

**Semiotics and dialectics:
Notes on the paper
“Literary criticism must be scientific”
by Juri Lotman**

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Abstract. The present paper is an introduction to and analysis of the article “Literary criticism must be scientific”, presented here for the first time in English translation. The original was published by Lotman in 1967 in the journal *Voprosy Literaturny*. The article by Lotman is a part of a wider debate, started in 1963, that saw structuralists and their opponents dispute the validity and heuristic value of structuralist methodology in literary criticism. The aim of the introduction is to explore Lotman’s engagements with his intellectual context as they emerge in his 1967 article. The first part of the paper discusses the wider context of the debate, and explores the positions of the opponents of structuralism and the ways in which Lotman relates to them. The second part of the paper analyses how Lotman and his structuralist colleagues related to the official Soviet ideology, the *diamat*. In both cases, it will be seen how Lotman engaged certain aspects of his opponents’ ideas, as well as the official ideology, in order to further his goal of reconciling structuralism and historicism.

Keywords: Juri Lotman; literary criticism; history of ideas; history of semiotics; structuralism.

In 1967, Juri Lotman published, in the Soviet academic journal *Voprosy Literaturny* (Questions of Literature), the paper “Literary criticism must be scientific” (written in 1965), offered here for the first time in English translation. Lotman’s article was initially entitled “*O printsipah strukturalizma v literaturovedenii*” (‘On the principles of structuralism in literary criticism’). The paper was published in an abridged form and with an editorial title that, however, would become a motto of Soviet literary structuralism.²

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² For the uncensored original text, see Lotman 2018: 65–82. While taking the original under consideration for its philological value, the translation and its analysis are of the published text, as the one which, in the end, had an impact on the wider debate on structuralism.

Since 1965 *Voprosy Literaturny* had been home to a heated debate among proponents and opponents of the use of structural methodologies in literary scholarship.³ The debate was opened as an occasion for structuralists to answer to the critiques advanced by literary scholars Leonid Timofeev (1963) and Petr Palievskij (1963). The paper by Lotman was a direct answer to an article by Valentin Kozhinov (1965), “*Vozmozhna li strukturnaya poetika?*” (‘Is structural poetics possible?’), while also containing passing remarks on the aforementioned contributions by Timofeev and Palevskij. Kozhinov was in turn responding to another article published in *Voprosy Literaturny* by structuralist scholar Isaak Revzin (1965): “*O tselyah strukturnogo izucheniya hudozhestvennogo tvorchestva*” (‘On the aims of the structural study of the work of art’).

Timofeev, Palievskij and Kozhinov, although coming from very different backgrounds, could be, for the sake of simplification, qualified as ‘orthodox Marxist-Leninists’. They were often involved in the analysis and advancement of the artistic movement known as ‘Socialist Realism’. Their theories were centred around the fundamental notion of the ‘artistic image’ (*hudozhestvennyj obraz*), borrowed from Vissarion Belinskij (1811–1848) (see Terras 1979). The term ‘*obraz*’ is quite unique to Russian thought, and it could be translated, in different contexts, as ‘image’, ‘symbol’ or ‘form’. In the context of aesthetics theory, it is used to translate the Hegelian and post-Hegelian notion of ‘*Bild*’: ‘image’, ‘form’, ‘symbol’ (Terras 1974: 56).

The notion itself is quite elusive and has a complex polysemicity. The artistic image can be generally defined as the realization, in a concrete form, of an artistic idea (Terras 1974: 127). The latter is the artist’s inner vision, the “generative idea” (Terras 1974: 129) which is the fundament of the artistic quality of the form (Belinskij 1953: 473). The idea that is given concrete form in the image is a reflection, and at the same time a generalization, of *life*: “the artistic image [is a] concrete and at the same time generalized image of human life” (Timofeev 1966: 60); a reflection “not only of its empirical facts, but also of the ideal, inner links between Life’s various phenomena” (Terras 1979: 445).

The artistic image thus allows for the reconciliation of art with life, which was seen by Marxist-Leninist scholars as a way to fulfil the expectations of realism and concreteness demanded by Socialist Realism and, at the same time, to maintain a connection with the Hegelian organicist aesthetics. As for Belinskij before them, they believed that “the [artistic] idea must be in an organic union with the form, as the soul with the body, so that to destroy the form means also to destroy the idea, and vice versa” (Belinskij 1954: 316).

