

SEMIOTICS OF CONFLICT

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SEMIOTICS OF CONFLICT

A LOTMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

Edited by Daniele Monticelli,
Merit Maran and Franciscu Sedda

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Brian James Baer is Professor of Russian and Translation Studies at Kent State University. He is founding editor of the journal *Translation and Interpreting Studies* and co-editor of the book series *Literatures, Cultures, Translation* (Bloomsbury) and *Translation Studies in Translation* (Routledge). His publications include the monographs *Other Russias, Translation and the Making of Modern Russian Literature*, and *Queer Theory and Translation Studies*, as well as the collected volumes *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Re-thinking Translation Pedagogy*, with Geoffrey Koby, *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia, Researching Translation and Interpreting*, with Claudia Angelelli, *Translation in Russian Contexts*, with Susanna Witt, *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, with Klaus Kaindl, and *Teaching Literature in Translation: Pedagogical Contexts and Reading Practices*, with Michelle Woods. His most recent translations include *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics*, by Juri Lotman, *Introduction to Translation Theory*, by Andrei Fedorov, and *Red Crosses* by Sasha Filipenko. He is the current president of the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association.

Cristina Demaria is Full Professor of Semiotics at the Department of the Arts of the University of Bologna, where she teaches semiotics of conflict. Her main research interests are semiotics of conflict and post-conflict situations, semiotics of memory and trauma, memory and gender, and gender representations in the media. Amongst her publications are Cristina Demaria (ed.) *Post-conflict Cultures: A Reader*, London, CCCP Press, 2021, and, with Patrizia Violi, *Reading Memory Spaces through Signs*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

Laura Gherlone is a researcher in semiotics at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina. She is also assistant professor of Russian Literature at the Catholic University of Argentina, Buenos Aires. Previously, she was a researcher in Italy. Laura's work focuses on four lines of research: 1. the relationship between space, emotion and decoloniality and its connection with the ecocritical perspective (Anthropocene); 2. the re-reading of late Lotman in the light of the affective, spatial and decolonial turn; 3. the relationship between post- and decolonial thought and the Soviet and post-Soviet experience; 4. the elaboration of a theoretical-ethical framework related to digital decoloniality.

Eduardo Chávez Herrera holds a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Warwick (UK) and is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Rennes 2 (France) in the framework of the *Ce qui nous concerne* project. His main research interests lie in the intersection of cultural semiotics, discourse analysis, interactional linguistics and the history of linguistic ideas. He is the associate editor of the Spanish-language online journal *Refracción. Revista de Lingüística Materialista*. His most recent publication is "On the Institutional (Dis)organisation of Semiotics As a Discipline", published in *Estudos Semióticos* (Brazil).

Israel León O'Farrill holds a PHD in Mesoamerican Studies, UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México); an MD in Mexican History, UAEH (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo); and Major in Communication Sciences, UIC (Universidad Intercontinental). He is a full-time Professor and Researcher at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), México, in the Faculty of Arts (Philosophy and Letters) in both bachelor and postgraduate studies in History and Literature. His main research topics are the Mayans, history, literature, semiotics of culture. He is a columnist for the *Jornada de Oriente* journal in Puebla, México and an author of academic articles and book chapters. His most

recent books are *Symbol, Alterity and Text: Bakhtin and Lotman from Literature and Culture* (2023), *My Word to the Face of the Sky, to the Face of the Earth: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Written Legacy of the Mayan Peoples* (2021), *Rey Kanek: History and Myth in the Construction of the Itza' Identity* (2020) and *The Indians Have Risen! Canek, Changes and Continuities of a Mayan Symbol* (2018). He belongs to the National Investigation System, level I.

Anna Maria Lorusso is full professor at the Department of Arts of Bologna University, where she teaches Semiotics. From 2017 to 2021 she was president of the Italian Association of Semiotics. Her research is focused on the semiotics of culture, with two main fields of research: logic of information (post-truth, fake news, etc.) and cultural memory. Among her last English publications, she edited “Perspectives on Post-Truth”, a thematic issue of *Social Epistemology* (2023, 37) and “A Sociosemiotic Critique: A Lotmanian Perspective”, a thematic issue of *Social Semiotics* (2023). In 2016 she authored *Cultural Semiotics*, published by Palgrave-MacMillan.

Merit Maran is the director of the Juri Lotman Semiotics Repository at Tallinn University. She received her PhD in semiotics from the University of Tartu in 2023. Her research interests are Juri Lotman's semiotics, education studies and complexity theory. She is a member of the Transmedia Research Group, which investigates new education practices based on Lotman's semiotics of culture. Together with Katarina Damčević and Lona Päll she taught the Semiotics of Conflict lecture course at the University of Tartu in 2018 and 2020, organised an international spring school under the same title in 2019, and hosted a public lecture series titled Semiotics of Conflict at Semiosalong (the after-hours semiotic salon in Tartu) in November and December 2019.

Daniele Monticelli is a Professor of Semiotics and Translation Studies at Tallinn University. His research is characterised by a wide

range of interests, including translation history, comparative literature and contemporary critical theory. More recently his work has focused on the potentialities and constraints of translation in contexts of radical cultural and social change, the construction and deconstruction of national identities in Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, censorship and dissidence under communism and contemporary debates on world literature and translation. Another focus of his research has been Juri Lotman's later works with particular attention to the notions of history and unpredictability. Among his most recent publications are the co-edited volumes *Italianistica 2.0 Tradizione e innovazione* (2020), *Translation Under Communism* (2021), and the *Routledge Handbook of the History of Translation Studies* (2024).

Mario Panico is a lecturer and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam, where he teaches heritage and memory theory. He works on collective and cultural nostalgia, as well as the representations of perpetrators at trauma sites and in museums. His next book, *Spaces for Nostalgia: Difficult Memories and Material Consolations*, will be published in 2024 by Palgrave Macmillan.

Igor Pilshchikov is professor and chair of the UCLA Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages and Cultures, and research professor of cultural semiotics and Russian literature at Tallinn University. He is founding academic editor of the Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature and Folklore (feb-web.ru) and the information system on Comparative Poetics and Comparative Literature (cpcl.info), editor of the journals *Studia Metrica et Poetica* (University of Tartu Press) and *Pushkin Review* (Slavica Publishers). He has authored three books and more than 200 articles on Russian poetry, poetics, verse theory, comparative literature, literary theory, cultural semiotics, and digital humanities.

Pietro Restaneo is a researcher at the Institute for the European Intellectual Lexicon and History of Ideas at the National Research Council (CNR-ILIESI) in Rome, Italy. He holds a PhD in Philosophy of Language. His main research interest concerns the history of language sciences, with a special focus on the history of semiotics and philosophy of language in the USSR. He has published papers, among others, on the influence of Leibnitian philosophy on Juri Lotman, and on the relationship between Soviet linguistics and Antonio Gramsci.

Franciscu Sedda is Full Professor of Semiotics at the University of Cagliari where he teaches Cultural Semiotics. He has been visiting professor at Harvard University and Pontificia Universidade de São Paulo. He has dedicated most of his research to developing a dialogue with Lotman, studying, applying and innovating the Lotmanian approach to culture and semiotics, with particular reference to topics such as Sardinian culture, globalisation and glocalisation, politics and digital populism, cultural translation, unpredictability. He has edited and introduced several collections of Lotman's essays – *Tesi per una semiotica delle culture* (Rome, 2006), *Retorica* (Rome, 2021), *La semiosfera* (with Salvestroni, Milan, 2022) and co-edited two special numbers of *Social Semiotics* (with Lorusso, 2022) and *De Signis* (with Merkoulova, Martín, Aran, Lozano, 2022) – in order to celebrate and update the Lotmanian perspective on memory and communication. He wrote the entry “Semiotics of Culture(s)” for the *International Handbook of Semiotics*, edited for Springer by P. P. Trifonas (2015).

Patrizia Violi, now Alma Mater Professor, was Full Professor of Semiotics of the University of Bologna. Her main research interests over the last 20 years have been semiotics of memory and culture, sites of trauma, and relationships between art and memory. Amongst her publications are *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2017; *Looking into Death: Trauma, Memory and*

the Human Face, Topoi, September 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-022-09818-w>; Cristina Demaria, Patrizia Violi, eds. *Reading Memory Spaces through Signs*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

Nicola Zengiaro is a PhD candidate in Semiotics at the University of Bologna, focusing on biosemiotics and ecosemiotics. His research explores how complexity theories challenge and redefine the boundaries between life and non-life in semiotics and biology. He is part of the Landscape and Environmental Semiotics research group at TraMe and the CULT-UP project, studying relationships between plastic materials and cultural heritage. He has published several articles in peer-reviewed journals, including *Biosemiotics*, *Lexia*, *Versus*, *E/C*, *Punctum*, *Ocula* and *Linguistic Frontiers*.

INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING CONFLICT FROM A LOTMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

Daniele Monticelli and Merit Maran

This collective work sets out to explicate the phenomenon of conflict in dialogue with Juri Lotman's semiotics of culture. Through theoretical investigations as well as concrete case studies, the authors in this volume make their contributions to illuminating the semiotic nature of conflict through a Lotmanian lens. The diverse nature of their perspectives shows that Lotman's ideas have the theoretical scope and versatility to inform a multifaceted approach to analysing conflict and provide some much-needed reflection on our current turbulent times.

The initial impulse for this publication came from the international congress "Juri Lotman's Semiosphere", held from the 25th to 28th of February 2022 in Estonia. The congress celebrated the centenary of the birth of Lotman (28 February 1922) and aimed to commemorate his distinguished contribution to semiotics, Russian cultural history and literary theory as well as to explore the new and sometimes unexpected ways in which Lotman's ideas are discussed and applied in various areas of research today from art and media studies, educational and social sciences, to digital and environmental humanities, and beyond.

One day before the congress began, on the 24th of February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, and a full-blown war broke out in Europe. This disruption shifted the whole focus of our academic gathering. In these changed circumstances, Lotman's ideas about the value of dialogue based on difference, the unpredictability of the historical process and the great relevance of the individual act of conscious

choice at moments of historical indeterminacy seemed to take on an entirely new layer of meaning. The potential of his theories to serve as a framework for uncovering the semiotic underpinnings that shape and define discord in human societies was brought to the forefront of the majority of the discussions that took place during the event. The congress programme also featured a number of panels as well as many individual presentations that explicitly focused on exploring the topic of conflict in the framework of Lotman's semiosphere. Many of these conference papers have been developed into the chapters published in this edited volume.

