

Prisons as total institution semiospheres

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Abstract. The main objective of this article is to combine Juri Lotman's theory of the semiosphere – including its concepts of boundary, core, and periphery – with Erving Goffman's theory of the total institution. The purpose is to develop a framework conducive to examining the prison as an object of study, equally emphasizing both its internal as well as external relations. This work positions itself within the contexts of the relative decline of the field of prison ethnography, few or no studies done applying semiotic metalanguage to the prison or the total institution, and none applying the theory of the semiosphere to either. This work is oriented according to an analytical or neutral mode; its point is not to offer a normative programme, but to offer a new description of the research object and a new language of description in which to speak of this object. The secondary objectives of this article include demonstrating that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere and Goffman's theory of the total institution are compatible, that Lotman's theory actually refines Goffman's original, that Lotman's theory taken independently and Goffman's theory as refined by Lotman's are both compatible with the direction of contemporary prison ethnography, and that the framework presented in this work has the potential to reinvigorate the field of prison ethnography.

Keywords: semiosphere; semiosis; boundary; core; periphery; total institution; prison; prison ethnography

Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to combine Juri Lotman's (2005[1984]) theory of the semiosphere with Erving Goffman's (1961a) theory of the total institution in order to develop a framework conducive to examining the prison as an object of study. In this article, the semiosphere is understood as a more abstract unit than the total institution, which in turn is understood as a more abstract unit than the prison. As follows, it is understood that all prisons are both total

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institutions and semiospheres, that all total institutions are semiospheres but not necessarily prisons, and that semiospheres are not necessarily either total institutions or prisons.

Combining the two theories involves applying the theory of the semiosphere to the theory of the total institution. Such application comes with a caveat. Namely, within the confines of an article it is necessary to be selective with regards to what aspects of either theory are being used. As both of these theories are dense with concepts, terms, ideas, and examples, it would be impossible to utilize every single aspect present within them. Instead of an exhaustive approach, then, the current article must settle for a representative one, with the proviso that in the future the topic be given an extended treatment in a wider format.

This article also has four secondary objectives. The first of these is to demonstrate that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere and Goffman's theory of the total institution are compatible. The second is to demonstrate that Lotman's theory actually also refines Goffman's original one. The third is to demonstrate that Lotman's theory taken independently – as well as Goffman's theory as refined by Lotman's theory – are both compatible with the direction of contemporary prison ethnography. Accomplishing all of the objectives set out in this article thus far promotes the idea of shared benefit on the theoretical plane: it may lead to the continued development of both Lotman's and Goffman's theories, whether independently or in conjunction.

The final objective of this article is to demonstrate that the theoretical framework it presents has the potential to reinvigorate what has been described as the relative decline of the field of prison ethnography. The existence of mutual benefit also holds here, between the theoretical and practical levels: the creation of a sharper study tool (or tools) broadens the possibility of its (or their) application in connection with examining the prison as a study object, which may lead to the usage of this theoretical framework or its components in the actual practice of prison ethnography. This would potentially lead both the theoretician and the practitioner into new directions of research, and also potentially reinvigorate the prison-ethnographic field.

In order to fulfill its objectives the body of this work is subdivided into six sections. The first section comments on other studies that have employed the/a metalanguage of semiotics in relation to the prison and/or total institution as research objects. The second defines the field of prison ethnography, and discusses its importance and relative decline, while the third makes mention of some ethical considerations. The fourth introduces the theory of the semiosphere, but this introduction also comes with a caveat: not only will semiosphere theory be presented representatively in the manner of a passive summarization, but

certain of its concepts or ideas will be actively developed in a way that will prove useful for later purposes. The fifth section applies the theory of the semiosphere to the theory of the total institution in the representative manner described above. Finally, the sixth section applies these theories separately as well as in combination to the prison as an object of study, discusses these applications, and discusses the consequences of such applications for contemporary prison ethnography.

1. Semiotic metalanguage and objects of study

The theory of the semiosphere has never been applied to the prison-object. However, there have been other studies employing semiotic metalanguage² in relation to the prison as an object of research. For example, Michel Foucault (1995[1975]) employs semiotic metalanguage to describe the birth of the prison in the context of changing power relations within a new political economy, and the rise of a new “disciplinary” society. Diana Johns (2014) employs semiotic metalanguage to understand “the post-prison experience” that leads to cycles of reoffending (recidivism) causing many prisoners to return to prison (reimprisonment), i.e. the difficulties prisoners face reintegrating into society and staying out of prison (the so-called “post-release problem”).

The theory of the semiosphere has also never been applied to the theory of the total institution. However, Foucault’s (1995[1975]: 133–308) description of different disciplinary institutions – barracks, hospitals, prisons, schools, workshops, etc. – is similar to Goffman’s description of total institutions, and Foucault’s employment of semiotic metalanguage in this connection thus comes close to the usage of semiotic metalanguage in relation to the theory of the total institution. However, this metalanguage is used to understand once again how such institutions came about in the context of changing power relations, a new political economy, and an emergent disciplinary society, and Foucault’s description of disciplinary institutions is not identical with Goffman’s description of total institutions.

Meanwhile, the theory of the total institution is not present in Johns, and so it cannot be said that she employs semiotic metalanguage in relation to the latter. Indeed, the theory of the total institution is even implicitly denied in her understanding of the prison: “That the culture of the prison leaks out into the post-prison sphere is axiomatic” (Johns 2014: 99). As will be demonstrated later, such an understanding is indeed self-evident, but only in the context of contemporary prison ethnography and its interpretation and denial of Goffman’s earlier theory.

² By ‘semiotic metalanguage’ is meant the language, terminology, or vocabulary generally associated with the field of study known as semiotics.

This article differs from these works both theoretically and with regard to its study object. The theory of the semiosphere involves a semiotic metalanguage very much specific to itself, which is not present in these other authors. The latter metalanguage is also applied explicitly to the theory of the total institution, and not some kind of similar theory or description. As regards the prison-object, this article is not explicitly concerned with evolving prison contexts or the experiences of released prisoners, although these topics may be explored in the future via the theoretical framework proposed in this work. Instead, it is focused on the internal relations holding within the prison world, and the external relations of the prison world to the wider world, and how best to examine these via the application of its proposed frame.

2. Prison ethnography: the field, its importance, and its decline

Loïc Wacquant (2002: 385–387) describes prison ethnography as the drawing of “fine-grained portraits of ordinary social relations and cultural forms between walls”, and as the carrying out of “intensive, close-up observation of the myriad relations [prisons] contain and support”. Lorna A. Rhodes (2001: 66, 76) describes it as “work that attempts an entry into and a direct engagement in the interior life of the prison”, to which she adds that “ethnographic and oral history approaches” may also involve prisoners’ families, administrators, architects, manufacturers, and many others in “the system”, as opposed to just prisoners and correctional workers proper. In short, prison ethnography is mostly contained to empirical observation of figures inside of the prison, but its investigations can also be extended to include figures associated with the prison.

For Wacquant (2002: 389), observational field study of the prison could “become a window into the deepest contradictions and the darkest secrets of our age”. That is, prison ethnography could form the basis of what he calls a “*comparative ethnography of the state*”, or the ethnographically-derived comparison of the police, the courts, and the prison with “the welfare, health, housing, labor and educational arms of the state” (Wacquant 2002: 389). For Wacquant, prison ethnography is important because close-up ethnographic observations could thus form the basis for making and drawing macroscopic comparisons and conclusions.