³ An extensive and well-documented account of the debate and its background can be found in Seyffert 1985: 200–249. An analysis of the debate can be also found in Pilshchikov, Poseljagin, Trunin 2018: 28–37 and Lotman 2018: 83–97.

This naturally means that the attempts of structuralists to “dissect” and “analyse” the form of the work of art were met with general distrust, as separating the form from the content would have also negated any possibility to understand the artistic idea, and with this the very essence of art.

The debate

The specific issue of the debate in which Lotman participates with the paper presented here was perfectly summarized by Kozhinov (1965) in the title of his work: is structural poetics possible? The article dealt mainly with the theoretical possibility, feasibility and even opportunity of applying structural methodologies to literature.

Structuralists, such as Revzin, had no problem admitting that the application of structural methodologies to literary scholarship was in its infancy, both theoretically and methodologically, and that major achievements were yet to come (Seyffert 1985: 203). The dearth of relevant results, however, while attributed to the early stage of development by proponents of structuralism, was treated by its opponents as an admission of lack of heuristic capacity (Kozhinov 1965: 2). The discussion had therefore to move onto a more theoretical level.

Before pinpointing some of the most relevant theoretical points discussed by Lotman, I wish to make a few remarks about the more polemical aspects that emerge from his paper: the fierce and sometimes unfair attacks, the “facile” quotes and the dubious ideological appeals (Seyffert 1985: 225–230) offer a very peculiar image of the author, unfamiliar especially to those scholars who approach Lotman for his later works on cultural semiotics.

The writing style, reflecting the common trend of polemical articles of the time, was fierce, cutting and at times outright irreverent (even in the watered-down censored version), so surprisingly far from contemporary academic style. Lotman included in his article not so subtle attacks *ad personam* (“V. Kozhinov attempts to master the that he believes to be specifically semiotic terminology without any success.” [486]) and frustrated remarks on the academic *establishment* (“In the humanities [...] there is the silent agreement that only one factor determines the possibility for the solution of all problems: its inclusion in the research plan of an institute or in a publishing contract.” [490]). Such attacks betray “the exasperation of someone forced to argue the obvious before an incompetent court” (Seyffert 1985: 229), and the frustration of someone feeling locked in a struggle against slumbering, conservative yet powerful institutions.

⁴ Page references are to this issue.

From the point of view of the history of ideas, the paper is interesting in giving us the measure of the connectedness of Lotman with the issues and academic debates of his time. By analysing Lotman's position within his intellectual context, it is also possible to observe how his idea of structuralism differed from that of the other, especially Muscovite, structuralists, and how he related to the previous "domestic" tradition.

It is of little doubt that the paper itself, within the context of the 1960s debate, has many limitations (as also pointed out in Seyffert 1985: 229–230). It does however contain, amidst the argumentative parries and counterattacks, many references to that what would then become major topics of Lotman's cultural semiotics research agenda, often in their early stage of elaboration. It is possible for instance to encounter passages mentioning the meaning-making function of translation ("certain features of a given structure are discovered only when we read it through the 'eyes' of a structure of another kind" [495]) and to the semiotics of emotions [496]. This shows very clearly how most of the concepts and ideas of his later cultural semiotics originate from his earlier reflections on literary criticism, and bear direct continuity not only with his structuralism, which for Lotman was a relatively late acquisition,⁵ as well as the previous tradition of Russian literary theory: formalism, certainly, but also with those "[scholars] that spoke against it" (Lotman 2018: 247). For this purpose, one of the most peculiar remarks he makes, which I will explore in the continuation of the present paper, is the claim on the dialectical nature of structuralism [488].

As Seyffert (1985: 229) points out, and Lotman himself implies – "the style of the offence determines also the style of the defence" [487], as he declares right before resorting to a second-hand quote from Karl Marx – a significant part of the debate verged on "political" or "ideological" claims, i.e. on a demonstrable harmony with the official ideology. From a methodological standpoint, however, to assume that any and all references by Lotman to dialectics could be reduced as empty phraseology would be incorrect, and a disservice to his rigour as a scholar. On the contrary, Lotman appears to go above and beyond a mere complacent and empty, however compulsory, appeal to official jargon. As I will try to show, while in the paper he strenuously defends structuralism against its opponents, at the same time he incorporates, within *his* structuralism, many ideas and topics of different traditions – *including* those of its opponents. As was typical of his research approach: by putting different ideas in a dialogue, he opened them to new meanings and new possibilities, overcoming the limitations imposed by the official ideology.

