uspenskij 2008, 2010, 2014). In the short introduction to the first issue, the series' editors offer their explanation of the semiotic approach to history, very much in line with Uspenskij's earlier statements:

The semiotic approach considers the events of the past in the context of the history of culture, i.e., of the changing worldview. This approach involves the reconstruction of the system of representations that determine both the perception of certain events in a given society, as well as the reaction to these events, which is the direct impulse of the historical process. In this case, the historian is interested in the cause-effect relationships at the level that is directly related to the event plan, directly and not indirectly. Thus, the historian tries to see the historical process through the eyes of its participants, deliberately distracting from the objectivist historiographical tradition retrospectively describing events from an external point of view. (Uspenskij, Uspenskij 2008: 8)

Juri Lotman's more specific interest in historical semiotics, as pointed out by Taras Boyko (2014: 63, 2015: 272), arose from his critical discussion of historical sources in the mid-1970s. In a short article "On the problem of dealing with unreliable sources" ["K probleme raboty s nedostovernymi istochnikami"], Lotman (1975) shows that the widely-used notion of 'reliability' (*dostovernost'*) in textual studies is inherently relative and even a deliberate forgery can offer valuable information. Some years later, in his discussion with the mathematicians Mihail Postnikov and Anatolij Fomenko, Lotman (1982: 44–45) argued in the same vein that historical documents potentially have a varied semiotic nature, and therefore any quantitative account should be preceded by semiotic analysis of each particular document. In the following years these preliminary reflections were developed into an important epistemological statement:

The historian is doomed to deal with texts. The text stands between the event "in itself" and the historian, and this changes the scientific situation in a fundamental way. The text is always created by someone and constitutes a situation which has been translated into some kind of language. One and the same reality, which has been codified by different means, will produce different – sometimes conflicting – texts. The extraction of events from a factual text, from a story about an event, constitutes a decoding operation. Thus, the historian begins, consciously or unconsciously, by subjecting his original material – the text – to semiotic manipulations. Therefore, if these operations occur without the researcher's awareness of them and with his conviction that the document is authentic, and he considers his knowledge of the language and intuitive sense of authenticity which his work experience has fostered to be sufficient to be able to understand the text, then, as a rule, there is a substitution in the historical auditorium for that "natural awareness", which upon closer scrutiny proves to be the awareness of the historian with all its cultural and historical prejudices. (Lotman 1991: 165–166; cf. Lotman 1990: 219–220; 2002[1992]: 344)

It follows that "facts" and "events" are not given to historian, but are outcomes of textual encoding and decoding: "The conception of what constitutes a historical event is dependent upon the type of culture involved and is in itself an important typological

indicator. Having selected his text, the historian thus has to make a distinction between what constitutes an event in the text from his own point of view as a historian and what is an event worth remembering in the eyes of the author of the text and his contemporaries” (Lotman 1991: 166). In brief, Lotman argues that every historian is by definition also a semiotician, even if unwittingly.

Next to historians’ dependence on textual mediation, Lotman underlines another important aspect of the historian’s work – its retrospective character:

The historian regards an event from a point of view which is oriented from present to past. This view, by its very nature, transforms the object of description. The picture of events, which appears chaotic to the casual observer, leaves the hands of the historian in the form of a secondary organisation. It is natural for the historian to proceed from the inevitability of what has occurred. However, his creative activity is manifested in other ways: from the abundance of facts stored in memory, he constructs a sequential line, leading with the utmost reliability towards this conclusive point. (Lotman 2009[1994]: 17)

The retrospective gaze of the historian creates the illusion of a linear and causal stream of time and excludes all unpredictable and random elements from the past. “By removing the moment of unpredictability from the historical process, we make it totally redundant,” Lotman contends (2009[1994]: 14). From the standpoint of semiotics of history, the event that has occurred is only one of the possible versions; and thus historical research cannot be reduced to merely investigating the circumstances and the inevitability of the historical event. According to Lotman, random events or elements in the historical process can cause unpredictable situations, cultural explosions, that change the whole semiotic situation completely, but these accidental elements can also act as a reserve for future reorganizations of the culture. In this connection, we can notice a great similarity between Lotman’s and Uspenskij’s approaches to historical semiotics: “Although Lotman and Uspenskij start from different positions [...] they reach quite similar results [...]: they both model the way how, in historical communication, the information coming from the past influences the future and vice versa” (Pern 2012: 457).