Similarly, Rhodes (2001: 76) states that prison ethnography “contains the possibility of a necessary confrontation with the brute facts of domination as they play out in institutions that have become ubiquitous, if partially veiled, features of our cultural and political landscape”. Since “internal contradictions and certain

paradoxical elements of practice can be discovered in institutional structures”, then those in the system who “struggle with the terms of these contradictions” may therefore “have something to tell us about how this struggle unfolds” (Rhodes 2001: 76).

Like Wacquant, Rhodes sees prison ethnography as important because it may serve as the basis for understanding the wider world. Indeed, this is a common theme found in contemporary prison ethnography: Gilles Chantraine (2013: 30) sees the importance of prison ethnography as demonstrating how “microsociological observations of the prison environment” could be used to understand the “sociohistorical forces that shape the institution”, while Manuela Cunha (2014: 218) adds that it is not only the case that “close-up observation of in-prison aspects illuminates external processes”, but that this also holds *vice versa*.

From the late 1970s onwards, the American penal system underwent what Wacquant (2002: 379–383) describes as an “historically unprecedented” expansion, in both “sheer scale and suddenness”: the Californian penal colony transformed into the American penal state. Paradoxically, in the early 1980s, “observational studies depicting the everyday world of inmates all but vanished just as the United States was settling into mass incarceration and other advanced countries were gingerly clearing their own roads towards the penal state” (Wacquant 2002: 385). As Wacquant (2002: 385) notes: “*The ethnography of the prison thus went into eclipse at the very moment when it was most urgently needed* on both scientific and political grounds”. While sociologists formerly even held jobs within prisons (Rhodes 2001: 71–72), and the United States was considered a world leader in research done on prisons (Wacquant 2002: 383–385), for myriad reasons the field was now in a state of relative decline³.

3. Ethical considerations

Mark Haugaard (2010: 427–430) has in essence demonstrated that there are two possible ways of approaching any object of research: analytically or normatively.

³ Relative in the sense that while prison ethnography was entering into eclipse in the American context, at the same time prison ethnography in Europe experienced “something of a mini-boom,” although such works remain dispersed and “come well short of forming a critical mass” (Wacquant 2002: 385–386). The reasons for the American decline include both restrictions placed on any information leaving the prison and on persons entering the prison for the purposes of doing research, alongside changing interests in the academic setting, namely a Foucault-inspired programme that left the prison off the “radar screen” of social researchers in favour of studying such institutions as “schools, public aid offices and hospitals” (Wacquant 2002: 383–385).

When working analytically the objective “is to understand *is*”, and when working normatively the objective is to understand how things ought to be (Haugaard 2010: 427). In short, a normative approach sticks to either commendation or censure, that is, to formulating evaluative judgments, as opposed to, for example, remaining purely “sortal”, as in the analytical approach (Haugaard 2010: 422–424).

Keeping this in mind, according to Igor Chernov (1988: 9), the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School was truly established in the year 1962, with Lotman as its leader. Over the years, the emphases of the school changed: from the study of “modelling systems” or languages in the early days, to texts throughout the 1970s, and to culture as a whole from about 1970 onwards (Chernov 1988: 10–14). The latter emphasis – which developed into the semiotics of culture, which Lotman represents as both founder and developer – eventually led him to formulate his theory of the semiosphere (Chernov 1988: 14–15).

Silvi Salupere and Peeter Torop (2013: 16) have pointed out that the first characteristic of the semiotics of culture – and by extension Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere – is its methodological preoccupation, attempting “to be innovative on both the object level and the metalevel, offer[ing] new ways of defining the cultural object of study, and new languages of description (not just one universal language) for carrying out cultural analysis”. As Kalevi Kull (2011: 344–345) has noted, the semiotics of culture has been “exclusively a scientific approach since its beginning”, not concerning itself with any kind of ideological emphasis.

On this note, the prison is undoubtedly a controversial object surrounded by many normative discourses, whether pro- or anti-prison⁴. Before proceeding with this study, it is thus necessary to all too briefly comment on its ethical orientation, or lack thereof. That is, the objectives of the current article do not include arguing either for or against the prison or the prison system: the research at hand has no normative inclination regarding how things should or should not be. Instead, the current work understands the importance of prison ethnography in terms of how the prison is able to shed light on the wider world (and vice versa), and emphasizes scientific or methodological grounds over political or ideological ones, being oriented towards providing a re-definition of the prison-object, as well as a new (meta)language of description for prison research useful in *analyzing* this object.

Like Lotman’s work, the work of Goffman is also exemplary of the analytical (or *neutral*) approach, even when confronted with potentially controversial research objects. Prison ethnographers such as Chantraine and Wacquant, meanwhile,

⁴ See, for example, Chantraine’s (2013) dissection of “prison-centrism”, a kind of pro-prison ideology *par excellence*.

tend to hybridize neutral descriptions with their own anti-prison values⁵, while Rhodes (2001: 75–76) stays entirely normative in her understanding of prison ethnography: “The most pressing need for the study of prisons is to challenge the terms of the discourse that frames and supports them”.

Indeed, it was at the turn of the millennium that Rhodes (2001: 66–71) stated the main challenge for those writing about the prison – including prison ethnographers – was to problematize or “interrupt” the “normalizing discourses” that surround the prison. For Rhodes (2001: 66–71, 75), the primary challenge of contemporary prison ethnography was thus to interrupt a normalizing prison discourse framing incarceration as inevitable, for example, or as a sign of progress.

One year later, Rhodes’s formulation provoked a direct commentary from Wacquant (2002: 386–387), who wrote that field researchers needed to worry less about interrupting the prison debate, because too often this acted “as a brake to systematic field investigation, if not as an excuse for not getting on with it”. Instead, as he put it at the time, “the paramount priority of the ethnography of the prison today is without contest *to just do it*” (Wacquant 2002: 386). For Wacquant, then, the primary challenge of contemporary prison ethnography – within the newfound context of “eclipse” – was to get prison ethnographers back to the actual practising of prison ethnography.

The current article is oriented towards the analytical mode, and not the normative one, nor to a hybridized analytical-normative approach⁶. That is, it does not take as its challenge the normative programme of either perpetuating or interrupting the prison or the prison system⁷. Regarding the prison-ethnographic binary presented above, the article is oriented towards the challenge of “just doing it”, and not towards the challenge of lessening any normalizing discourse(s) surrounding the prison. It must be noted that these statements and disclaimers are not meant to disparage singular or hybrid works written according to the

⁵ Wacquant (2002), for instance, constantly juxtaposes statistical facts, on the one hand, with personal diary entries describing the negative emotions he experienced during a prison-ethnographic tour, on the other one. Meanwhile, Chantraine (2013) objectively dissects prison-centrism according to its elements and mechanisms of perpetuation, but then proposes a prison ethnography – or “empirical sociology of the social uses of law” – meant as a “political action” which would “help increase consciousness of the law in prison”.

⁶ Haugaard (2010: 430) has noted that it is easier to keep the two approaches separate in principle as opposed to in practice, as the normative and analytical modes exist more as ideal types.

⁷ The difficulty in interrupting the prison or prison system as it stands is even acknowledged by Rhodes (2001: 76) herself, who notes that knowledge of the structure of power relations within prison “should disabuse us of the hope” – which is “often held in spite of ourselves” – that such knowledge can ever trump such relations.

normative approach. Instead, they are meant to testify to the ethical limitations of this specific research article.