Semiotics of Conflict: A Lotmanian Perspective aims to continue the discussions that were initiated at Lotman's centenary celebrations and provide a platform from which to examine the connection between semiotics of culture and conflict. What is the place of the notion of conflict in Lotman's theoretical model, and how does it relate to other central concepts of his semiotics? How does the Lotmanian view of conflict resonate with different theoretical approaches? What role does conflict play in the dynamics of semiotic systems according to a Lotmanian perspective? How can we apply Lotman's semiotics to make sense of conflict in particular cultural contexts or analyse the representations of conflict in various texts? What is the potential of Lotman's theoretical models to elaborate new approaches to dealing with the conflicts and crises of the contemporary world? These are some of the questions that will be explored throughout this introduction and the chapters of this volume.

I. 'Conflict' as a mechanism of cultural dynamism in Lotman's Semiotics

The importance of conflict for semiotic systems runs as a connecting thread throughout Lotman's scientific legacy, connecting different periods of research on his academic path and appearing as a universal mechanism for describing the dynamics of various semiotic processes (see the chapters by Pilshchikov, Gherlone and Restaneo, and

Sedda in this volume). In an interview given in 1990 to the journal *Vita Aeterna*¹, Lotman emphasised that it is precisely the preeminent orientation towards complex contradictions and conflictual semiotic situations that can be seen as the distinctive feature of Tartu Semiotics (Lotman 2022 [1990]: 285). The centrality of conflict and contradiction for the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics² is also acknowledged in an essay written, again in 1990, and titled “Winter Notes on Summer Schools”, in which Lotman recalls the atmosphere in the Summer Schools of Secondary Modelling Systems³ as dense with fruitful contradictions and characterised by the diversity of interests, differences in mentality and age and overall dissimilarity in everything, and how this led to a continuous and productive dialogue between the participants (Lotman [1990] 1998: 85). This characterisation applies not only to the summer gatherings but also serves to illustrate Lotman’s view on the more general dynamics between the Tartu–Moscow School members as well as his own understanding of the importance of conflict as a mechanism of cultural dynamics.

The centrality of conflict in culture and, consequently, as a preeminent object of semiotic research immediately follows from a crucial postulate of the Tartu–Moscow school clearly formulated in the collective *Theses for the Semiotic Study of Culture*, published in 1973:

¹ This interview was first published in *Vita Aeterna*, a journal published by the Circle of Theoretical Biology at the University of Tartu, in 1990. The interview was conducted by Toomas Tammaru.

² A collaboration between an international group of scholars with diverse backgrounds who were interested in the study of semiotics. The group was led by Juri Lotman, who managed to bring together many notable Soviet scholars, among them Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Piatigorsky, Vladimir Toporov, Boris Uspenskij, Isaak Revzin, Juri Levin, Boris Gasparov and many others. As a result of their collective work, the semiotics of culture as a separate academic discipline was established.

³ A series of academic gatherings that took place from 1964 to 1970 in Kääriku, Estonia. These gatherings were initiated by Juri Lotman and aimed to bring together scholars from diverse disciplines united by an interest in structural and semiotic studies. These Summer Schools of Secondary Modelling Systems served as one of the main platforms of dialogue for the members of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics (see also Salupere 2012).

For the functioning of culture and accordingly for employing comprehensive methods in studying it, this fact is of fundamental significance: that a single isolated semiotic system, however perfectly it may be organized, cannot constitute a culture ... The pursuit of heterogeneity of language is a characteristic feature of culture. (Lotman et al. 2013 [1973]: 69–70)

The insistence on the internal heterogeneity of languages, texts and cultures distinguishes the semiotics of culture from traditional Saussurean and structuralist approaches, with their focus on single languages (semiotic systems) and their homogeneous structures. For Lotman, such isolated languages are an idealised abstraction. In semiotic reality a language can function only alongside other and different languages, where “language” is semiotically understood as any modelling system (literature and cinema are in this respect also “languages”). Moreover, internal heterogeneity and polyglotism are, for Lotman, constitutive of any intellectual entity, be it an individual consciousness, artistic text, or culture as collective intellect (Lotman 2004 [1981]: 585). An invariant model of any intellectual entity thus consists, for Lotman, of at least two integrated languages modelling external reality in fundamentally different ways. Lotman calls “stereoscopicity” (стереоскопичность) this constitutive characteristic of consciousness, texts and culture and explains it in *Culture and Explosion* as follows:

A minimally functional structure requires the presence of at least two languages and their incapacity, each independently of the other, to embrace the world external to each of them. This incapacity is not a deficiency, but rather a condition of existence, as it dictates the necessity of *the other* (another person, another language, another culture). (Lotman 2009 [1992])

Difference (“the necessity of the other”) is the constitutive (one could even say ontological) ground of any semiotic activity and intellectual entity in Lotman’s semiotics.

While in the case of stereoscopicity, the various languages of culture appear as different reflections of the external world, what more distinctively interests Lotman are the dynamic interactions that occur between those languages. As he explains (1981: 3), the semiotics of culture takes as its object “the mutual interaction of semiotic systems with different structures, the internal heterogeneity of semiotic space, the inevitability of cultural and semiotic polyglotism.” The interaction between heterogeneous languages and semiotic systems is understood in the *Theses* in the opposite terms of reciprocal “support” (Lotman et al. 2013 [1973]: 41) and “conflict” (ibid.: 60). Conflict is therefore not heterogeneity, difference, polyglotism and stereoscopicity in themselves, as heterogeneous systems and different images of the world can exist side by side in the same semiotic space without interacting with one another. It is only when interaction takes place that a tension is created, from which both conflict and dialogue (“support”) can emerge, though in Lotman’s terms dialogue and conflict are often used as quasi-synonyms and we could consider them as the two extremes of the same continuum of tense interaction rather than opposite concepts.

It is in this respect important to delve into Lotman’s peculiar understanding of binary oppositions and binarism and the way it differs from the classics of structuralism. He and Uspenskij express it in the 1979 Postscriptum to the *Theses* as follows:

While polyglotism is stressed as a fundamental feature of the internal mechanism of culture, it should be constantly kept in mind that at the basis of any model of culture lies a binary opposition of two radically different languages, being in a state of mutual untranslatability. (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013 [1979]: 131)

While the idea of “binary oppositions” clearly resonates with the structuralist background of Lotman’s earlier works, it is important to observe that binarism is for Lotman not just “two”, but rather an “at least two”, that is a general principle of difference and differentiation, which is “realised in plurality” (Lotman 1990: 124).

Moreover, Lotman's binary oppositions are never static (structural), but dynamic. As we have seen the radical difference and untranslatability of binary structures is a precondition of tense interaction. When this happens radical difference and untranslatability has to be paradoxically mediated through translation. Given the polyglotism of culture,

the act of exchanging information ceases to be a passive transfer of a message that is adequate ... and becomes a translation, in the course of which the message is transformed and the striving for adequacy [адекватность] enters into dramatic conflict with the impossibility of its complete realization. The act of communication begins to include the aspect of tension [напряжение] within itself. (Lotman 1977: 97–98)

As is clear from this quote, the “dramatic conflict” is not due to the radical heterogeneity of languages in itself, but rather to the impossible, though still attempted, task of establishing adequate equivalences between them. In his later work Lotman will define such communication acts with another paradoxical (or even oxymoronic) expression: the “translation of the untranslatable” (перевод непереводаемого), which is supposed to mediate radical difference. The most distinctive aspect of this Lotmanian understanding of conflict is that communicative tension becomes the condition of possibility for the emergence of new information in the process of meaning-making as translation. Whether it is described as an incompatibility of codes (Lotman 1982 [1977]), untranslatability (Lotman 1979 [1979]: 93; Lotman 1990: 15), collision between languages (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 135), stereoscopicity (Lotman 2019 [1978]: 46) semiotic resistance between communication partners (Lotman 2002 [1983]: 168), misunderstanding as conversation in non-identical languages (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 16) or tension between opposing structural poles inside a semiotic system (Lotman 1990: 233), conflict functions as the catalyst for the creation of new texts, and consequently as a mechanism of dynamics in culture.

The emergence of new information implies that in a communicative situation, a non-trivial shift of meaning has occurred in the process of text transmission or, referring to Lotman's quote above, the text is "transformed" in the act of translation. Lotman specifies the nature of such transformation in the following way: "We call non-trivial a shift of meaning that is completely unpredictable and is not predefined by a concrete algorithm of text transformation. We will call the text resulting from such a shift new" (Lotman 2004 [1981]: 582). In such situations, there is no unambiguous correspondence between the code of the source text and the code of the translation, only a conditional equivalence, which is why the possibility of retrieving the original text in a reverse translation is impossible (*ibid.*). Irreversibility and unpredictability thus are the results of the tension and conflict which the "translation of the untranslatable" generates. For Lotman, the ability to generate new texts is one of the primary characteristics that defines a semiotic system capable of intellectual activity.⁴

In Lotman's works, the most common example of creative dialogue is when information is exchanged using both discrete sign systems with linear sequencing in their syntagmatic organisation of text and continuous sign systems characterised by non-discrete representation and spatial organisation of elements (Lotman 2019 [1978]: 35). Due to the profound incompatibility of these two ways of processing information, what we are facing here according to Lotman (1990: 37) is a situation in which translation is impossible; yet it is precisely in these situations that efforts to translate are most determined and the results most valuable.

⁴ An interesting question arises here about the scope of "intellectual activity" in relation to Lotman's extensive application of the notions of "mechanism" and "device" (see also Salupere 2015) in the description of cultural dynamics. Can the notion of intellectual activity be extended to "intelligent machines"? At the present stage of the evolution of AI, the answer is rather negative, as it is seemingly still possible to use unpredictability and irreversibility as criteria for distinguishing human and machine (algorithmic) behaviour. There is no tension and conflict, one could say, in machine translation.