## Overview of the special issue

The seeds for this special issue were sown in February 2016 when an interdisciplinary seminar “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” was organized by the School of Humanities and the Centre of Excellence in Intercultural Studies of Tallinn University in connection to the awarding of Doctor Honoris Causa degree to Boris Uspenskij by Tallinn University (see Figure 1). At the suggestion of the editors of *Sign Systems*

*Studies*, the idea was born to gather the seminar materials (together with some commissioned articles) in a special issue on semiotics of history. This also turned out to be an occasion to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Boris Uspenskij. To the best of my knowledge, this special issue is the fourth *Festschrift* offered to Professor Uspenskij. In 1987, an issue of the journal *Russian Linguistics* [11(2/3)] was dedicated to his 50th birthday, with two other volumes – *Miscellanea slavica* (Uspenskij, F. 2008) and *Forma formans* (Bertolissi, Salvatore 2010) being published to mark his 70th birthday.



*Figure 1.* Boris Uspenskij in Tallinn University on 17 February 2016, after being awarded the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa by Tallinn University. Photo by Piret Räni.

The special issue consists of two thematic blocs. The first of them offers different insights into the semiotic study of history by its foremost practitioners. The opening article by Boris Uspenskij, titled “Semiotics and culture: The perception of time as a semiotic problem”, is a study of the conceptualization of time according to two different models of temporal perception, the ‘historical’ and the ‘cosmological’ one. According to Uspenskij, the conceptualization and perception of time is fundamentally a semiotic problem. Different types of semiosis may be traced, for example, when we evaluate our present from the perspective of our past or when we do it from the perspective of our future, and so on. The article is an updated English version of the second part of the two-part article published by the author in Russian under the title “Istoriya i semiotika” [“History and semiotics”] in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* [*Sign Systems Studies*] 22–23 in 1988–1989.

Carlo Ginzburg offers in his article an erudite investigation into the intricate relationship between civilization and barbarism. This conceptual distinction dates back to ancient Greece, to the work of Herodotus and to that of Plato and Aristotle. Ginzburg analyses more specifically the famous debate about the status of the native populations of the New World which took place in Valladolid in 1550–1551. He shows that for the main opponents, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, translator of and commentator on Aristotle, and the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, bishop of Chiapas, the legacy of Greek debates in Latin adaptation was particularly important. The article concludes on the contemporary implications of this mid-16th-century intellectual debate on barbarism and civilization.

Mihhail Lotman addresses in his article “History as geography: In search for the Russian identity” the fundamentally dualist nature of Russian culture, focusing on the notion of Russian spacetime, where the spatial parameters constitute one of the most important constants of history. Lotman argues that there are two antithetical mechanisms that constitute the basis of the identity of Russian culture, one of being sovereign and the other – relations with others. Russia is conceptualized as “being in-between” which is a complex and ambivalent position. The article offers a comprehensive typology of cultural in-betweenness, demonstrating that different Russian ideologists have used all options that are theoretically possible.

Proceeding from materials relating to the “Time of Troubles” in Russia, Ilya Kalinin examines in his contribution “The figure of the impostor to the throne in Russian political culture: Between sacralization and mimesis” the phenomenon of imposture (*samozvanchestvo*) as one of the symbols of Russian political history from the early 17th to the mid-19th century. The main goal of the article consists in an attempt to develop Boris Uspenskij’s argument that reveals in the sacralization of tsar power in medieval Russia the main principal of imposture. Following the work of René Girard, Kalinin argues that the Time of Troubles represented a disintegration of the socio-cultural order

that was similar to what Girard has described in the context of the decomposition of religion. From this perspective, imposture is a phenomenon that reflects the internal crisis of the very “autocratic” form of rule, bringing its internal split into material form, which was a conflict between individual arbitrariness and the claim to an ancestral and sacralized right of undivided domination. In place of the failed transition from the figure of the autocrat to the figure of a monarch bound by a social contract, the former figure splits, revealing the distinction between the individual and the ancestral, the social and the sacral, the conventional and the unconditional.

The late Tzvetan Todorov, who submitted his contribution “Two approaches to the humanities” to the special issue only a few months before his unexpected death, proposes a comparative reading of two eminent anthropologists of the 20th century: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Germaine Tillion. While Lévi-Strauss emphasized the importance of an objective stance in the humanities and wanted to eliminate all subjectivity, Tillion desired to reserve an exclusive role for subjectivity, preferring human individuals to abstractions. Todorov suggests looking for the reason for these opposite positions within the disparate experiences the two scholars had during World War II: an American university life for Lévi-Strauss, and “humanist classes” in a German concentration camp for Tillion. A person who had been through the schooling at Ravensbrück, Todorov argues, could not arrive at the same conception of the field as another who had gained his experiences from the campus of an American university.