To get prison ethnographers back to doing prison ethnography in a time of eclipse, Wacquant (2002: 386) noted that prison-ethnographic field study was in need of reinvigoration from some kind of external force⁸. In a prison-ethnographic review written a dozen years after Wacquant, Cunha (2014: 218) noted that the idea of eclipse was still a relevant consideration in contemporary prison ethnography⁹.

The article at hand is thus possessed of an analytical or neutral orientation, while being positioned within the context of the relative decline of prison ethnography and its need for externally-derived reinvigoration. The research is also positioned within the context of few studies done applying semiotic metalanguage to the prison as study object, none applying it to the theory of the total institution, and none applying the theory or metalanguage of the semiosphere to either of these two. One final point to note is that the research undertaken in this article is theoretical and not empirical: the author did not himself partake in any prison ethnography of his own for the purposes of this study.

4. The semiosphere

4.1. *Semiotic spaces.* The semiosphere as described by Lotman (2005[1984]: 207) is an abstract and enclosed space, a “specific sphere” characterized by semiosis. The semiosphere is the semiotic space inside of which semiosis exists (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208). Generally understood as the process of meaning-generation, it is only within the semiosphere that semiosis as such is possible, described partly as “communicative processes and the creation of new information” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 207).

The semiosphere is surrounded by “non- or extra-semiotic space” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208). Although he does not explicitly define these terms, ‘extra-semiotic space’ may be understood as the space located outside of the given semiosphere which is still understood by members of that semiosphere as “the space of other semiotics” (read: semiosis or semiotic processes) (Lotman 2005[1984]: 213). In other words, extra-semiotic space represents a *different* semiotic space or environment, i.e. a *different semiosphere* as such, from the perspective of the members of the given semiosphere.

⁸ Wacquant’s (2002: 386) own attempt was the organization of a special journal issue dedicated to the topic of prison ethnography.

⁹ Cunha (2014: 218) noted that an international symposium was held entirely on the topic of prison-ethnographic eclipse in the year 2012.

Meanwhile, ‘non-semiotic space’ may be understood as the space located outside of the given semiosphere which is not understood as the space of any semiotics (semiosis or semiotic processes) whatsoever by its members, that is, it represents a space that is not just different, but *is not considered a semiosphere at all*. When it comes to non-semiotic space, the point is not whether the surrounding space is *actually* a semiotic environment or not, but only whether it is *understood* as such by members of the given semiosphere. Therefore, the difference between non- and extra-semiotic space is oftentimes relative, dependent on the perspective of the given semiosphere and its members.¹⁰

Although it is an abstract sphere, Lotman (2005[1984]: 211) makes allowances for the fact that there are cases where semiospheres in the abstract can be identified with territorial units. The latter could be understood as concrete physical spaces. Like semiotic space proper (the internal space of the semiosphere), it seems that both non- and extra-semiotic space may also be understood as either abstract spaces, or as abstract ones corresponding more or less with concrete, physical, or territorial spaces. However, as the semiosphere implies semiosis, its space can never be purely concrete.

4.2. *Boundary*. One of the principal attributes of the semiosphere is the presence of a boundary separating the semiosphere from the extra- or non-semiotic space surrounding it, and this semiotic border also possesses an abstract character (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208). But it is only with the help of the boundary “that the semiosphere [is also] able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208). The boundary of the semiosphere thus has the dual role of both dividing or delimiting it from non- and extra-semiotic spaces, as well as uniting it or establishing contact with such spaces (Lotman 2005[1984]: 211).

Lotman (2005[1984]: 211) also makes allowances for the fact that there are cases where the boundaries of the semiosphere in the abstract can be identified

¹⁰ In theory, whether or not extra-semiotic space is *actually* a semiotic space is also irrelevant, as long as members of the given semiosphere consider it as such. Extra-semiotic space could theoretically be devoid of all semiosis, but still be considered a semiotic environment. In conjunction with the understanding of non-semiotic space, it is thus possible to give a preliminary typologization of the semiosphere’s surrounding spaces: extra-semiotic space that is actually semiotic, extra-semiotic space that is non-semiotic but considered semiotic, non-semiotic space which is actually non-semiotic, and non-semiotic space which is actually semiotic but is not considered as such. This is connected to the relativity of extra- and non-semiotic spaces, as such typologization is also dependent on the perspective of the given semiosphere and its members.

with territorial units (i.e. concrete physical spaces). In cases where semiospheres can be equated more or less with a spatial distribution (physical, concrete, or territorial space), oftentimes certain persons “by virtue of [their particular] type of employment” play the role of boundary (Lotman 2005[1984]: 211). An individual of this type “belongs to two worlds” and “operates as a kind of interpreter” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 211). Like the semiosphere and its surrounding spaces proper, the boundary may also be understood as either an abstraction, or as an abstraction corresponding more or less with a concrete, physical, or territorial space, but never as an entirely concrete space.

The semiosphere is not and can never really be contiguous to – or isolated from – the world which surrounds it, because its border points are always transforming actors of this world (read: extra- or non-semiotic space) into the facts of its own semiotic universe (Lotman 2005[1984]: 209). The “border of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210). The boundary of the semiosphere exists to “semiotize” the facts, to adapt external actors to a given semiotic sphere, which is necessary for their realization in the semiosphere at all (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208–209).

The boundary thus functions to substantiate the semiosphere, and the manner in which it does so can be understood by way of the translation of texts by languages. The boundary may be understood as “a multiplicity of points, belonging simultaneously to both the internal and external space”, which is represented by the sum of “bilingual translatable filters”, of which passing through an external text “is translated into another language (or languages)” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208–209). The semiosphere’s boundary is therefore tasked with carrying out “the transformative processing of the external to the internal” and informing or substantiating it thusly (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210).

However, substantiation of the semiosphere also involves “the transformation of external non-communications into communications, i.e. the semiotisation of incoming materials and the transformation of the latter into information” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210). On the one hand, the boundary translates “foreign”, external, or extra-semiotic texts into the language(s) of the semiosphere’s own internal space (Lotman 2005[1984] 209–210, 214). On the other hand, the boundary also does the same with “non-texts” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 209). The latter idea may be put thusly: before they can be translated, non-semiotic non-texts must be “textualized”, that is, so-called “non-materials”, “non-communications”, or “non-information” must be made semiotic, transformed into materials, communications, or information – i.e. texts – suitable for translation into the semiosphere’s own internal language(s) in the first place. If extra-semiotic texts derive from extra-semiotic

space and are in need of translation, non-texts derive from non-semiotic space and are in need of textualization (“semiotization”) prior to the step of translation.

In ensuring “semiotic contacts between two worlds,” the reality of extra- and non-semiotic spaces, expressed through texts and non-texts (which have been transformed into texts), becomes for a given semiosphere a “reality in itself” only insofar as it has been translated into the semiosphere’s own language(s) at or by the boundary (Lotman 2005[1984]: 209–211).

The semiosphere’s boundary is (at the very least) a bilingual zone, and it also has a bidirectional nature: “The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210–211). That is, texts and non-texts which have become texts are not only translated into the given semiosphere from the direction of external reception, but texts are also translated into a language or multiple languages “situated *outside* the given semiosphere” from the internal direction outwards¹¹ (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208–209).

No matter the direction, the material that the border points of the boundary traffic in are texts, and these points are equivalent to linguistic units of translation (Lotman 2005[1984]: 209). Yet alongside its translational tasks, the boundary also has the “invariant function” of limiting penetration to the semiosphere (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210). Prior to translation into its own internal language(s), the boundary of the semiosphere must first filter all external communications (Lotman 2005[1984]: 210) (i.e. texts, including textualized non-texts). It should be added that the process of filtration may also occur from the direction of the internal to the external, and may involve not only transformation, but also the complete rejection of texts.