While Lotman (*ibid.*) acknowledges that the discrete–continuous opposition is merely one possible form of such semiotically productive incompatibility, this dichotomy often appears in his works as the invariant of a semiotic conflict with creative potential. The centrality of this opposition for Lotman is connected to the idea of the specialisation of the two cerebral hemispheres of the human brain. In the 1970s and 1980s, many scholars who were a part of the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics were fascinated by research findings connected to the functional asymmetry of the human brain. In Semenenko’s view, the reason behind Lotman’s excitement regarding these findings was partly connected to the fact that it resonated with his own model of communication:

It is understandable why Lotman refers to neurological studies: it appears that his postulate that culture is minimally a two-channel meaning-generating structure receives an unexpected confirmation in the anatomy of the brain. The analogy is thrilling: it suggests that the structure of human culture is predetermined or at least influenced by the brain structure. (Semenenko 2012: 137)

Lotman’s understanding of this topic was influenced by the work of his Moscow colleague Vyacheslav Ivanov who, in his book *Even and Odd: Asymmetry of the Brain and Sign Systems* (1978), suggests that the asymmetrical dialogue between the left (discrete) and right (non-discrete) hemispheres of the human brain is mirrored in the asymmetrical structure of culture (see also Nöth 2022: 167; Semenenko 2012: 137–138). In addition, in the 1980s, Lotman was collaborating with a group of neurophysiologists from Leningrad – Lev Balonov, Vadim Deglin, Tatyana Chernigovskaya, and Nikolai Nikolaenko⁵ – who were studying hemispheric lateralisation. While Lotman was

⁵ As a part of this collaboration, two issues of the Tartu–Moscow School journal *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Sign Systems Studies) were published that focused on the phenomena of asymmetry and dialogue: issue number 16 “Text and Culture” (1983) and issue number 17 “Structure of Dialogue as the Working Principle of the Semiotic Mechanism” (1984).

cautious regarding overly literal transpositions between brain studies research and theory of culture and warned against oversimplification in applying the right–left dichotomy to various cultural phenomena, he did still see massive potential in such analogical thinking as a heuristic device for unravelling various isomorphic relations that govern our world. In his article “Asymmetry and Dialogue” (1983), Lotman writes:

However, the caution in using this analogy increases rather than diminishes its importance. The most important point remains: the conviction that any intellectual device must have a bi- or polypolar structure and that the functions of these substructures are similar at different levels, from the individual text and individual consciousness to entities such as national cultures and the global culture of humanity. The conviction holds, that the correlation of these substructures and their integration is carried out in the form of dramatic dialogue, compromises and mutual tension, that this mechanism of intelligence itself must have not only the apparatus of functional asymmetry, but also devices that control its stabilisation and destabilisation, ensuring homeostasis and dynamics. (Lotman 1983: 25)

While Lotman’s explicit fascination with the findings of neurophysiology lasted for a short period and is reflected in more detail only in a couple of his writings (see, e.g., Lotman 1979 [1977], 2004 [1981], 1983), the principle of asymmetry remained one of the cornerstones of his semiotic theory.

Further on, Lotman explored the various occurrences of asymmetry in semiotic systems in dialogue with the work of Vladimir Vernadsky. According to Amy Mandelker (1994: 388), Vernadsky’s model of the biosphere is based on the principle of specularity, or mirroring, on the interplay of symmetry and asymmetry, and on the reproduction of life by the union of enantiomorphic (mirror image) pairs. These ideas resonated with Lotman’s model of communication as well as with the findings of the functional asymmetry of the

cerebral hemispheres. Lotman uses the mirroring principle to redefine his model of the dialogical structure of semiotic systems:

Mirror symmetry creates the necessary relations between structural diversity and structural similarity, which allow dialogic relationships to be built. On the one hand, the systems are not identical and give out diverse texts, and on the other, they are easily converted, ensuring mutual translatability. We may say that, in order for dialogue to take place, the participants must be distinct and yet simultaneously contain within their structure a semiotic image of counter-agent ... thus enantiomorphism represents the primary “mechanism” of dialogue. (Lotman 2005 [1984]: 220–221)

Another relevant aspect of such a view of dialogue is that the tension between the symmetry–asymmetry of the dialogue partners pertains to both the vertical and horizontal axes of a semiotic system. Let us recall that Lotman describes semiotic systems through a hierarchical structure where every part is at once a whole, and every whole functions as a part (Lotman 2019 [1983]: 74). On the vertical axis (i.e., the symmetry axis) the dialogue partner is located as a sub-entity within the “I” or, on the contrary, the “I” is part of the higher-order partner (Lotman 2004 [1981]: 589). In this case, dialogue is made possible, i.e., mutual understanding between dialogue partners is ensured due to the structural and functional similarity between the whole and its part. Lotman has called this the principle of vertical isomorphism of semiotic systems. Despite the isomorphic relation, this type of dialogue between the whole and the part is not redundant. The capacity to generate new information from such interaction is connected to partial asymmetry, which in this case can come from the fact that any part of a semiotic system in Lotman’s view is still always an individual in itself and thus has characteristics that are not entailed in the higher level of the system, and/or the part belongs simultaneously to various other higher-order systems leading to a multiplicity of conflicting identities.

On the horizontal axis – the axis of asymmetry, heterogeneity and polyglotism – the informational value of the dialogue lies in the incompatibility and mutual untranslatability between semiotic individuals of the same level, while dialogue is made possible by the fact that both individuals are isomorphic to the higher-level system, which creates common ground for communication (see, e.g., Lotman 2019 [1989], 2005 [1984]).

The fact that dialogue in culture always takes place in the condition of partial untranslatability (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 2), and the tension it generates between the interacting partners and their languages enables the emergence of new (unpredictable) meaning on all levels of the system. That is why, according to Lotman, the structural paradox where every part is at once a whole, and every whole functions as a part, results in the richness of inner conflicts and interaction and their outcomes and “ensures the exceptional flexibility and dynamism of Culture as collective intelligence” (Lotman 2019 [1978]: 47).

The asymmetrical nature of communicative interaction is clearly communicated in *Culture and Explosion*, where Lotman revises the Jakobsonian model of communication, figuring the co-presence of similarity and difference (symmetry–asymmetry) in communication as two partially intersecting spheres, representing the non-identity of the participants in dialogue (see Figure 1).

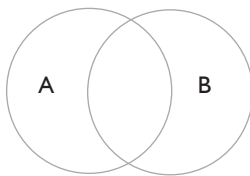


Figure 1. Intersection of lingual space between speaker and hearer (Lotman 2009: 5).

The intersection (similarity) between the two spheres is what makes dialogue possible, but the not-intersecting part of the two spheres (difference) is what makes dialogue creative. Tension is measured

by the proportion of the sizes of the intersecting area and the non-intersecting areas, which determines the results of translation between them:

the more difficult and inadequate the translation from one non-intersecting part of the space into the language of the other, the more valuable, in informative and social terms, the fact of this paradoxical communication becomes. You could say that the translation of the untranslatable becomes the carrier of information of the highest value. (Lotman 2019: 5–6)

Once again, Lotman stresses here the peculiar interest that the semiotics of culture has in communication in situations that complicate communication or even make it (apparently) impossible. He defines this as another “insoluble contradiction” (*ibid.*), i.e. the kinds of situation that were Lotman’s favourite research object.

2. A more ambivalent perspective on conflict in Lotman’s later works

Having before his eyes the violent conflicts generated by the collapse of the USSR (for example the Nagorno-Karabakh war), the Lotman of the 1990s on the one hand develop his understanding of conflict in the new notion of the “explosion”, while on the other taking an ethical stance on the ongoing events, recognising the ambivalent nature of conflict, which is not always productive dialogue, but often also manifests itself as destructive collision. While emphasising the essential role of conflictuality in the broader dynamics of culture, Lotman also acknowledges that observing a conflict in the researcher’s contemporary world demands a rather different perspective than the view of a theoretician working with abstract models or a historian reflecting on conflicts that found their solutions ages ago. In discussing the role of conflict in the context of the present, Lotman emphasised the need to grasp the possibility that not all destruction is followed by rebirth and that it is possible for cultures

to perish without anything new emerging in their place (see Lotman 2024 [1993]: 337). As such, he seems to take a darker view of the role of conflict as a catalyst for change: "...when we talk about gambling on the edge, we are talking about how the ship on which we all are sailing works, and we rejoice in the possibility the ship might sink, forgetting that we all are on board..." (ibid.: 338).

"Gambling on edge" is here the effective metaphor that Lotman proposes about the conflictual relations between the old and the new, discord and unity, divergence and rapprochement, and the need to strike a balance (always risky and precarious) between the two sides of these binary oppositions.

In his last two monographs, *Culture and Explosion* (2009 [1992]) and *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (2013 [1994]), Lotman focuses his attention on the role explosive processes play in the unpredictable development of cultural dynamics. Explosion, in his view, can be described as the moment of the collision of two opposing languages. An explosive space appears as a cluster of unpredictable possibilities (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 135). It is relevant to note that "the moment of explosion is also the place where a sharp increase in the informativity of the entire system takes place. The developmental curve jumps, here, to a completely new, unpredictable, and much more complex path" (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 14).

This change towards increasing complexity is linked to the significance of individual behaviour near bifurcation points (cf. Prigogine and Stengers 1984: 176). Lotman points out that in times of cultural and social explosion, the role of the individual is highlighted, as the possible path forward will depend not only on chance but also on the self-awareness of the people involved (Lotman 1990: 223). Here lies the principal divergence between the unpredictability of natural processes and cultural explosions. Lotman explains the peculiarity of cultural processes with the fact that in culture, the randomness that is present at the bifurcation points can be transformed into freedom, "which greatly complicates its relationship to

causality because now, between cause and effect, there lies an act of intellectual choice, free from automatization” (Lotman 2019 [1989]). Hence, while explosions are an integral part of cultural dynamics, we do have the possibility for agency and the means to influence historical processes even in their turmoil.

Nevertheless, Lotman differentiates between systems based on binary or ternary self-description, which are responsible for the different outcomes of the explosion and explain the ambivalence of conflict mentioned above. The binary model is built on clear-cut oppositions and the absolutist logic of ‘if you are not with us, you are against us’. The ternary model, in contrast, allows for much more freedom of choice and individual behaviour, resulting in a greater degree of system complexity (see Lotman 2013 [1994]: 79–80). While this differentiation in his work is not elaborated in full theoretical depth, the central focus of the comparison of these models seems to lie in the way major dynamic processes or cultural explosions affect such structures. In the case of binary systems, explosion penetrates life in its entirety and destroys all that exists, while in ternary models, even the most powerful explosions cannot encompass the entirety of the complex richness of the system (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 166). As Lotman explains:

ternary structures retain certain values from the antecedent period and transport them from the periphery to the centre of the system. By contrast, the ideal binary system is represented by the complete destruction of all that already exists which is considered to be irremediably corrupt. The ternary system strives to adapt the ideal to reality, whereas the binary system seeks, in practice, to actualise an unrealisable ideal. (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 166)

Witnessing the social, political and cultural tension that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent radical change in the relations between Eastern and Western Europe, Lotman wished that this could be an opportunity to abandon the logic of irreconcilable oppositions and switch from the binary system of

the Cold War to a “ternary, Pan-European” system (Lotman 2009 [1992]: 174). He warned in 1992 that missing that opportunity would be a “historical catastrophe”. Thirty years later, with the brutal war waged by Russia against the Ukraine and the consequent conflict with the West, we must sadly admit that Lotman’s words were prophetic.

It was an ethics of difference as a source of stereoscopicity and dynamism in culture, that Lotman proposed as an antidote to destructive understandings of irreducible conflict, an ethics that continues to be relevant in our world of deep and pervasive discord. The next passage, from an interview Lotman gave in 1990, is, in this respect, a good way of closing these preliminary remarks on Lotman’s semiotic understanding of conflict:

Having a common language with people who think like you is easy.... We must learn to speak with people who think in an entirely different way. We need to learn to value other people for being different, without demanding that they be like us. In fact, if we were all the same, identical, we simply wouldn't have survived as biological entities. We are alive because we are all different. Human society is based on the differences among people, on the fact that no one individual possesses even a fraction of the truth, but together we form a path toward the truth. (Lotman 2024 [1990]: add page nr in this volume).