⁵ Lotman's earliest known involvement with structuralism is a series of lectures given at the University of Tartu between 1958 and 1963 (Seyffert 1985: 197).

Structuralists and the official ideology

As mentioned above, Lotman appeals in his paper to the dialectical nature of structuralism. The problem of the relationship between structuralism and Hegelo-Marxist dialectics was, at the time, extensively debated in Western Europe. In particular, a debate was ongoing between Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre (Brown 1978). Lotman was aware of the debate and the positions of its participants, as his then-unpublished encyclopedic article on literary structuralism testifies (see Lotman 2018: 239, 242 and Igor Pilshchikov's notes 79 and 104).

However, when the participants in the debate on literary structuralism, as well as most of the Soviet scholarly production of that time, appeal to the notion of *dialectics*, they refer to, or at least have to confront, something very specific. By 'dialectics' one should read *dialectical materialism*, also known as *diamat*, the official philosophical doctrine of the Soviet Union. More precisely, 'dialectics' refers to the "Marxist dialectical methodology" (Stalin 1997[1938]: 254), one of the main components of *diamat* together with the "Marxist philosophical materialism" (Stalin 1997[1938]: 260). As it was somewhat difficult for structuralism to sell itself as *materialist*, most of the claims verged around the notion of *dialectics* (see e.g. Shaumyan 1952: 2 and 1960).

In its broadest sense, 'dialectics' means that the essential laws that lie at the foundation of culture and nature share some common and stable characteristics: "phenomena should be considered not only from the standpoint of their interconnection and interdependence, but also from the standpoint of their movement, their change, their development, their coming into being and going out of being". (Stalin 1997[1938]: 255). Processes of development and evolution, both in nature and in human society, are propelled by the internal contradictory tendencies of any object, whose clash generates the (evolutionary) motion: "development is the 'struggle' of the opposites" (Stalin 1997[1938]: 257).

As with most official ideologies, the counterpoint to such vague definitions is the fact that they do not provide a precise criterion to decide which texts and ideas could be declared "orthodox" or "heretic", leaving ample room for debate. The battle for ideological hegemony continued unquelled even at the height of Stalinism. In the debates of Soviet Academia, the contenders constantly attempted to define their own theory as the true incarnation of *diamat* and – in terms of Lotman's cultural semiotics – aimed to assume a dominant position and the right to speak for the rest of the cultural space (Lotman 1985[1983]: 132).⁶

⁶ Numerous historians have attempted to show how, even during Stalinism, it was possible to find discordant voices in the USSR, challenging the "official" doctrines of their field, such as Lysenkoism, Marrism, etc., often at a great personal cost, or at least seeking to create

Even for structuralists it was painfully impossible to shy away from this game. Shaumyan, for example, can often barely contain his contempt for “any attempt at philosophical interpretation of structuralism” (Shaumyan 1960: 72). He is however forced to discuss the philosophical (i.e. ideological) content of structuralism in the public arena. For example, while defending the notion of ‘phoneme’, Shaumyan points out how, in accordance with the principles of *dialectics*, the phoneme emerges when the same phenomenon is considered “in its relations with its surrounding phenomena” (Stalin in Shaumyan 1956: 334):

from a dialectics point of view, the essence of the sounds of a language is exhausted in its pure physical qualities when we consider them together with other physical phenomena. However, as soon as we bring the sounds in connection with the functional nature of language, [...] we are not dealing with sound anymore, but with phonemes. (Shaumyan 1956: 334)

Shaumyan encases his notion of the phoneme – that he ultimately claims to be derived from the ideas of Baudouin de Courtenay (Shaumyan 1956: 332) – within the principles of *diamat*. The relative validity of his argument relies on the fact that official ideology itself, from a philosophical standpoint, is *empty*.