Finally, although the border of the semiosphere generally “cannot be visualised by means of the concrete imagination”, in cases where the abstract and the territorial correspond, “the border is spatially located in elementary meanings” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 208, 211). Even in these cases, the boundary in its more concrete form nonetheless retains the idea of either a filtering “buffer mechanism” or a “unique unit of translation”, both meant to transform information (Lotman 2005[1984]: 211). In its more concrete form, the boundary of course also retains its delimiting and contact-establishing functions.

4.3. *Core and periphery.* The semiosphere has attributes other than the existence of a boundary. For example, the “law of the internal organization of the semiosphere”

¹¹ Of course, since all things within the semiosphere are already texts, the process of textualization does not occur from the direction of the internal to the external.

is the division between its core and its periphery (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). The core of the semiosphere is its nucleus, and semiotic space is characterized by the presence of a nuclear structure immersed in “a visibly organised more amorphous semiotic world gravitating towards the periphery” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 213). The core is where the dominant systems are located (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214).

Furthermore, this nuclear structure, centre, or core may not only hold a dominant position within the semiosphere, but may also rise “to a state of self-description” wherein “it describes not only itself but also the peripheral space of a given semiosphere” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). Consequently, the level of the core’s “ideal unity creates a superstructure which itself is above the irregularity of a real semiotic map” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214).

The core is the area of the semiosphere characterized by structural fixity, rigidity, and slower development (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). Meanwhile, the peripheral areas of the semiosphere are more amorphous places, characterized by structures that are “slippery”, i.e. “less organised and more flexible” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). The periphery is constituted by “sections which were not subjected to description”, or sections “registered in categories which are clearly inadequate” for describing them (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). The periphery is thus an area where “dynamic processes meet with less opposition and, consequently, develop more quickly” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214). The quicker development of the periphery may allow “for the future displacement of the function of the structural nucleus to the periphery of the previous stage, and the transformation of the former centre to the periphery” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 214).

4.4. *Functions and relations.* The semiosis of the semiosphere – its processes of communication, information-creation, or meaning-generation – is partially determined by the functions of its boundary (and the relations they do or do not afford). The functions of the semiosphere’s boundary include *delimitation*, *establishing contact*, *translation*, and *filtration*. The function of delimitation involves dividing, while the function of establishing contact involves uniting. The function of translation includes the textualization of non-texts prior to actual translation, the substantiation of the semiosphere via the internally-directed translation of texts (including non-texts that have been transformed into texts) into its own internal language(s), and the exportation of the semiosphere’s own semiotic products via the externally-directed translation of texts into external language(s). Both the functions of translation and filtration are bidirectional, but while they both entail the transformation of texts, only the function of filtration includes also the explicit rejection of texts.

The semiosis of the semiosphere is also partly determined by the relations holding between its core and periphery levels¹²: it is the “active interaction” between the core and periphery which “becomes one of the roots of the dynamic processes within the semiosphere” (Lotman 2005[1984]: 213). The active relation holding between the semiosphere’s core and periphery is understandable in a variety of ways. First, in terms of the *dominance* of the core over the periphery. Second, in terms of *description*: the core either describes itself, the periphery, or their relations in ideal terms which may contradict reality (either partially or fully), or leaves itself, the periphery, or their relations undescribed (either partially or fully). Third, in terms of the *dynamism* of the periphery as opposed to the static or stable nature of the core. And fourth, in terms of the fact that the periphery is always struggling towards *transformation*, attempting to conquer and replace the core (Lotman 2005[1984]: 212, 214).

5. The total institution (as a) semiosphere

5.1. *The total institution: semiotic and extra-semiotic space.* In Goffman (1961a: 4–5), total institutions are places such as abbeys, army barracks, boarding schools, concentration camps, convents, jails, mental hospitals, monasteries, old age homes, orphanages, prisoner of war camps, prisons, sanatoria, ships, and work camps, amongst many others. While institutions “in the everyday sense of that term” are simply social establishments, or places “in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on”, total institutions have an encompassing or total character which captures the entirety of “the time and interest of its members” and provides an inescapable world for them (Goffman 1961a: 4).

Total institutions are obviously concrete, physical, or territorial spaces, but this does not contradict the possibility of describing them as semiospheres. Instead, total institutions may be understood as concrete units whose physical or territorial space overlaps more or less with an abstract space of semiosis, wherein processes of communication, information-creation, and meaning-generation occur. Total institutions are thus neither entirely concrete nor entirely abstract units, but a hybrid of the two. The same correlation of the concrete and the abstract could also be postulated of the total institution’s surrounding extra-semiotic space.

An example of the extra-semiotic space surrounding the total institution is the “environing society” that both its staff and inmates take into account (Goffman

¹² As was the case with the boundary, the semiosphere proper, and its surrounding spaces, the core and the periphery of the semiosphere may also be understood in either abstract or abstract-concrete terms (but not concrete ones only).

1961a: 76, 104). Indeed, it is clear that both of these groups are very much aware that surrounding society is a semiosphere, but one that is very different from the semiotic environment or space of the total institution. And since society is considered an extra-semiotic space by the members of the total institution (as a semiosphere), total institutions are able to “create and sustain a particular kind of tension between the home world and the institutional world and use this persistent tension as strategic leverage” in the management of their inmates (Goffman 1961a: 13). Accordingly: ‘The full meaning for the inmate of being ‘in’ or ‘on the inside’ does not exist apart from the special meaning to him of ‘getting out’ or ‘getting on the outside’” (Goffman 1961a: 13).

5.2. *Boundaries of the total institution.* According to Goffman (1961a: 3–4), total institutions are “symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure”. These symbolizing barriers are “often built right into the physical plant” and take the form of physical barriers such as “locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors” (Goffman 1961a: 4). Physical-cum-symbolic, the barriers of the total institution play the role of boundary in its function of delimiting/dividing the semiosphere from its surrounding extra- and non-semiotic space (its “outside” as such).

Cases where the total institution leverages tension between the home world and the institutional world are exemplary of the boundary’s function of establishing contact (uniting), and in these cases the role of boundary is played by the staff members of the total institution, who strategically bridge these two worlds. As opposed to concrete barriers, viewing staff members as the boundary of the total institution is a more (but not entirely) abstract understanding, just as the symbolic nature of physical barriers is inclined towards a more (but not entirely) concrete understanding of the boundary of the total institution. In either case, the fact that the boundary of the total institution manifests itself in different forms – from physical barriers to human beings – implies that it is also best considered according to a combined abstract and concrete understanding.

Staff members playing the role of the total institution’s boundary is seen in certain aspects of its translational function, such as the exportation of texts from the internal world to the external extra-semiotic one. Within total institutions, for example, the staff have the right “to limit, inspect, and censor outgoing mail”, and frequently have a rule “against writing anything negative about the institution” (Goffman 1961a: 103). By virtue of their employment, certain staff members operate as interpreters of the so-called “letter-texts” written by inmates. These individuals operate in both the institutional world and the home world of society. Indeed, a defining feature of the difference between staff and inmates within total

institutions is that individual staff members are allowed to leave the total institution, giving them a level of contact and social integration with the outside world not possessed by inmates (Goffman 1961a: 7).