3. Towards a Lotmanian Semiotics of Conflicts

The chapters of this volume all explore the semiotics of conflict from a Lotmanian perspective, or it would be more precise to say, from different Lotmanian perspectives, mobilising various concepts of Lotman’s theoretical toolkit that do not just help to address different aspects of conflict, but even function in some cases as the basis for different understandings of the very notion of conflict. This is an immediate consequence of the fact that Lotman does

not offer a systematic theory of conflict. Despite the fact that he does not use the word itself very often, conflict is rather, as we have attempted to show, one of the central principles of his semiotics, which appears in different wordings in many of his reflections on language, culture, society and human behaviour, which are often understood by Lotman as crossed by paradoxes and contradictions. Following the peculiarity of Lotman's writing, which is characterised by the fluidity of the semantic boundaries of his notions, we have considered it unproductive to give clear-cut definitions of the various concepts that we have discussed in connection to conflict in this introduction. Instead, our aim was to map out the different appearances of the principle of conflictuality in Lotman's theory and discuss the nuances of this principle through the lens of different concepts of the same semantic field with greater or lesser family resemblances.

Considering *a posteriori* the topics represented in the articles, we have decided to articulate them in three distinct sections. The first section includes rather theoretical articles with a strong focus on Lotman's conceptuality. The articles of the second section apply Lotman's ideas to the study of conflicts that are grounded on different kinds of mismatch between times and temporalities and the issue of memory. The final section includes articles which focus on the spatial dimension of conflict analysis and demonstrate the possibilities of semiospheric analysis on particular case studies, in which local, regional and global issues collide. To conclude this book, we will give the final word to Juri Lotman himself by publishing three of his texts from the beginning of the 1990s, in which he speaks to broader non-academic audiences. All three have been translated by Brian James Baer and made available in English for the first time.

In the first chapter of the volume, **Igor Pilshchikov** sets out to explore the historical formation of the idea of inherent conflictuality of semiotic processes in Juri Lotman's theory. Pilshchikov's

exploration begins with Russian Formalists, who repurposed the key tropes from Marxist and Leninist discourse of class struggle, such as ‘conflict’ and ‘organised violence’ in the analysis of poetic text and poetic language. As the author shows, Lotman adopted this metaphorical lexicon and continued the work of the Russian Formalists by explicating the inner conflicts within artistic texts and emphasising the productive potential of this emerging tension. Pilshchikov follows the development of the idea of inner conflict as a source of cultural dynamics, moving from the earlier period of Lotman’s writings with a focus on artistic texts, to the theory of the semiosphere and Lotman’s later works where practical applications of his theory were adopted to address intercultural and interethnic conflicts in the disintegrating Soviet Union. Through tracking the development of conflict-inspired terminology in Lotman’s works, Pilshchikov elucidates the wider processes of conceptual transfers between the fields of politics and poetics.

Franciscu Sedda synthesises different aspects of Lotman’s understanding of conflict into a complex and fully articulated semiotics of power, which would function as a semiopolitical model of semiosis, going beyond Lotman and integrating notions from other thinkers. The semiotics of power draws on the fundamental Lotmanian category of Us vs Them, which is paralleled by the emotional binaries of fear–shame and contract–self-surrender elaborated by Lotman in the context of his semiotics of everyday behaviour. Sedda proposes a three-stage schema of the emergence of the political, which goes from the distinction between human and animal and the constitution of human groups into a political body, to the division of society in antagonistic groups struggling for power. The semiopolitical model of social semiosis is, on the one hand, based on a stratification of self-descriptions, which produce order, while on the other hand clashing with the irregularities and chaos in the domain of semiotic reality. This generates different levels of articulation and legitimation of conflict and different models of unity. Sedda’s approach emphasises the heuristic potential of Lotman’s

concepts for a complex understanding of power and politics: due to their “abstract nature”, they lend themselves to flexible uses.

In their chapter, **Laura Gherlone** and **Pietro Restaneo** explore the dialogue between decolonial investigations and the cultural theory of Juri Lotman, focusing on two interrelated core concepts that traverse both lines of thought, ‘universality’ and ‘conflict’. The authors argue that Lotman’s theory can offer fresh perspectives on decolonial research itself, enabling it to contribute more effectively to an analysis of the post-Soviet space. In the context of decolonial studies, the notion of conflict is primarily understood as ‘resistance’. It implies a unidirectional action of one subjectivity on another and does not consider any dialectics between the ‘subjugated’ and the ‘universal’ culture. As Gherlone and Restaneo demonstrate, Lotman’s interpretation of conflict – in which antinomy can become synonymous with openness, freedom, and growth – allows us to view the struggle between opposing forces in terms of translation and could thus enrich the research on decoloniality with a more complex and dynamic understanding of conflict.

Mario Panico’s chapter draws on Lotmanian theoretical understanding of the workings of cultural memory, particularly his view on the centre–periphery dynamics in the semiosphere. He elaborates a concept of ‘re-collection’, which focuses on the semantic potentiality of the semiosphere’s peripheral reserves. While ‘recollection’ is commonly understood as an act of remembering something, ‘re-collection’ brings forth the idea of remembering as collecting. Panico presents it as a distinct mechanism of cultural memory, which is inherent to transgenerational memory in the post-conflict context. Through the concept of ‘re-collecting’, it becomes possible to describe how traumatic memories are re-placed and remembered by those generations who do not have a direct experience of the traumatic event but who are trying to make sense of their familial pasts. In the chapter, this process is illustrated through an analysis of the graphic novel *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* by Nora Krug (2019). Krug is a third-generation German woman,

a naturalised American who, through this novel, is attempting to come to terms with her “generational guilt”. Through analysis of this text, Panico illustrates how inheriting should not be considered a passive activity of preservation but a fully-fledged activity of semantic and textual redistribution.

Anna Maria Lorusso focuses on Lotman’s understanding of polychrony, i.e. the co-presence of different temporal speeds, depths and resistances within the semiosphere, as a possible source of temporal conflictuality, using it to develop a typology of different cases of cancel culture. The article thus conceptualises cancel culture as a conflict over temporalities and distinguishes four different ways in which the relationship between the present and the past can be articulated by such conflict. Through “elimination” the present erases the past (for example the removal of monuments); through “correction” the present corrects the past (for example the replacement of problematic expressions in literary texts); through “marginalisation” the text of the past is made irrelevant through the over-production of texts in the present (for example writing new politically correct fairy tales in order to make the old ‘incorrect’ ones obsolete); through “reframing” the present returns the past to history, taking distance from it (for example documentaries that accompany problematic movies, explaining their bias and historical context). According to Lorusso these strategies of cancel culture share an “absolutisation of the present”, which pretends to eradicate polychrony from the semiosphere.

Patrizia Violi and **Cristina Demaria** consider conflict through the lenses of Lotman’s understanding of change in history. They propose to add to Lotman’s gradual processes and explosions a third mode of transformation, which they call “erosion”. The concept is elaborated on the basis of the specific case studies they analyse in the article taken from post-dictatorship Chile and Spain. In these cases, they claim, after the fall of the dictatorship the old system of values was not completely reconfigured and continues to undermine the process of democratisation. This is why change in such cases

does not take the form of explosion, but rather of erosion, where the old system not only coexists with the new, but steadily erodes its foundations and the possibility of real change. The conceptual toolkit elaborated in the article allows the authors to problematise the notion of ‘post-conflict’ situations, exposing the contradictions, power relations and conflicts that are inherent to processes of political conciliation and memorialisation of a violent past.

Israel León O’Farrill conducts a semiospheric analysis of the dynamics of Mayan cultural development in the context of colonial history. In order to analyse the processes of resistance, conflict, and negotiation as forms of dialogue between the Mayan communities and colonial society, León O’Farrill draws primarily on Lotman’s concept of the boundary explicating its various functions throughout the analysis. He views boundary as a symbolic space of “semiotic negotiation” where the symbolic exchange between various semiospheres takes place as well as a frontier of identity battles. The chapter emphasises the dynamic interplay of continuity and change within cultural systems, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of indigenous populations in the face of colonial pressures. O’Farrill thus underscores the importance of understanding the complex combination of resistance, adaptation, and negotiation that have formed the Mayan history and culture and highlights the role of the liminal space as a site where oppressed groups assert their agency in shaping their own worldview amidst encounters with the other.

Eduardo Chávez Herrera’s analysis of the semiotic demarcations that constitute Basque identity is grounded on Lotman’s notion of self-description, which establishes the boundaries between the inner and outer space of a given semiotic entity. Basque self-description is described in the chapter as internally conflictual and changing in time, the core of it having shifted from ethnicity to language and, more recently, to the ‘sentiment’ attached to different aspects of Basque life and traditions. Herrera considers the use of spatial, symbolic and “homeland” deixis in the Basque linguistic landscape and everyday objects of consumption as embodiments of

Basque self-description. Deixis is indeed based on spatial, personal and symbolic demarcations – here vs there, we vs them, our land vs foreign land – that shape the semiosphere of Basque nationalism, foregrounding cultural difference and the conflict between Basque culture and the bordering Spanish and French cultures. Herrera’s approach thus interestingly shows how self-description works as a generator of identity and difference in everyday language use and cultural practice.

Nicola Zengiaro’s chapter addresses the phenomenon of conflict in the context of ecological crisis. In his analysis, he approaches Lotman’s semiotic theory through the lens of ecosemiotics. Primarily, the chapter draws on the concept of ecosemiosphere proposed by Timo Maran on the basis of Lotman’s semiosphere model. Zengiaro argues that the asymmetry which emerges from the conflicts between heterogeneous semioses, and which Lotman sees as a primary mechanism for the dynamics and organisation of the semiosphere, in the context of ecological crisis actually leads to the realisation of a possibly irremediable rift between our species and others. He proposes analysing this process through the notion of “semiotic flattening”, which occurs as an effect of semiotic conflict. This conflict in turn can be understood as the footprint of human presence inhibiting the expression of other forms of semiosis in space. Zengiaro provides a multifaceted insight into the processes of semiotic flattening, illustrating it with a variety of case studies.

The chapters of this volume develop different Lotmanian perspectives for the analysis of different kinds of conflict. They show how versatile and open to different interpretation is Lotman’s understanding of the role of conflict in culture and how many of the notions of his semiotics of culture connect with the issue of conflict. These notions are useful for conceptualising the conflictual phenomena analysed in the volume, highlighting issues and relations that were previously ignored. The studies gathered here are not just applications of Lotman’s conceptuality to the analysis of empirical material, as the

dialogue between the phenomena analysed and Lotman's semiotics contribute to develop the latter in new and interesting directions, at the same time enriching and transforming the concepts that inform Lotman's understanding of conflict. Future research could focus on a comparison between Lotmanian concepts thus enriched and transformed with other understandings of conflict in semiotics as well as the rest of the humanities and social sciences.