Revzin’s (1965) appeal to dialectics follows the same general principles, yet even less enthusiastically. The structural approach to the study of literature, Revzin concedes, is “reductionist”, as it tries to “reduce the laws (*zakonomernost*) of the complex object of a given science (for example, the living cell in biology) to the laws of the object [...] of another science (for example to the laws of physics and chemistry)” (Revzin 1965, Ch. 1 *O spetsifichnosti...*, par. 2). The approach of his opponents, in this case Palievskij, can be called ‘irreductionist’. Both approaches, Revzin claims, are functional to each other, as each constantly forces the other to review its principles and challenges its basic assumptions. Dialectical materialism states that development in any form results from the so-called “struggle of the opposites”. The dialectical nature of structuralism is thus proven, according to Revzin, by the fact that it is a fundamental moment in the dialectical evolution of science.

and maintain enclaves where alternative ideas could survive (see e.g. Graham 1993). In the linguistic field in the 1920s–1940s, for example, the dominance of Marrism was seldom left uncontested (see Smith 1998).

Lotman and Soviet ideology

An important difference between Lotman and his structuralist colleagues can be found in how they deal with dialectical materialism. When considering the tenet of *diamat* that phenomena should be considered from the standpoint of their interconnection and interdependence, Lotman takes an approach similar to that of his colleagues, showing how the structuralist methodology is founded on the interconnectedness of the elements, and the relationality of their meaning. However, when dealing with the tenet that phenomena should be considered also from the standpoint of their movement, their change, their development, their coming into being and going out of being, Lotman pursues a different agenda.

By proclaiming the necessity for an alliance between structuralism and history Lotman is not – or not only – trying to please the official ideology. He is attempting to reconnect structuralism to the ideas of his own professors at the University, such as Nikolaj Mordovchenko (1904–1951) and Grigorij Gukovskij (1902–1950). Lotman saw in their works an attempt to merge the historicist methodology with a “formalist” or “synchronic” approach to the text, in an effort to overcome the shortcomings of the Marxist sociological literary criticism (De Bortoli 2016; Marzaduri 1989). While Mordovchenko’s approach cannot be described as ‘formalist’, according to Lotman he received numerous “creative impulses” from scholars such as Tynyanov and Eihenbaum, which led him to acquire a “double perspective” on the artistic text, considered both as the “document of an epoch” and as a “work of art, a text of a completely special nature” (Lotman 2005: 69). This allowed Mordovchenko to consider the literary facts from the double perspective of historicism and of their internal organization. The attempt of his teachers to merge “historicism” and “synchronic analysis” had a lasting impact on Lotman, influencing his research agenda for the decades to come (see Markovich 2002; Strada 1984).

Through his university education, Lotman was also well acquainted with the ideas of his opponents in the debate on structuralism, and of their putative father Belinskij. When discussing the structuralist methodology, rather than rejecting confrontation with the opponents (as Revzin does, for example), Lotman attempts to integrate their views into his new structuralist methodology. Contrary to Revzin, he presents structuralism not as the polar opposite of its opponents’ theory, but as the result of dialectical development, as the *resolution* of the contradiction between historicism and formalism. The biological analogy employed by Revzin is completely transfigured. Lotman compares the relation between the structure of the artwork and the ‘artistic idea’ to the relation between the physical nature of the cell and life: life is considered as the realization of the function of the cell as a

self-regulating system [491]. This notion is easily recognizable as referencing the analogous position of Belinskij and Lotman's opponents in the debates.

However, Lotman is not simply mirroring the ideas of his opponents. Rather he is *translating* their ideas *within* the structuralist framework. To do so, he reads the ideas through the lens of different authors: for example, he reads Belinskij's Hegelian theory of the *obraz* through the lens of Leibnitzian monadology (in turn, through a Hegelian reading of Leibniz).⁷ When Lotman says that "the artistic idea is the life of the (artistic) work" he is thus employing a precise philosophical terminology in which 'life' is to be understood as the *realization of the function of the soul*. However, while for Belinskij the soul-body relationship was incarnated in the relationship between the artistic idea and the image, Lotman sees the same relationship between the text and its structure (Restaneo 2018: 10). The artistic idea is the realization of the function of the structure.