In this specific case, the staff members taking on the role of boundary are translating internal inmate letter-texts into language(s) of the external semiosphere (i.e. outside society). For example, one of these languages could be a moral language determined by the fact that “[p]ersons are almost always considered to be ends in themselves, according to the broad moral principles of a total institution’s enviroing society” (Goffman 1961a: 76). That is, the interpretation and censorship involved in the inspection of so-called “mail-texts” is equivalent to the process of translating these texts into a language of moral principles found in the external society, so that the latter will, for instance, value total institutions positively and refrain from criticizing them.

The transformation involved in the censorship of inmate letters also illustrates the boundary’s filtration function: since inspection also involves limitation, this implies that sometimes texts may not just be transformed, but may even be outright rejected at the boundary of the total institution, in this case from the direction of the internal to the external.

5.3. *The core and periphery of the total institution.* For Goffman (1961a: 6), the “key fact” of total institutions is the “handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people”. The “major implication” of such management is that the defining feature of total institutions is a “basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff” (Goffman 1961a: 7, 9). The life inside of the total institution is determined by the division between its staff and inmates:

First, all aspects of life [working, resting, playing] are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. (Goffman 1961a: 6)

It is clear that the staff of the total institution dominate the inmates. For instance, staff force inmates into indignities of speech and action, subject them to indignities of treatment, place them into a submissive or suppliant role akin to that of children (while they remain the “adults”), and oblige them to exist in a

situation of “tyrannization” and “regimentation” (Goffman 1961a: 22–23, 37–42). Furthermore, the “authority system” of the total institution is of an “*echelon* kind”, wherein “any member of the staff class has the right to punish any member of the inmate class, thereby markedly increasing the probability of sanction” (Goffman 1961a: 42). The social control within total institutions is immensely detailed, its inmates closely restricted, unable to “easily escape from the press of judgmental officials and from the enveloping tissue of constraint” (Goffman 1961a: 38, 41). From a higher and more authoritative level, the small body of officials make sure that the large batch of inmates have knowledge of the total institution’s all-encompassing nature and feel the pressures of inescapability and routine, pressures from which the staff members have the ability to remove themselves.

Inherent to total institutions is also how the staff partly or fully describes itself, its inmates, or their relations in ideal as opposed to real terms. For instance, characteristic of the total institution is that its “various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution” (Goffman 1961a: 6). However, these plans “are very often merely rationalizations, generated by efforts to manage the daily activity of a large number of persons in a restricted space with a small expenditure of resources” (Goffman 1961a: 46–47). So while total institutions present themselves “as rational organizations designed consciously” or “effective machines for producing a few officially avowed and officially approved ends”, in truth they “typically fall considerably short of their official aims” (Goffman 1961a: 74, 83).

As presentation is generally oriented by the total institution towards the wider public, it is also extant in the relation between staff and inmates: “The contradiction, between what the institution does and what its officials must say it does, forms the basic context of the staff’s daily activity” in working with inmates (Goffman 1961a: 74). Staff members of the total institution are daily “charged with meeting the hostility and demands of the inmates” with the “avowed goals” of the total institution, or the “rational perspective” it espouses (Goffman 1961a: 83). The most frequent official objective presented by total institutions is “the reformation of inmates in the direction of some ideal standard”, however, many total institutions “most of the time, seem to function merely as storage dumps for inmates” (Goffman 1961a: 74).

When it comes to idealized description, staff members oftentimes describe their own work in ideal reformatory terms (and not real warehousing ones), as well as the effect that this work supposedly has on the inmates they are relating to (who are purported to be reformed towards an ideal even if no such reformation is actually occurring). How the staff, the inmates, or their relations remain undescribed by the staff, whether in part or in full, is also inherent to total institutions.

When it comes to lack of description, the staff's ineffectiveness in relation to the reality of a hostile inmate world may remain undescribed. To hide shortcomings of reformation and the practice of storage, for example, such ineffectiveness and hostility may remain hidden¹³.

The staff-inmate division within the total institution is also characterized by the more static nature of the staff and the more dynamic nature of the inmates. Related to this is the following nuance of their relation:

[Within total institutions] the institutional plant and name come to be identified by both staff and inmates as somehow belonging to staff, so that when either grouping refers to the view or interests of "the institution," by implication they are referring [...] to the views and concerns of the staff. (Goffman 1961a: 9)

The correspondence of the physical plant with staff members is visible in the practice of "spatial specialization", wherein places to work and sleep "become clearly defined as places where certain kinds and levels of privileges obtain", and wherein "inmates are shifted very frequently and visibly from one place to another as the administrative device for giving them the punishment or reward their co-operativeness warrants" (Goffman 1961a: 51–52). According to this practice, "inmates are moved, the system is not", and "one ward or hut [acquires] the reputation of a punishment place for especially recalcitrant inmates" (Goffman 1961a: 51–52).

The institutional component of the total institution is thus not only characterized by pre-established practices or procedures inherently reactive in nature, but also by architectural forms eventually made functional within the system. Even using the physical plant as a metaphor for the rigidity of the staff, there is nothing more stable and less "moveable", nothing more static and less dynamic than an architectural form, once completed, especially from the perspective of the inmates. The correspondence of the total institution's staff with its physical plant, made on the part of the inmates, is indicative of the institution's less dynamic nature in relation to its inmates.

Owing to this, the inmates are inclined towards transforming (conquering and/or replacing) the staff. In general, the relation between the total institution's staff and its inmates is characterized by recalcitrance or hostility, especially on the part of the inmates. Inmates remain refractory, with their capacity "to perceive

¹³ Alongside the disconnect between reformation and warehousing, description-based contradictions between the "superstructure" and the "real map" inherent to the total institution also include the way in which staff members of the total institution balance treating inmates with "humane" as opposed to "technical" standards; another is the existence of both legitimate and illegitimate punishments within the total institution (Goffman 1961a: 74–80, 105–106).

and follow out the plans of staff” ensuring that they can “hinder the staff” and thwart such plans effectively, purposely, and intelligently (Goffman 1961a: 80–81). Indeed, guards often have to be “ready for organized efforts at escape” and attempts to “bait them, ‘frame’ them, or otherwise get them into trouble” (Goffman 1961a: 81). Constant strategizing on the part of the inmates – as opposed to the pre-established or traditional ways of the institution – is illustrative not only of their more dynamic being, but also of their ambitions towards transforming the situation, whether or not this is a realistic achievement.

Beyond more or less individual hostility, planning, or troublemaking, inmates within total institutions may also develop solidarity via the “fraternization process” and reject the staff as a collective (Goffman 1961a: 58). Collectivizing methods used to initiate or participate in such rejection include the examples of “collective teasing” practised by inmates towards the staff:

Although the [staff] can deal with individual infractions that are identifiable as to source, inmate solidarity may be strong enough to support brief gestures of anonymous or mass defiance. Examples are: slogan shouting, booing, tray thumping, mass food rejection, and minor sabotage. These actions tend to take the form of “rise-getting”: a warder, guard, or attendant – or even the staff as a whole – is teased, mocked, or accorded other forms of minor abuse until he loses some measure of self-control and engages in ineffective counteraction. (Goffman 1961a: 58–59)

Whether or not it is a possible achievement in the first place, fraternization is the most identifiable attempt on the part of the inmates to transform the relation with the staff of the total institution. On a smaller scale than total transformation, conquering and replacing could entail getting a specific staff member (or multiple ones) fired, for example.