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I

**CONCEPTUALISING CONFLICT
WITH JURI LOTMAN**

FROM VIOLENCE TO DIALOGUE: INNER CONFLICT AS A SOURCE OF ARTISTIC, CULTURAL, AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN JURI LOTMAN'S SEMIOTICS AND THE THEORIES OF HIS PREDECESSORS

Igor Pilshchikov

Engaging in debates with Marxists, the Russian Formalists not only contested their ideas but also borrowed key metaphors like conflict, struggle, and organised violence. These tropes, however, were repurposed by the Formalists to describe the dynamic construction of the poetic text (Yuri Tynianov) or poetic language (Roman Jakobson) rather than class struggle and state violence. Juri Lotman inherited and adopted this metaphorical lexicon. The initial two sections of my paper provide a contextual backdrop for the discourse of conflict and violence, focusing on Jakobson's and Tynianov's adaptation of Marxist and Leninist phraseology. Sections three and four discuss Lotman's application of these concepts to all kinds of artistic text and the semiosphere at large. The fifth section examines how Lotman reinterpreted Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism for use in analysing social conflicts. The concluding section summarises these transfers of terminology, tracing a trajectory from political philosophy to poetics and back.

I. Lotman, Jakobson, and the Language of the Revolution

In his *Анализ поэтического текста* (*Analysis of the Poetic Text*, 1972), Lotman contrasts the two opposing views of the relationship between poetry and language:

В свое время формальная школа выдвинула тезис о языке как материале, сопротивление которого преодолевает поэзия. В борьбе с этим положением родился взгляд на поэзию как автоматическую реализацию языковых законов, один из функциональных стилей языка. [...] В настоящее время обе теории – и «борьбы с языком» и отрицания качественного своеобразия поэзии по отношению к естественному языку – представляются неизбежными крайностями раннего этапа науки. (Lotman 1972: 33)

In its day, the Formalist school advanced the theory that language is a material whose resistance is overcome by poetry. In disputing this position there arose the view of poetry as an automatic realisation of linguistic laws, as one of the functional styles of language. ... At the present time both theories, the “conflict with language” and the denial of the qualitative uniqueness of poetry in relation to natural language, may be seen as unavoidable extremes of the early stages of our discipline. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 20, tr. mod.)

Lotman delineates the dichotomy between the Russian Formalist view and the Prague functional–structuralist approach, both, ironically, originating from different phases of Roman Jakobson’s intellectual journey, i.e. the early 1920s and the mid-1930s. The first definition goes back to Jakobson’s book *О чешском стихе преимущественно в сопоставлении с русским* (*On Czech Verse, Primarily in Comparison with Russian*, 1923):

Теории безусловного соответствия стиха духу языка, непротivления формы материалу мы противопоставляем теорию организованного насилия поэтической формы над языком. (Jakobson 1923: 16)

To the theory of the unconditioned correspondence of verse to the spirit of the language, of non-resistance of form to material, we oppose the theory of the organised violence of poetic form on language.¹

¹ Non-referenced translations are my own.

Notably, in Lotman's copy of Jakobson's book, this phrase is under-scored and flanked by two vertical lines in the margin. Jakobson's analogous assertions on pages 45 and 101 ("вне насилия нет поэзии" = "there is no poetry without violence") are marked with *NB* for special attention (Pilshchikov, Trunin 2015: 37–38).

Both opposites, "non-resistance" and "organised violence", allude to contemporary debates. The term *непротивление* ('non-resistance'), distinctly traceable to Leo Tolstoy, stems from his axiom "непротивление злу злом" or "непротивление злу насилием" ('non-resistance to evil by evil or by violence'), as has been observed elsewhere (Glanc, Pilshchikov 2017: 98). Tolstoy first articulated this philosophy in *В чем моя вера?* (*What is My Faith?*, 1884), where the phrase "непротивление злу" ('non-resistance to evil') occurs 30 times. He further expanded on this notion in the treatise *Царство Божие внутри вас* (*The Kingdom of God is Within You*, 1893), in which the word "непротивление" ('non-resistance') appears 91 times, with 45 instances as part of the collocation "непротивление злу насилием" ('non-resistance to evil by violence').

The concept of "organised violence", the second term in the dichotomy, also finds a place in Tolstoy's writings (Glanc, Pilshchikov 2017: 98). However, in Tolstoy's text, it functions as "чужое слово" ('the Other's word'), a term Mikhail Bakhtin would use, indicating a borrowed expression from another's discourse. In chapter 13 of his pamphlet *Рабство нашего времени* (*The Slavery of Our Times*, 1900), Tolstoy acknowledges that "организованное насилие есть правительство" ('organised violence is government'). Yet, in the next chapter, he refutes the Communist and Socialist interpretation of this idea:

[П]о теории социалистовъ, уничтоженіе насилія капиталистовъ [...] должно совершиться по ихъ ученію тоже черезъ новое организованное насиліе, и должно быть удерживаемо имъ же. (Tolstoy 1900a: 72)

[A]ccording to the Socialist theory, the coming abolition of the rule of the capitalists ... is also to be carried out by a new instance of organised violence, and will have to be maintained by the same means. (Tolstoy 1900b: 147–148, tr. mod.)²

This notion of organised violence originally derives from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a text Umberto Eco (1998: 29) lauded as “un capolavoro di oratoria politica” (‘a masterpiece of political rhetoric’):

Die politische Gewalt im eigentlichen Sinn ist die organisirte Gewalt einer Klasse zur Unterdrückung einer andern. (Marx, Engels 1848: 16)

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another. (Marx, Engels [1888] 1910: 42)

The original German word “Gewalt” encapsulates both ‘power’ and ‘violence’. Within Russian revolutionary discourse, spanning groups from anarchists and socialist revolutionaries (S-R) to Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, “die organisierte Gewalt” was commonly translated as “организованное насилие” (‘organised violence’), a phrasing echoed by Tolstoy. Leon Trotsky, reflecting on Tolstoy’s teaching soon after his death, remarked:

В отличие от Толстого, мы говорим и учим: организованное насилие меньшинства можно разрушить только организованным восстанием большинства. Вера Толстого – не наша вера. (Trotsky [1910] 1926: 261)

In contrast to Tolstoy, we say and teach: the organised violence of the minority can only be overthrown by the organised insurrection

² In all versions of Aylmer Maude’s translation of *The Slavery of Our Times*, republished and quoted until today, the phrase under discussion reads: “to be carried out [or instituted] by a fresh organisation of violence”.

of the majority. Tolstoy's faith is not our faith. (Trotsky 1970: 144–145, tr. mod.)

Jakobson was a member of the Constitutional Democratic Party (K-D) led by Pavel Miliukov and Vladimir Nabokov Sr., as indicated by Toman (1994: 37–38), but, of course, he was well-versed in the leftist linguistic nuances.

Intriguingly, the standard Russian version of the Communist Manifesto only adopted the phrase “organised violence” as late as 1939. Earlier translations by Georgii Plekhanov (1882) and Vladimir Posse (1903) used the terms “организованная сила” (‘organised force’)³ and “организованная власть” (‘organised power’) respectively.⁴ Vatslav Vorovsky, in 1906, aligned with Plekhanov’s translation. It was not until the collective translation by the Marx–Engels–Lenin Institute in 1939 that “organised force/power” was replaced with “organised violence”, a change reaffirmed in the jubilee edition of the Manifesto in 1948:

Политическая власть в собственном смысле слова – это организованное насилие одного класса для подавления другого. (Marx, Engels 1939: 54; 1948: 80)

Political power, in the proper sense of the word, is merely the organised violence of one class for oppressing another.

Around the years 1939–1940 and again in 1948, leading Party periodicals published special articles arguing that Plekhanov had intentionally altered Marx’s concept by substituting “organised force” for “organised violence”:

³ “Политическая власть въ собственномъ смыслѣ этого слова есть организованная сила одного класса, имѣющая цѣлью подчиненіе другого класса” (Marx, Engels [1882] 1900: 26 [2nd pagination]).

⁴ “Политическая власть въ собственномъ значеніи есть организованная власть одного класса для угнетенія другого” (Marx, Engels 1903: 36).

В переводе Плеханова выражение “организованное насилие” (“organisierte Gewalt”) передано, как “организованная сила”. Это – не простая стилистическая обмолвка. В предисловии к своему переводу “Манифеста” Плеханов противопоставляет понятия “силы” и “насилия”, не дает четкого объяснения роли *революционного* насилия пролетариата над буржуазией, отрывает его от диктатуры пролетариата. ... Иначе, с последовательных до конца позиций творческого марксизма, подходил к этому вопросу Ленин. В своей статье “Революционные марксисты на международной социалистической конференции 5–8 сентября 1915 г.” Ленин особо подчеркивал постановку в “Манифесте” вопроса о роли революционного насилия над буржуазией. Маркс и Энгельс, указывал Ленин, «в знаменитом “Манифесте Коммунистической Партии”, звали к революции, говорили прямо и открыто о применении насилия, объявляли “презренным” делом сокрытие своих революционных целей, задач и приемов борьбы...». (Kogan, Kandel’ 1940: 210)

In Plekhanov’s translation, the expression “organised violence” (“organisierte Gewalt”) is rendered as “organised force”. This is not a mere stylistic slip. In the preface to his translation of the *Manifesto*, Plekhanov contrasts the concepts of “force” and “violence”, failing to provide a clear explanation of the role of the proletariat’s revolutionary violence against the bourgeoisie and detaching it from the dictatorship of the proletariat. ... In contrast, Lenin approached this issue differently, from the consistent positions of creative Marxism. In his article “Revolutionary Marxists at the International Socialist Conference, September 5–8, 1915”, Lenin specifically emphasised that the *Manifesto* posed the question of the role of revolutionary violence against the bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels, Lenin pointed out, “in the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, called for revolution, spoke directly and openly about the use of violence, and declared it ‘contemptible’ to conceal their revolutionary goals, tasks, and methods of struggle...”.

Вместо термина “насилие” (для передачи слова “Gewalt”) Плеханов пользуется словом “сила”. Вследствие такого перевода классическая формулировка “Манифеста”: “Политическая власть в собственном смысле слова – это организованное насилие одного класса для подавления другого” – потеряла в плехановской передаче свою чёткость и остроту. Вместо слов “организованное насилие” мы читаем у Плеханова: “организованная сила”. ... В соответствии с ленинской терминологией слово “Gewalt” переводится в издании “Манифеста” 1939 года как “насилие”. Впервые в этом издании мы встречаем правильную, соответствующую ленинскому пониманию “Манифеста” формулировку... (Preis 1948a: 59, 65; see also Preis 1948b: 64).