The second thematic bloc of the issue is introduced by an article of Peeter Torop, entitled “Semiotics of cultural history” and dedicated to the analysis of the contribution of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics to semiotics of history. Torop reminds us that the Tartu-Moscow School is itself an organic part of cultural history and the self-presentation of the school via establishing new contacts with the heritage of Russian theory (the Formalist school, the Bakhtin circle, Vygotskij, Eisenstein) is a semiotic activity and part of the semiotics of cultural history. According to Torop, actualizing the semiotic aspect of cultural history can support the development of semiotics of culture in two directions. First, cultural semiotics of culture has a potential for more thorough research into texts as mediators between the audience and the cultural tradition. Second, semiotics of culture as semiotics of cultural history can be methodologically used for establishing a new (chronotopical) theory of culture.

In the next article, “Semiosphere and history: Toward the origins of the semiotic approach to history”, Mikhail Trunin compares Juri Lotman’s and Boris Uspenskij’s approaches to semiotics of history. He argues that when Lotman’s approach to the semiotics of history is closely connected with the development of his theory of the semiosphere, that is, with the shift in his research from studies of the history of literature to typology, and then from typology to the semiotics of culture and history, then Uspenskij, a linguist who started out as a scholar of structural language

typology, moved in the opposite direction, becoming increasingly more engaged in the examination of individual historical cases.

In her article “The future orientation of culture and the memory of the past in the making of history” Elżbieta Hałas focuses on Uspenskij’s theory of semiotics of history. She reminds us to what extent Uspenskij’s semiotics of history is integrally bound with the Tartu-Moscow School’s programme of cultural semiotics and rooted in the fundamental premises of that programme. These premises contain a complex ontology of culture, encompassing three levels: cultural memory, sets of cultural texts, and semiotic systems, which model both the image of the world and programmes of action. Hałas is particularly interested in the role of reflexivity in the historical process, associated with reconstructing of the meaning of the past and prospective shaping of the future. Making history means constantly renewing the narrative about past events, which determines the future course of history in the present.

Taras Boyko’s article, “Reading Uspenskij: Soviet ‘semiotics of history’ in the West”, for the first time explores the reception of Boris Uspenskij’s writings and ideas outside of the Soviet Union, primarily in Western European and North American academic contexts. He concentrates on the reception of Uspenskij’s two best-known articles, “*Historia sub specie semioticae*” and “History and semiotics”, in English, French, Spanish, German and other European languages. As a separate contribution, Boyko provides a list of Uspenskij’s publications in English, including co-authored works and various reprints/republications. For the most part, Uspenskij’s publications in English are translations of his books and articles originally written in Russian and previously published in the Soviet Union/Russia. In total, the current bibliography consists of 65 entries from a period spanning from 1968 till today.

The issue is concluded by an extensive interview with Uspenskij on the various aspects of his life in research by Kalevi Kull and Ekaterina Velmezova. The interview consists of two parts, the first was conducted on 25 August, 2011, at the end of the Tartu Summer School of Semiotics, held at Palmse, Estonia, and the second in Uspenskij’s home in Rome on 27 May, 2012.

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### **Введение: новый взгляд на семиотику и историю**

Вступительная статья определяет ключевые темы всего спецвыпуска: в ней обсуждается появление семиотики истории как новой дисциплины или подхода в гуманитарных науках. В статье предлагается обзор попыток объединения истории и семиотики, предпринимавшихся западными учеными (прежде всего американскими) с начала 1980-х годов. Далее рассматривается вклад представителей Тартуско-московской школы в исследование истории *sub specie semioticae* (основное внимание уделяется работам Ю. М. Лотмана и Б.А. Успенского). В заключении представлены аннотации статей, составивших настоящий том, посвященный 80-летию Б. А. Успенского.

### **Sissejuhatus: uus vaade semiootikale ja ajaloole**

Sissejuhatav artikkel pakub erinumbrile üldise raami, arutledes ajaloosemiootika kui uue distsipliini või lähenemise esiletõusu üle humanitaarteadustes. Artikkel teeb ülevaate ajaloo ja semiootika ühendamisest läänemaailmas 1980. aastate algusest alates, fookusega Ameerika Ühendriikidel. Seejärel käsitletakse Tartu-Moskva semiootikakoolkonna panust ajaloo semiootilise uurimise, pöörates põhitähelepanu Juri Lotmani ja Boriss Uspenski töödele. Lõpetuseks on esitatud kokkuvõtte artikleid, mis moodustavad selle Boriss Uspenski 80. sünniaastapäevale pühendatud erinumbri.