5.4. *Functions and relations of the total institution (as a) semiosphere.* It is possible to verbalize the total institution-semiosphere connection in two synonymous ways, depending on context or preference: the total institution *as* a semiosphere, or the *total institution semiosphere* as such. The total institution (as a) semiosphere is a combined abstract-concrete unit, and its semiosis is partially determined by the delimiting, contact-establishing, translating, and filtering functions of its abstract-concrete boundary (and the relations they do or do not afford).

The semiosis of the total institution (as a) semiosphere is also partially determined by the relations between its institutional aspect (the combination of its staff and the physical plant) and its inmates. These come in the form of domination, description, dynamism, and transformation. Therefore, the distinction between

the institution and the inmates of the total institution corresponds to the distinction between the core and the periphery of the semiosphere. It is thus possible to discuss the *institutional core* and the *inmate periphery* (or in a synonymous way, the institution *as a core* and the inmates *as a periphery*) of the total institution (as a) semiosphere, and the relations holding between them.

6. The prison (as a) total institution semiosphere

Before applying the combined theory of the total institution (as a) semiosphere to the prison as research object, it should be mentioned that there is also precedence in examining the prison according to each of this combined theory's respective parts taken separately. For example, the case of the prison *as a total institution* or the *prison total institution* as such (both of these verbalizations considered synonymous) is explicit: Goffman (1961b: xiv) states that the theory of the total institution itself draws heavily "on two examples that feature involuntary membership – mental hospitals and prisons". For Goffman, the prison institution is central to the definition of the total institution and, alongside mental hospitals, is considered one of its examples *par excellence*:

A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prisons serve as a clear example, providing we appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws. (Goffman 1961b: xiii)

The case of the semiosphere is not explicit: just as the theory has never been applied to that of the total institution, it has also never been applied more narrowly to the prison-object either. However, the understanding of the prison in contemporary prison ethnography does imply a certain precedence in discussing the prison *as a semiosphere*, or the *prison semiosphere* as such (again, these verbalizations are considered synonymous).

According to Cunha (2014: 217, 222), the field of prison ethnography is trending towards examining and problematizing the "porosity of prison boundaries", with prison walls being considered "more permeable". In current prison ethnography, prisons are seen to be pouring out of their "local margins" or "physical walls" with an "increasing number of goods, services, and communications" flowing through them (Cunha 2014: 222). That is, prison ethnography as it currently stands is "organized around a main line of discussion: The prison-society relation and the

articulation between intramural and extramural worlds”, with its “central theme” being the “prison-society nexus”, or the relation between internal and external worlds (Cunha 2014: 217–218).

In examining this nexus, the prison ethnographer no longer sees the prison as a “closed, bounded universe”, authoritarian, self-referential, self-sufficient, autarchic, or insulated, but sees it as more integrated into mainstream society (Cunha 2014: 219, 222–223, 227). This is Johns’s (2014: 99) “axiomatic” understanding of prison culture leaking out into the post-prison “sphere”. The use of terms such as ‘sphere’, ‘relation’, and ‘boundary’¹⁴ in contemporary prison ethnography does indicate a certain precedence in approaching the prison as a semiosphere.

The prison has thus been explicitly described as a total institution, on the one hand, and implicitly described as a semiosphere, on the other one. It is thus entirely valid to speak separately of the prison (as a) total institution or the prison (as a) semiosphere, respectively. However, given that the two theories can be combined into one, it is just as valid to describe the prison according to the united conception of the total institution (as a) semiosphere.

Therefore, instead of prisons being understood as total institutions or semiospheres taken separately, the following section will discuss the prison *as* a total institution semiosphere, or according to its synonymous equivalent, the *prison total institution semiosphere* as such. Consequently, everything that has thus far been stated about the semiosphere, total institution, and combined total institution (as a) semiosphere is also applicable to the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere more specifically. Furthermore, this new framework also opens up the prison to further examination.

6.1. *The prison: non-semiotic space and the relativity of spaces.* The prison (as a) total institution semiosphere is a concrete, physical, or territorial space corresponding more or less with an abstract semiotic space: it is a hybrid unit of physical space and the space of semiosis (communication, information, meaning), as is its extra-semiotic space of environing society, and its surrounding non-semiotic space. As regards the latter, a natural environment such as a desert may serve as an example of the non-semiotic space surrounding the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere.

In the novel *Holes* by Louis Sachar (2000[1998]: 14), a new inmate arriving to the Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility is asked by one of the authorities if he sees any guard towers or electric fences, to which he answers in the negative. Indeed, the authority explains that since Camp Green Lake has the only water

¹⁴ Cunha (2014: 217) even posits ‘prison boundaries’ as one of the keywords of her review.

for a hundred miles, such precautions are unnecessary (Sachar 2000[1998]: 15). Built on the site of a dried-up lake, the surroundings of the camp are described as a “barren and desolate” land, “dry, flat wasteland”, or “vast wasteland” (Sachar 2000[1998]: 3, 11, 14). In this scenario, Camp Green Lake is the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere, and if its members interpret the surrounding desert as being devoid of any and all semiosis, then this “wasteland” is understood by them as surrounding non-semiotic space.

At other times, however, the surrounding desert is explicitly described in terms of the danger posed by its inhabitants, including rattlesnakes and scorpions; the most dangerous creatures, however, are the so-called “yellow-spotted lizards”, which are the only things (inmates included) that the authority would be willing to “waste” a bullet on (Sachar 2000[1998]: 3–4, 14–15). Indeed, the creatures of the surrounding desert are oftentimes considered or discussed in terms of their proclivities: one inmate uses their tendency to bite humans to get himself transferred out of the facility, and it is a conversation point that buzzards eat human remains (Sachar 2000[1998]: 15, 157–158).

In this case, from the perspective of the inhabitants of the Camp Green Lake prison (as a) total institution semiosphere, the desert is indeed seen as a space of semiosis – even if this semiosis is non-human or animal – and is thus understood by the members of Camp Green Lake as surrounding extra-semiotic space. The ascription of either non- or extra-semiotic status to the surrounding space of the Camp Green Lake prison (as a) total institution semiosphere is thus a matter of relativity or perspective.

From an objective viewpoint, the surrounding desert environment of Camp Green Lake is indeed a semiosphere:¹⁵ it is factually correct to ascribe it the status of extra-semiotic space from the perspective of the Camp Green Lake inhabitants. However, the question of whether or not this space is *actually* a space of semiotics is irrelevant: in cases where members of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere deny or ignore the desert’s nature as a semiosphere – understanding

¹⁵ There is precedence in thinking of animal, natural, or non-human environments as semiospheres. Lotman (2005[1984]: 206–208) himself, for instance, constructed his theory of the semiosphere in analogy with the theory of the biosphere. For an overview of Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere, theories of the biosphere and related theories, and theories explicitly connecting the semiosphere with the biosphere, see Kaie Kotov and Kalevi Kull (2006). Just one example of the latter is Jesper Hoffmeyer’s theory of the semiosphere; for a representative sample, see Hoffmeyer (2008: 6–7, 12–18). Hoffmeyer’s theory – formulated independently of Lotman’s (Kotov, Kull 2006: 198) – posits the semiosphere as the totality of signs or cues with either actual or potential interpretation on the part of all of the individual animals and species existing together in a common natural world (such as a forest ecosystem), shared according to any type of medium or “means of semiosis” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 6–7, 12–18).

it as devoid of any and all semiosis whatsoever, regardless of its actual semiotic processes – the desert has the status of non-semiotic space for the members of the prison total institution semiosphere (it is not considered a semiosphere or semiotic environment at all from their perspective).