Instead of the term “violence”, Plekhanov uses the word “force” to convey the word “Gewalt”. As a result of such a translation, the classical formula of the *Manifesto* – “Political power, in the proper sense of the word, is merely the organised violence of one class for oppressing another” – lost its clarity and sharpness in Plekhanov’s rendition. Instead of the words “organised violence”, Plekhanov’s version reads: “organised force”. ... In line with Lenin’s terminology, “Gewalt” is translated in the 1939 edition of the *Manifesto* as “violence”. For the first time in this edition, we encounter the correct formulation corresponding to Lenin’s understanding of the *Manifesto*...

This was a brief history of the Russian reception of Marx’s definition of political power, which Jakobson adapted into his definition of poetic language. Broadening the view, the theme and metaphor of ‘violence’ captivated scholars worldwide across various disciplines during the interwar period. A notable instance is Walter Benjamin’s essay “Zur Kritik der Gewalt” (‘Critique of Violence’, 1921), which is entirely dedicated to an in-depth examination of the concept of ‘Gewalt’, so fervently debated by Soviet translators of the Communist Manifesto.⁵

⁵ The literature on the subject is huge. See, in particular, Butler 2006, Greenberg 2008, Friedlander 2015, Whittington 2018, and Holte 2022.

Jakobson, who authored one of the earliest academic explorations of the language of the Russian revolution (Jakobson 1920/21), was adept in this vernacular, skilfully employing its neologisms, slogans, and coined expressions. In 1919, he published his first theoretical piece on the foundational principles of the “science of poetic language” (Jakobson 1919: 1). The article, which appeared in the newspaper *Жизнь Искусства* (*The Life of Art*), edited among others by Viktor Shklovsky, was titled “Очередные задачи науки об искусстве” (‘The Immediate Tasks of the Science of Art’). Although the phrase “очередные задачи” (‘immediate tasks’) had occasional pre-Bolshevik usage, its post-1917 context unmistakably alluded to Vladimir Ulianov-Lenin’s article “Очередные задачи советской власти” (‘The Immediate Tasks of Soviet Power’, April 1918), which had turned this collocation into a set phrase.⁶

Fifteen years later, during the methodological discussion at the Prague Linguistic Circle on 10 December 1934 (see Glanc 2016: 110–112), Jakobson drew a line between Formalism and structuralism, invoking the title of Lenin’s book *Детская болезнь «левизны» в коммунизме* (*The Infantile Sickness of ‘Leftism’ in Communism*, 1920; see Pilshchikov 2023: 248):

Strukturalismus mnoho těží z formalismu, ale nesmí lpěti na těch jeho thesích, které byly pouhou dětskou nemocí nového směru literární vědy. Formalismus se vyvíjel směrem k dialektické metodě, ale byl ještě značně zatížen mechanistickým dědictvím. (Havránek *et al.* 1935: 192)

Structuralism benefited a lot from Formalism, but it cannot adhere to those of its theses that were a mere infantile sickness of the new direction in literary studies. Formalism developed toward a dialectical method but was still heavily burdened by a mechanistic hangover.

⁶ Compare Pavel Medvedev’s 1928 article “Очередные задачи историко-литературной науки” (‘The Immediate Tasks of the Literary-Historical Science’) published in the journal *Литература и марксизм* (*Literature and Marxism*).

Many of Jakobson's followers shared his view of the development of literary and linguistic studies in the twentieth century (cf. Matějka 1988: 226). For Lotman, too, Formalism displayed the "unavoidable extremes of the early stages" of linguistic poetics, which he believed were to be transcended by structuralism and semiotics (Lotman [1972] 1976: 20).

2. Tynianov, Jakobson, and Marxism

Now, let us focus on Tynianov's notion of dynamism, a key influence on both Jakobson and Lotman. Tynianov's theory of literary dynamics centres around the concept of 'the dominant', which he adopted and reinterpreted from the German aesthetician Broder Christiansen (see Jakobson [1935] 1971; Erlich [1955] 1965: 199–200, 212–215; Steiner 1984: 104–106; Hansen-Löve 1986; Gerigk 2007; Pilshchikov 2023: 230–233). Tynianov's interpretation of 'the dominant' entails inequality, subjugation, conflict, and struggle (Ehlers 1992: 185–192).

For Christiansen, an aesthetic object emerges from the perceptual synthesis of various impressions of the artefact, termed "Faktoren" ('factors'). Not all the factors are equal: one or a group usually predominates, called "die Dominante" (Christiansen 1909: 241–251). Tynianov expands on this, stating that "the dominant" (1929: 41, 48), or "the constructive factor" (1924: 10, 1929: 15–16) subjugates other factors. However, it does not harmonise them, as Christiansen thought, but "deforms" them (Tynianov 1924: 10; Tynianov 1929: 15, 41), turning poetry into a "struggle of factors, not their alliance": "борьба факторов, а не содружество их" (1924: 20). For Tynianov, form is inherently dynamic as he pairs dynamics with interaction (взаимодействие) and interaction with struggle (борьба) (*ibid.*: 10). He often uses these terms as synonyms, sometimes linking them with commas (*ibid.*: 11). In one noteworthy case, he explicitly equates the terms, using the equals sign: "interaction (= struggle)" (*ibid.*: 27; cf. Tynianov [1924] 1981: 33, 40, 47).

In the articles “Ода как ораторский жанр” (‘The Ode as an Oratorical Genre’, written in 1922 and first published in 1927) and “О литературной эволюции” (‘On Literary Evolution’, 1927), Tynianov applies the principle of dynamism across various levels: to a literary work, a literary genre, and ultimately to literature itself, presenting each as a dynamic system:

[К]аждая литературная система образуется не мирным взаимодействием всех факторов, но главенством, выдвинутостью одного (или группы), функционально подчиняющего и окрашивающего остальные. Такой фактор носит уже привившееся в русской научной литературе название доминанты (Христиансен, Б. Эйхенбаум). (Tynianov 1929: 48)

[E]ach literary system is formed not through the peaceful interaction of all its factors, but rather through the priority – the foregrounding – of one factor (or a group of them) that functionally subordinates and colors the rest. In Russian scholarship, this factor has come to be called the “dominant” ([Broder] Christiansen, Boris Eikhenbaum). (Tynianov 2019: 75)

[С]истема не есть равноправное взаимодействие всех элементов, а предполагает выдвинутость группы элементов («доминанта») и деформацию остальных. (Tynianov 1929: 41)

A system is not the egalitarian interaction of all its elements, but instead assumes that some groups of elements (“the dominant”) will be foregrounded and the others deformed. (Tynianov 2019: 271)

In “Литературный факт” (‘Literary Fact’, 1924), Tynianov states that literary evolution “is driven by struggle and shift [борьба и смена]” (1929: 10–11; 2019: 154). The compendium of his research, *Архаисты и новаторы* (*Archaists and Innovators*), which begins with these three articles mentioned above, features the word “борьба” (‘struggle’) more than 120 times. This “struggle-based”

perspective (compare Ehlers 1992: 126–131, 223–232) reaches its zenith in the final paragraph of “The Ode as an Oratorical Genre”, where the word “struggle” is used five times:

Таким образом борьба за жанр является в сущности борьбой за направление поэтического слова, за его установку. Борьба эта сложна; самые большие достижения получаются иногда в результате использования опыта враждебных школ, но самая борьба эта в основе есть борьба за функцию поэтического слова, за его установку, соотносённость с литературой, с речевыми и вне-литературными рядами. (Тупианов 1929: 85–86)

The struggle for genre is, in essence, a struggle for the future direction of the poetic word, for its orientation. This struggle is complex; sometimes the greatest achievements result from using the methods of rival schools. But the struggle itself is, in essence, a struggle for the function of poetic language, for its orientation and its interrelations with literature and with various verbal and extra-literary series. (Tynianov 2019: 111)

For Marxists, change and development are propelled by the inherent antagonism between “Produktivkräfte” (‘productive forces’) and “Produktionsverhältnisse” (‘relations of production’), leading to “Klassenkampf” (‘class conflict’, or ‘class struggle’):

Die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft ist die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen. (Marx, Engels 1848: 3)

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (Marx, Engels [1888] 1910: 12).

In contrast, for Tynianov and Jakobson, diachronic shifts are produced by the internal tensions within any synchronic system, caused by its structural disequilibrium. For Tynianov, this applies to the evolution of literary genres, and for Jakobson, to the evolution of the system of phonemes or other linguistic categories. In Jakobson’s

Remarques sur l'évolution phonologique du russe comparée à celle des autres langues slaves (*Remarks on the Phonological Evolution of Russian in Comparison with the Other Slavic Languages*, 1929), “terms such as ‘struggle’ and ‘conflict’ refer to a system that must deal with the simultaneous presence of incompatible phonological features by eliminating one or both of them” (Feldstein 2018: xv). Diachronic change culminates in “liquidation paisible du conflit” (‘a peaceful settlement of the conflict’), which is always, invariably, temporary (Jakobson 1929: 67). Importantly, the term “Conflict” is included in the subject index to the *Remarques* in the first volume of Jakobson’s *Selected Writings* (Jakobson 1962: 672).⁷

3. Lotman’s Poetics

In his dialogue with Marxism and Formalism, Lotman picked up where Tynianov left off. He emphasised the inner conflicts within poetic/artistic texts, reinterpreting them as conflicts between different linguistic levels or substructures. My focus now shifts to two of his early 1970s works: *Структура художественного текста* (*The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 1970) and the previously mentioned *Анализ поэтического текста* (*Analysis of the Poetic Text*, 1972). Both books offer a refreshed take on structuralist poetics (Lotman 1964), yet within different frameworks: the application of information theory to language and art (Lotman 1970) and semiotics of poetry (Lotman 1972).

The starting point is the semiotic heterogeneity of the poetic text. The interaction of its elements, or the struggle between them, is understood as a productive conflict:

⁷ The *Remarques* were written in Russian and published in Louis Brun’s French translation. Jakobson “intended in the future to publish the Russian original of the *Remarques*, but the manuscript perished under the German invasion of Brno in 1939” (Trubetzkoy, Jakobson 1975: 147 fn. 3).

Художественный текст никогда не принадлежит одной системе или какой-либо единственной тенденции: закономерность и ее нарушение, ... автоматизация и деавтоматизация структуры текста постоянно борются друг с другом. Каждая из этих тенденций вступает в конфликт со своим структурным антиподом, но существует только в отношении к нему. Поэтому победа одной тенденции над другой означает не уничтожение конфликта, а перенесение его в другую плоскость. Победившая же тенденция теряет художественную активность. (Lotman 1970: 123)

An artistic text never belongs to one system or one tendency: regularity and its violation, ... the automatisisation and de-automatisation of the structure of a text are all engaged in a constant struggle. Each of these tendencies enters into conflict with its structural antipode, but exists only in relation to it. Therefore the victory of one tendency over another does not mean the cessation of conflict, but the transference of conflict to another plane. The tendency that wins out becomes artistically unviable. (Lotman [1970] 1977: 96)

Keep this quote in mind, as it will reveal its relevance in various cultural domains beyond art.