In this way, Lotman transposes in structuralist terms the notion of '*obraz*', opening up the possibility to analyse what was previously un-analysable (the "indissoluble core" [488]). As the 'artistic idea' will always remain semantically open, precisely due to the fact that its meaning cannot be exhausted by the elements of the structure and the laws of their connections, this approach also circumvents any accusation of reductionism. The openness of the work of art gives new importance to the problem of the interpretation of the reader, which Lotman stresses on different occasions (e.g. Lotman 1977: 21–22).

The attempt to reconcile and overcome the opposition between historicist and formalist methodology will remain one of the ultimate goals of Lotman's cultural semiotics, until the very end. Still in the very last years of his life, Lotman saw in the reconciliation of history and structuralism the birth of *cultural semiotics*:

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: 53)

⁷ Lotman's familiarity with Leibniz has been already noted by Laura Gherlone (2013: 399). For an historical reconstruction of Lotman's reception of Leibniz, see Restaneo 2018.

In place of a conclusion

It is not my intention, in this short paper, to delve further into the complicated relationship between Lotman, his contemporary debate and the official ideology. I simply wish to offer a small sample of the possibilities that a polemical paper, such as the one presented below, can offer in reconstructing the labyrinth of dialogues and translations that Lotman was at the centre of. Perhaps this can contribute to a better understanding of an author whose seemingly infinite connections with the domestic and international history of literary scholarship, semiotics and philosophy, to quote the title of a paper by Gherlone (2019), “continue to astonish”.

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Semiotica e dialettica. Appunti sull’articolo “La scienza letteraria deve essere scientifica” di Juri Lotman

Il presente articolo vuole introdurre e analizzare il saggio “La scienza letteraria deve essere scientifica” di Juri Lotman, presentato qui in traduzione inglese per la prima volta. L’originale fu pubblicato nel 1967 sulla rivista *Voprosy Literatury*. L’articolo di Lotman si inserisce in un dibattito più ampio, iniziato nel 1963, in cui gli strutturalisti e i loro avversari disputavano della validità e del valore euristico del metodo strutturale nel campo delle scienze letterarie. Lo scopo della presente introduzione è di esplorare i rapporti di Lotman con il suo contesto intellettuale, così come emergono nell’articolo del 1967. Nella prima parte sarà ricostruito il dibattito sui metodi strutturali, le posizioni degli avversari dello strutturalismo e il modo con cui Lotman affronta le questioni da loro poste. Nella

seconda parte sarà analizzato il modo con cui Lotman e i suoi colleghi strutturalisti si relazionavano all'ideologia sovietica ufficiale, il *diamat*. In entrambi i casi si mostrerà come Lotman tenesse in considerazione alcuni aspetti del pensiero dei suoi avversari e dell'ideologia ufficiale, allo scopo di portare avanti il proprio obiettivo di riconciliare strutturalismo e storicismo.

Semiootika ja dialektika. Märkusi Juri Lotmani artikli "Kirjandusteadus peab olema teaduslik" juurde

Antud kirjutis on sissejuhatus artiklile "Kirjandusteadus peab olema teaduslik", mis ilmub käesolevaga esmakordselt inglise keeles, ning selle artikli analüüs. Lotmani originaal ilmus 1967. aastal ajakirjas *Voprosy Literatury*. Lotmani artikkel on osa laiaulatuslikumast debatist, mis sai alguse 1963. aastal ning mille käigus strukturalistid ja nende vastased vaidlesid kirjandusteaduses strukturalistliku meetodika kasutamise valiidsuse ning heuristilise väärtuse üle. Sissejuhatuse eesmärk on uurida Lotmani seoseid tema intellektuaalse kontekstiga, nagu need ta 1967. aasta artiklis ilmsiks tulevad. Artikli esimeses osas käsitletakse debati avaramat konteksti ning vaadeldakse strukturalismi oponentide seisukohti ja viise, kuidas Lotman nendega suhestub. Artikli teises osas analüüsitakse, kuidas Lotman ning tema strukturalistidest kolleegid suhestusid ametliku Nõukogude ideoloogia, nn "diamatiga". Mõlemal puhul on näha, kuidas Lotman kasutab oma vastaste ideede teatavaid aspekte ja nende ametlikku ideoloogiat selleks, et edendada oma püüet lepitada omavahel strukturalism ning historitsism.