6.2. *Prison boundaries.* The prison (as a) total institution semiosphere is also characterized by physical-cum-symbolic barriers which divide it from its outside extra- and non-semiotic space. These barriers play the role of the boundary in its function of delimitation, but although they are concrete, they nonetheless also possess an abstract characteristic, and are thus hybrid forms. The staff members who bridge and leverage the home and institutional worlds are also examples of hybrid boundaries, who fulfill the function of establishing contact or uniting the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere with its surrounding spaces.

Certain staff members of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere also fulfill the translation function of the boundary: from the internal direction outwards, letter- or mail-texts get translated into an external language of moral principles by interpreters who are allowed to leave the premises and operate in both institutional and home worlds, with the hopes of giving the prison in question a positive evaluation on behalf of its extra-semiotic space (i.e. the semiosphere of wider society).¹⁶

Staff members of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere also fulfill the translational functions of the boundary from the external direction inwards. For example, a total institution (such as a prison) may be surrounded by an expanse of water, as noted by Goffman (1961a: 4). But before members of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere can even consider it at all or in any way, this water has the status of non-text, being part of what is here considered non-semiotic space: staff members must thus textualize this body of water, transforming it into a so-called “water-text”. Now textualized, the water-text may be translated into the internal language(s) of the total institution, in order to give the latter its substance. For example, the surrounding water (as a text) may be used by staff members to remind inmates that the total institution is truly inescapable, just as the desert was used by the authority figure in *Holes*.

Alongside the translational function of textualization-cum-translation, staff members also simply translate texts, this time from the external direction inwards. In Jerome Washington’s (1998[1994]) short story “Barracuda and Sheryl”, a prison

¹⁶ Even in cases where staff live on site, the institutional and home worlds remain clearly differentiated: the warden of Camp Green Lake, for example, has a log cabin of her own very clearly marked off from the rest of the prison and its tents, near the only two trees in the area, from which she hangs a hammock (Sachar 2000[1998]: 3).

pimp called Barracuda orders a “life-size, inflatable rubber doll” with “the shape of a young woman” called Sheryl from “a hard core porno mag”, wherein its qualities for use as a sex doll were praised. The prison guard who intercepted this package warns Barracuda that he will need to return it to the sender, citing prison regulations such as a ban on inmate toys, alongside the general “perversion” of Barracuda he seemingly finds repugnant. Barracuda’s counterargument begins with his “legal and constitutional” claims to the doll and “to the pursuit of happiness”, but ends with his “last ditch effort” in the form of a confession: “I just want to take it out to the Main Yard and pimp it to other guys” (Washington 1998[1994]). The consequences were as follows:

The guard listened with keen ears for a deal, but when Barracuda failed to make him an offer, the guard confiscated the doll as contraband and ordered Barracuda locked in an observation cell. The next day, the guard gave Sheryl to Leon Greeneyes, another pimp, who promised to cut him in on the profits. (Washington 1998[1994])

In this scenario, the so-called “Sheryl-text” has been translated from the external direction inwards, into an internal language of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere. This language is one of the informal or illicit economy of the inmate world, and the boundary role is played by a corrupt prison guard.

Certain staff members of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere may also fulfill the filtration function of the boundary, which at its extreme involves not only limiting but outright rejecting letter- or mail-texts, and not just transforming (censoring) them. While this type of filtration occurs from the internal direction outwards, the staff member boundary also filters from the direction of the external to the internal: if the prison guard in Washington’s short story was more honest and had actually returned the doll to its sender, this would be a case of filtration-as-explicit-textual-rejection from the external direction inwards.

6.3. *Core and periphery relations in the prison.* The prison (as a) total institution semiosphere is also characterized by the basic split between an institutional core and inmate periphery, wherein the same processes of domination, description, dynamism, and transformation hold, and the same phenomena – including tyrannization, regimentation, systems of authority and echelon, restriction, pressures, planning, warehousing, purported reformation, spatial specialization, individual recalcitrance, fraternalization, and so forth – exist or may exist.

6.4. *Functions and relations of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere.* The semiosis of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere as an abstract–concrete unit is thus partially determined by the relations that its abstract–concrete boundary does or does not afford, in its functions of delimitation, establishing contact, translating (either internally or externally, and in the former case sometimes involving textualization), and filtration (sometimes involving rejection). This semiosis is also partially determined by the relations – of domination, description, dynamism, and transformation – holding between the institutional core and inmate periphery of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere.

The prison may thus be described as a total institution, as a semiosphere, or as a combined total institution semiosphere. Each of these descriptions entails different consequences for contemporary prison ethnography. For Cunha (2014: 222, 225), the new approach of studying the prison beyond its walls – or in an implicit manner, as a semiosphere – belongs to a novel tradition challenging the explicit “Goffmanian model” of the prison as a total institution, or “Goffmanian-type depictions” of the prison as a “world apart”. Describing the prison as a total institution thus has the consequence of getting the idea rejected in contemporary prison ethnography, while describing the prison as a semiosphere is in line with its current understanding of the prison as such.

Based on the opposition of closed versus open, it is thus possible to read out a potential contradiction between describing prisons as total institutions, on the one hand, and describing prisons as semiospheres, on the other hand, as presented in current prison ethnography. However, it has been demonstrated that combining the theory of the semiosphere with the theory of the total institution is unproblematic: the two theories prove very much compatible with each other, i.e. there is not actually any contradiction holding between them. The rejection of Goffman’s original theory in current prison ethnography thus seems unmerited, and one does not necessarily have to accept the premise that Goffman’s original theory is incompatible with the direction of contemporary prison ethnography.

Indeed, Goffman (1961a: 13) was well aware of the relation of total institutions to the wider world, as his discussion of home and institutional worlds demonstrates. He even spoke of the “permeability” of total institutions, which he used to refer to “the degree to which the social standards maintained within the institution and the social standards maintained in the enviroing society have influenced each other, the consequence being to minimize differences” (Goffman 1961a: 119). The issue of permeability, “incidentally, gives us opportunity to consider some of the dynamic relations between a total institution and the wider society that supports or tolerates it” (Goffman 1961a: 119). So while Goffman’s

permeability may differ from Cunha's in its specifics – while the former posits an analogy between total institutions and wider society, the degree of which provides material for typologizing different total institutions, the latter does not, focusing instead on the relations between these two arenas – it cannot be said that Goffman ignored or was unaware of the prison's wider contextual relations.

However, it is true that Goffman's original theory of the total institution nonetheless emphasizes different facets of the prison than those currently considered in contemporary prison ethnography, namely, its internal relations, as opposed to its external ones. On this note, it could be said that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere actually refines the theory of the total institution by giving equal emphasis to its external relations, both in general and in the field of prison ethnography proper. Hypothetically speaking, this allows for the continued inclusion of the total-institutional conception in the field of prison ethnography, albeit in a slightly modified form.

For example, in Goffman's original theory – but using the metalanguage of the theory of the semiosphere introduced in this article – emphasis was on the internal relations between the institutional core and the inmate periphery, as well as the delimiting function of the boundary. Meanwhile, the other boundary functions – establishing contact, translating, and filtering – were always framed according to how they supported or described the internal relations of the total institution. Contextually speaking, emphasis was more on the external relations that these functions *did not* afford, than on what they afforded. However, Goffman's theory as refined by Lotman's places equal emphasis on what the boundary functions of establishing contact, translating, and filtering actually *do* afford, as regards external relations. That is, Lotman's theory refines Goffman's theory and makes the latter compatible with the direction of contemporary prison ethnography; this can be demonstrated as follows.