A basic example is the interplay of metre and rhythm. In Russian verse theory, metre can be viewed as an abstract scheme, with rhythm as its realisation. Alternatively, rhythm can be seen as a tendency, with metre being its generalisation. A third, generativist perspective posits that metre and rhythm are two alternative structures with the rules of their correspondence (M. Lotman 2008). Regardless of the interpretation, Juri Lotman maintains that “the actual line of verse exists only as the mutual tension [взаимное напряжение] between these two elements” and embodies “a struggle [борьба] between order and diversity” (Lotman 1970: 169; [1970] 1977: 136).

Итак, ритмико-метрическая структура – это ... не лишенная внутренних противоречий схема распределения ударных и безударных слогов, а конфликт, напряжение между различными типами структуры. (Lotman 1972: 59)

Thus rhythmico-metrical structure is ... not a scheme for the distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables devoid of internal contradictions, but a conflict, a tension between different types of structure. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 55)

In Lotman's terminology, 'tension', 'struggle', and 'conflict' become synonyms. He equates "a conflict [конфликт] between tendencies" with "the structural tension [структурное напряжение] between them" (1970: 259; [1970] 1977: 211). In *The Structure of the Artistic Text* the word *конфликт* ('conflict') appears 27 times, and in *Analysis of the Poetic Text* it occurs 39 times, along with its derivatives, both meaning 'conflicting': *конфликтный* (twice) and *конфликтующий* (once).

Beyond metre and rhythm, there are other conflicts in verse, such as those between rhythm and syntax, when the segmentation into verse lines diverges from the division into phrases and sentences:

В организации стиха можно проследить непрерывно действующую тенденцию к столкновению, конфликту, борьбе различных конструктивных принципов. Каждый из этих принципов, который внутри системы, им создаваемой, выступает как организующий, вне ее выполняет функцию дезорганизатора. Так, ... синтаксические интонации вступают в конфликты с ритмическими и т. п. Там, где те или иные противопоставленные тенденции совпадают, мы имеем дело не с отсутствием конфликта, а с частным его случаем – нулевым выражением структурной напряженности. (Lotman 1970: 234)

In the organisation of verse we can trace a constant tendency toward collision and conflict, a struggle between different constructive principles. Each principle has an organising function within the system it creates, and functions as a disorganiser outside of that system. Thus ... syntactic intonations conflict with rhythmic intonations, and so on. When opposing tendencies coincide, we are not dealing with an absence of conflict but with a particular instance of conflict; the zero expression of structural tension. (Lotman [1970] 1977: 190)⁸

These conflicts generate what Lotman calls “энергия стиха” (‘the energy of verse’) (1970: 234; [1970] 1977: 190) or, in terms of information theory, its entropy – essentially, its informativeness (Lotman argues that poetry is more informative than prose).

Таким образом, отношение текста и системы в художественном произведении не есть автоматическая реализация абстрактной структуры в конкретном материале – это всегда отношения борьбы, напряжения и конфликта. (Lotman 1972: 124, cf. 49)

Thus the relationship of text and system in an artistic work is not the automatic realisation of an abstract structure in concrete form, but is always a relationship of struggle, tension, and conflict. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 123–124, cf. 47; see Monticelli 2022: 328–329)

From these fundamental structural conflicts, additional conflicts arise. As an example, poetic semantics does not necessarily coincide with the meanings “of the natural language, but enters into conflict [конфликт] with them and struggles [борется] with them” (Lotman 1970: 237; [1970] 1977: 193):

⁸ Compare: “совпадение – частный случай конфликта” (‘coincidence is a particular instance of conflict’) (Lotman 1970: 238; [1970] 1977: 193).

Конфликт, напряжение между этими двумя типами значений тем более ощутимы, что в тексте они выражены одним и тем же знаком – данным словом. (Lotman 1972: 87)

Conflict, tension between these two types of meaning, is all the more palpable in that they are expressed in the text by a single sign, a given word. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 85)

Moreover:

Восприятие художественного текста – всегда борьба между слушателем и автором. (Lotman 1970: 348)

The perception of an artistic text is always a struggle between audience and author. (Lotman [1970] 1977: 288)⁹

The crucial aspect is that, according to Lotman, this conflict is also productive:

[О]тношение «поэт – читатель» – всегда напряжение и борьба. Чем напряженнее конфликт, тем более выигрывает читатель от своего поражения. (Lotman 1972: 127)

[T]he “poet–reader” relationship is always one of tension and struggle. The more intense the conflict, the more the reader wins from his or her loss. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 128, tr. mod.)

4. Lotman’s Semiosphere

Lotman later applied these methodological principles to other sign systems, introducing the term “semiosphere” to describe the comprehensive, heterogeneous system of all semiotic systems. It spans a myriad of elements: conflicting texts, conflicting codes, conflicts between texts and codes, conflicting sign types (such as iconicity and conventionality), and, eventually, conflicting communication

⁹ Here Lotman adds, in brackets: “in this sense we can apply mathematical game theory to the study of the perception of art”. Compare Brams 2011 and Swirski 2013.

participants (the addressers and the addressees) (see the chapter by Gherlone and Restaneo in this volume).

Lotman discovered the antinomy of iconicity and conventionality in the early 1960s (Kim Soo Hwan 2003: 22–58; Pilshchikov 2018: 135–136), well before he became familiar with C. S. Peirce’s classification of signs, which was revived and reinterpreted by Jakobson (1965: 23–24; Gvoždiak 2017). Characteristically, in Lotman’s thought these concepts are seen as a binary opposition, unlike Peirce’s “icon–index–symbol” triad (compare Griffin 2021). In his 1970 article “Как говорит искусство?” (“How does art speak?”), published in Estonian as “Kuidas kõneleb kunst?” and not reprinted during his lifetime, Lotman wrote:

Современная семиотика, по сути, внесла существенные коррективы в деление знаков на изобразительные и условные. Условность и изобразительность не воплощаются в чистом виде ни в одном из типов знаков – это две тенденции, два языковых механизма, конфликт, борьба, напряжение между которыми определяет жизнь той или иной знаковой системы. (Lotman 2003: 104)

Modern semiotics has significantly revised the categorisation of signs into figurative and conventional. Neither conventionality nor figurativeness exists in pure form in any sign type—they represent two trends, two language mechanisms, whose conflict, struggle, tension define the vitality of a particular sign system.

In the concluding theoretical chapter of *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, Lotman translates the structuralist description of an artwork into the language of communication theory and semiotics:

В отличие от нехудожественных текстов, произведение искусства соотносится не с одним, а с многими дешифрующими его кодами. (Lotman 1972: 123)

Unlike non-artistic texts, a work of art is correlated not with one but with multiple deciphering codes. (Lotman [1972] 1976: 123, tr. mod.)

When applied to text reception, this model implies that the two languages (or codes) are those of the addresser and the addressee. In his 1960 talk “Linguistics and Communication Theory”, Jakobson (1961: 249) highlighted the difference between the grammar/code of the sender and that of the receiver of information. In a paper published in the 1967 festschrift to Jakobson, Boris Uspenskij (1967) recognised this difference as fundamental for linguistics and semiotics. In *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Lotman refers to Jakobson, who “is correct in asserting that in the process of transmitting information, not one, but in fact two codes are employed [не один, а два кода], the one for encoding and the other for decoding the message” (Lotman 1970: 21; [1970] 1977: 13; see Pilshchikov, Sütiste 2022: 67–68), and then, referring implicitly to Uspenskij’s article, reiterates:

В лингвистической литературе получило признание положение Р. Якобсона о разделении правил грамматического синтеза (грамматика говорящего) и грамматики анализа (грамматика слушающего). Аналогичный подход к художественной коммуникации раскрывает ее бóльшую сложность. (Lotman 1970: 34)

Linguistic scholarship has recognised the validity of Roman Jakobson’s thesis on the difference between rules that govern grammatical synthesis (the grammar of the speaker) and rules that govern grammatical analysis (the grammar of the listener). A similar approach to artistic communication reveals its greater complexity. (Lotman [1970] 1977: 24, tr. mod.)

A poetic text is a text *written* in more than one language, but any cultural text, whether poetic or not, is *read* in multiple languages (compare Lotman 1989: 188–189, [1989] 2019: 84–85).

Lotman wrote of heterogeneity and incomplete translatability, both linguistic and conceptual, as key drivers in cognition and communication (Salupere 2008; Avtonomova 2009: 256–268; Monticelli 2012, 2017, 2019). This is the principle of the semiosphere: it is “composed of conflicting structures [из конфликтующих структур]” (Lotman 1990: 131, 1990 [1996]: 175). He notes:

Таким образом, на любом синхронном срезе семиосферы сталкиваются разные языки, ... некоторые тексты оказываются погруженными в не соответствующие им языки, а дешифрующие их коды могут вовсе отсутствовать. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 168).

So across any synchronic section of the semiosphere different languages ... are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own, while the codes to decipher them may be entirely absent. (Lotman 1990: 126)

Or, as Umberto Eco put it: “Sometimes the addressee’s entire system of cultural units ... legitimates an interpretation that the sender would have never foreseen” (1976: 141).

5. Lotman and Bakhtin: an Unobvious Connection

How can these conflicts be resolved, or rather, how can they be transformed into productive forces? Lotman explored this question in his 1990 book *Universe of the Mind*. Initially published in English, with Umberto Eco’s introduction, it comprises Lotman’s revised and updated studies stretching from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s; the original Russian version was released posthumously in 1996. In his introduction, Eco writes:

[T]he first theoretical problem which the structuralists of the Sixties found most difficult to deal with was the fact that certain systems, through communication processes (which are historical processes, that is processes, which take place in time) changed.