According to Cunha,¹⁷ the examinations done by contemporary prison ethnographers of the external relations holding between the prison world and wider

¹⁷ Cunha's (2014) overview of contemporary prison ethnography is an example of a work written in an analytical or neutral mode: she begins her review by citing Chantraine and stating that the works which she is overviews are possessed of "descriptive-foci and are not to be confounded with prison-centrism as an ideology endorsing prison itself" (Cunha 2014: 218). This amounts to saying that she is not overviews pro-prison normative works. Of course, this also implies that she *is* including anti-prison normative works, or works mixing normative anti-prison and analytical modes. Regardless, although she may be overviews complete or hybrid normative works – such as Chantraine, Rhodes, and Wacquant – Cunha herself does not enter into the normative mode, instead staying within the analytical one by discussing the contents of works written in anti-prison discourse matter-of-factly.

society generally follow one of two paths: (1) emphasis is placed on the workings of the institution – on its agents, practices, and actual physicality – in relation to wider society, or (2) emphasis is placed “on prisoners and their social worlds, both within and outside prison walls” (Cunha 2014: 218–225). In other words, (1) emphasis is placed on either the external relation of what Goffman called the “institution” (including both the staff and the physical plant of the prison) to the wider society, or (2) on the external relation of what he called the “inmates” of the prison to the wider society.

Instead of totally rejecting Goffman’s original theory, then, it seems that current prison ethnography is merely opening it up, widening its applicability beyond prison walls. And in this situation of apparent conflict, at a time when prison ethnography explicitly rejects Goffman’s theory, the theory of the semiosphere refines the theory of the total institution according to the direction of contemporary prison ethnography, thus allowing for its continued inclusion in the field, although in a refined form. It is not just Lotman’s theory taken independently that is compatible with the direction of current prison ethnography, but also Goffman’s theory as refined by or in combination with Lotman’s. Since this refinement or combination allows for the continued inclusion of Goffman’s once-invalidated theory in the field of prison ethnography – but in a more developed framework – it thus follows that it has the potential to reinvigorate the entire field of prison ethnography in its time of relative decline.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this article was to combine Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere with Goffman’s theory of the total institution in order to develop a framework conducive to examining the prison as an object of study. It is thus possible to speak of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere, both abstract and concrete, characterized by the presence of an institutional core and inmate periphery, whose semiosis is partially determined by the internal relations of domination, description, dynamism, and transformation holding between these levels, and to give various examples of all of these relations. It is also possible to speak of the prison (as a) total institution semiosphere’s bidirectional, combined abstract–concrete boundary, and the external relations it does or does not afford via its functions of delimitation, establishing contact, bidirectional translation (including textualization), and bidirectional filtration (including rejection), which also partially contribute to the semiosis of this world, and also to provide diverse examples of these relations or lack thereof.

It was also demonstrated above that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere is compatible with Goffman's theory of the total institution: There is a natural fit between the ideas and examples presented independently in both conceptions, one of which is more abstract/general and the other more concrete/specific. It was demonstrated, too, that Lotman's theory actually refines Goffman's theory by placing external relations on an equal footing with internal relations, both in general and in the more narrow context of contemporary prison ethnography. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that Lotman's theory taken independently – as well as Goffman's theory as rejected by current prison ethnography (but refined by Lotman's thought) – are both compatible with the direction of contemporary prison ethnography, exemplified by the correspondence of these theories with current prison-ethnographic theorizations or conceptions. Finally, on the basis of all of the latter, it has been demonstrated that the theoretical framework presented in this article has the potential to reinvigorate the declining field of prison ethnography. The accomplishment of all of this article's objectives will thus hopefully lead to a relation of mutual benefit on both the theoretical plane, as well as in the theoretical-practical nexus.

Whether or not the theoretical and the practical enter into such a relation – or whether the framework proposed in this article actually realizes its reinvigorating potential in the context of contemporary prison ethnography – is to be determined by posterity. This article is intended for prison ethnographers focused on “just doing” prison ethnography – empirically studying the prison from the inside and the around – in an analytical or neutral mode, in order to understand how localized prison settings offer insight into broader societal, systemic, or worldly contexts (and vice versa). It is meant to offer both theorists and practitioners a re-definition of the object-level prison and a new language of description useful for the metalevel of prison studies, equally emphasizing both internal and external prison relations “scientifically” or “methodologically”, and not “ideologically” or “politically”. This work is not oriented towards providing a normative programme with the potential to “interrupt” normalizing prison discourse, for example, or stating how things should be as regards the prison (instead of how they are).

The theoretical framework presented in this article is open to further developing, owing to the richness of both the theory of the semiosphere and the theory of the total institution (and their many concepts, ideas, examples, and terms which had to be omitted from this work). This article and any future developments are and will be positioned in the context of the relative decline of prison ethnography and its need for externally-derived reinvigoration, as well as the context of few studies done applying semiotic metalanguage to the prison as research object, none applying it to the theory of the total institution, and none applying the theory of the semiosphere to either of these research objects.

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Тюрьмы как семиосферы тотальной институции

Основная цель данной статьи – соединить теорию семиосферы Юрия Лотмана (включая ее понятия границы, центра и периферии) с теорией тотального института Ирвинга Гофмана для создания методологической основы изучения тюрьмы как объекта научного исследования, в равной степени акцентируя внимание как на ее внутренних, так и на внешних связях. Эта работа позиционируется в контексте относительного упадка области тюремной этнографии, поскольку лишь немногие из проведенных исследований применяют семиотический метаязык к тюрьме или тотальному институту, и ни одно из них не применяет теорию семиосферы ни к тому, ни к другому. У статьи имеются и четыре вторичных цели. Показывается, что (1) теории Лотмана и Гофмана созвучны; (2) во многом теория Лотмана уточняет теорию Гофмана; (3) обе теории соразмерны современной тюремной этнографии; (4) новое обрамление позволяет дать новое дыхание находящейся в упадке тюремной этнографии. Цели и метаязык статьи ориентированы нейтрально, а не нормативно, т. е. статья не предлагает нормативную программу, а новый язык описания изучаемого объекта.

Vanglad kui totaalse institutsiooni semiosfäärid

Artikli põhieesmärk on panna Juri Lotmani semiosfääri teooria kokku Erving Goffmani totaalse institutsiooni teooriaga, et luua raamistik, mille kaudu saaks läheneda vanglale kui uurimisobjektile. Artiklil on ka neli sekundaarset eesmärki. Näidatakse, (1) et Lotmani ja Goffmani teooriad on omavahel kooskõlas; (2) et Lotmani teooria paljuski täpsustab Goffmani oma; (3) et Lotmani teooria iseseisvalt võetuna ja ka Goffmani teooria Lotmani teooria poolt täpsustatuna on mõlemad kooskõlas kaasaegse vanglaetnograafiaga; ja (4) uus raamistik võimaldab anda uue hingamise vanglaetnograafiale, mille allakäiku mitmed uurijad on täheldanud. Artikkel on esitatud vanglaetnograafia allakäigu kontekstis, aga ka kontekstis, kus vanglat kui totaalse institutsiooni käsitlevates uurimustes on vähe kasutatud semiootilist metakeelt ja Lotmani semiosfääri teooriat pole kordagi rakendatud. Artikkel ei ole suunitluselt normatiivne, selle põhimõte pole pakkuda välja normatiivset programmi, vaid esitada uurimisobjekti uus kirjeldus ja ka uus kirjelduskeel, millega saaks antud objektist rääkida.