The second problem was that given that a semiotic system was seen as a code, or rather as a system of rules, how could there be communication processes in which it was difficult to identify codes or where there seemed to be a conflict between different codes? It is these problems which hold the key to an understanding of the evolution of Lotman's thought. (Eco 1990: ix)

In artistic texts, uniformity at one level may clash with uniformity at another, yet such inter-level conflicts can be harmonised at a higher level. Even contradictions within the same level do not dismantle the system but rather enhance its diversity. To elucidate this, Lotman incorporates Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia. While Bakhtin originally confined these concepts to Dostoevsky's 'polyphonic' novels, Lotman expanded their application to other literary texts and further employed the literary text as a paradigm for resolving social conflicts:

В художественном тексте оказывается возможным реализовать ту оптимальную их [конфликтующих структур – IP] соотношенность, при которой конфликтующие структуры располагаются не иерархически, то есть на разных уровнях, а диалогически – на одном. Поэтому художественное повествование оказывается наиболее гибким и эффективным моделирующим устройством, способным целостно описывать весьма сложные структуры и ситуации. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 226)

In the literary text there is an optimal correlation whereby the conflicting structures are disposed not hierarchically (that is, on different levels) but dialogically on the same level. This is why a literary narrative is the most flexible and effective modelling mechanism for describing extremely complex structures and situations in their entirety. (Lotman 1990: 163–164)

As Natalia Avtonomova (2009: 194) has observed, in many of his works, "Lotman constantly attempts to translate Bakhtin's

set of concerns into his own language [перевести бахтинскую проблематику на свой язык], using terminology close to him”:

Analysing the various contexts in which Bakhtin’s ideas and concepts are used, Lotman often substitutes his own equivalents, which belong to a completely different register of thought, instead of the originals. Thus, in place of Bakhtin’s polyphony, Lotman speaks of “polyglottism” [“многоязычие”] or a complex play of subsystems in the structure; ... he considers dialogues in Dostoevsky’s novels and Bakhtin’s analyses as a way to create a new type of orderings generated by “conflicting systems” [“конфликтующими системами”]; and in their turn, these orderings are included in his own framework as “dialogical structures”. (Avtonomova 2009: 194, cf. 238–242; see also Shukman 1986: 196–197; Gasparov 2003: 8–9; and Emerson 2002: 82–83)

Lotman articulated his perspective on Bakhtin’s legacy in a paper he presented at the International Bakhtin Colloquium hosted by the Friedrich Schiller University Jena in 1984. Titled “Bachtin – sein Erbe und aktuelle Probleme der Semiotik” (‘Bakhtin: His Legacy and Contemporary Problems of Semiotics’), the paper detailed Lotman’s adoption and reinterpretation of Bakhtin’s “Idee der Dialogizität” (‘concept of dialogism’):

Es soll gleich angemerkt werden, daß der von Bachtin eingeführte Begriff des Dialogs in seinen Aufsätzen nicht selten einen metaphorischen, oft sehr unbestimmten Charakter hat. Und seine Bestimmtheit erlangt dieser Begriff allmählich, im Laufe der weiteren Entwicklung der Wissenschaft. ... Wir können nun vom Dialog schon nicht mehr als einer schönen Metapher sprechen, die auf Beliebiges beliebig oft anwendbar ist, sondern als einem ganz bestimmten Begriff, der den Mechanismus der Erarbeitung neuer Information bedeutet. Eine Information, die bis zum dialogischen Kontakt noch nicht besteht, entwickelt sich in seinem Prozeß. (Lotman 1984: 33, 38)

It should be noted right away that the concept of dialog introduced by Bakhtin in his essays often has a metaphorical, sometimes very vague character. However, this concept gradually gains its specificity in the course of the further development of scholarship. ... We can no longer speak of dialogue merely as a beautiful metaphor that can be applied to anything and everything, but as a very specific concept that denotes the mechanism for elaborating new information. Information that did not exist before the dialogic contact emerges in the dialogic process.

Lotman takes on this idea in *Universe of the Mind*:

Поскольку в реальности любая семиосфера ..., а соприкасается с другими семиосферами, обладающими своей организацией ..., здесь возникает постоянный обмен, выработка общего языка, койне, образование креолизованных семиотических систем. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 191–192)

Insofar as [any] semiosphere ... is contiguous with other semiospheres that possess their own organisation ..., what comes about here is a constant exchange, the production of a common language, of a *koinē*, the formation of creolised semiotic systems. (Lotman 2020: 47; cf. 1990: 142).

Conflicts are unpreventable in principle:

Однако эти столкновения неизбежно приводят к культурному выравниванию и созданию некоей новой семиосферы более высокого порядка, в которую включаются обе стороны уже как равноправные. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 192)

But these conflicts inevitably lead to cultural levelling and to the creation of a new higher-order semiosphere, which includes both parties, now as equals. (Lotman 1990: 142, tr. mod.; cf. 2020: 47).

Lotman's ideal is a compromise and "creolisation", or creating hybrids (Eco 1990: xii):

Исторический опыт показывает, что наиболее жизнестойкими оказываются те системы, в которых борьба между [конфликтующими] структурами не приводит к безусловной победе какой-либо одной из них. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 45)

Historical experience has shown that the most viable cultures are those systems where the struggle between the [conflicting] structures has not resulted in an all-out victory for one of them. (Lotman 1990: 35)

In his last book, *Культура и взрыв (Culture and Explosion, 1992)*, Lotman explained this in more detail:

[О]бщ[ая] судьб[а] противопоставлений в структуре культуры [такова]. Полярные начала осуществляют себя во взаимном конфликте. Каждая из тенденций понимает победу как полное уничтожение своей антитезы. Однако понимаемая таким образом победа представляет собой программу самоуничтожения, ибо [каждая тенденция] определяется реальностью и бытием ее антитезы. (Lotman 1992b: 233–234)

[T]he common fate of oppositions in the structure of culture [is as follows]. Polar elements manifest themselves in mutual conflict. Each of the two tendencies understands victory as the complete annihilation of its antithesis. However, victory understood in this way is a programme for self-destruction, as each tendency is contingent upon the reality and existence of its antithesis. (Lotman [1992] 2009: 150–151, tr. mod.)

This assertion, evidently Hegelian in nature, aligns closely with Marx's early book, *Misère de la philosophie (The Poverty of Philosophy, 1847)*, originally written in French):

Ce qui constitue le mouvement dialectique, c'est la coexistence des deux côtés contradictoires, leur lutte et leur fusion en une catégorie nouvelle. Rien qu'à se poser le problème d'éliminer le mauvais côté, on coupe court au mouvement dialectique. (Marx 1847: 103)

What constitutes dialectical movement is the coexistence of two contradictory sides, their struggle and their fusion into a new category. The very setting of the problem of eliminating the bad side cuts short the dialectic movement. (Marx [1847] 1959: 108, tr. mod.)

Thus, Lotman's view of complementary contradictions parallels Hegel's "Einheit der Entgegengesetzten" ('unity of opposites') with their "dialektische Aufhebung" ('dialectical sublation') and its appropriation in materialist dialectics. However, his conclusions diverge sharply from revolutionary Marxism.¹⁰ In *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman interprets dialectics as synonymous with the evolutionary progress of ternary systems, contrasting it with the revolutionary self-annihilation characteristic of binary systems (Gherlone 2022: 289–290):

[И]деалом бинарных систем является полное уничтожение всего уже существующего как запятнанного неисправимыми пороками. Тернарная система стремится приспособить идеал к реальности, бинарная – осуществить на практике неосуществимый идеал. (Lotman 1992b: 258)

[T]he ideal of binary systems is the complete destruction of all that has come before as tainted by irremediable defects. The ternary system strives to adapt the ideal to reality, the binary to realise an unrealisable ideal in practice. (Lotman 2020: 69, cf. [1992] 2009: 166)¹¹

¹⁰ Compare Mikhail Gasparov's analysis of Juri Lotman's attitude to Marxism (Gasparov 1996) and Mihhail Lotman's objections (2022). See also Avtonomova 2009: 229–242.

¹¹ It is important to distinguish between the binarism of a system or structure and binarism as a principle of description. A ternary system can be described using "two pairs of hinged oppositions" (Mandelker 2006: 70; cf. Gasparov [1999] 2009: 227). For instance, the third element in such a system might share one characteristic with the first element and a different characteristic with the second, with each characteristic forming a privative opposition based on its presence or absence (see Lotman 1990 [1996]: 116–117, 1990: 83, and 1992b: 64–65, [1992] 2009: 38; Kroó 2022).

In the Perestroika period and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lotman explored practical applications of his theory to address intercultural and interethnic conflicts in the disintegrating USSR (Poselyagin, Strukova 2013):

Сказанное имеет непосредственное отношение к событиям, протекающим сейчас на бывшей территории Советского Союза. ... [П]роцесс, свидетелями которого мы являемся, можно описать как переключение с бинарной системы на тернарную. Однако ... сам переход мыслится в традиционных понятиях бинаризма ..., поскольку вся предшествующая привычная нам культура тяготела к полярности и максимализму. (Lotman 1992b: 264–265)

This discussion has an immediate bearing on events now taking place in the former territory of the Soviet Union. ... [T]he process we are witnessing can be described as a switch from a binary system to a ternary one. Yet ... the shift itself is thought of using the traditional binary concepts ..., as all previous culture, customary for us, was oriented towards notions of polarity and maximalism. (Lotman 2020: 74–75, cf. [1992] 2009: 171)¹²

Lotman identified the forced imposition of borders and identities as a dangerous conflict-generating mechanism. This occurs when an individual presents him- or herself as a semiotic subject, but a particular group perceives that person solely as an appendage to their own or another group, effectively reducing him or her to a semiotic object:

Ситуация возмущения и бунта возникает при столкновении двух способов кодирования: когда социально-семиотическая структура описывает данного индивида как часть, а он

¹² Compare a competent commentary: "... as a rigorous scholar of Russian history, Lotman understood, better than many politicians, the near-impossibility of this evolutionary change of cultural paradigms" (Epshtein 2019: 92). Of course. But does it only apply to *Russian* history?

сам себя осознает автономной единицей, семиотическим субъектом, а не объектом. (Lotman 1990 [1996]: 186)

Disturbances and rebellion arise when two methods of encoding are in conflict: for instance when the socio-semiotic structure describes an individual as a *part*, but that person feels him- or herself to be an autonomous unit, a semiotic subject not an object. (Lotman 1990: 138)

This idea resonates with Bakhtin's emphasis on the non-objectification of living and speaking Others (Mandelker 2006: 60–61, 71–72). Lotman articulated a similar concern in a 1992 interview with the Estonian *Pühapäevaleht* (*Sunday Newspaper*), which remains untranslated into other languages:

Me peame mõistma teisi, aga teised peavad jääma teisteks. (Lotman 1992a: 3)

We must understand others, but others must remain others.

Furthermore, Lotman acknowledged the inevitability of globalised conflicts, arguing that actions in one part of the world impact other regions, making it impossible to remain insulated from global repercussions. In a 1991 interview, he said:

Эпоха мелких конфликтов и частных столкновений кончилась. Мир един, и то, что происходит на одном конце, неизбежно отзывается на другом. Спрятаться не удастся никому. Колокол звонит по каждому из нас. (Lotman 2003: 286)

The era of petty conflicts and private clashes is over. The world is one, and what is happening in one hemisphere imminently reverberates in the other. No one can hide. The bell tolls for everyone of us.¹³

¹³ *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a novel by Ernest Hemingway (1940), with an epigraph from John Donne: "... I am involved in *Mankind*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*". The Russian translation by Natalia Volzhina

However, there is no real alternative:

See ongi meie ainus valik: elada ohtlikus maailmas või elada vanglas. Mina eelistan esimest. (Lotman 1992a: 3)

Our only choice is to live in a dangerous world or to live in prison. I prefer the former.

6. From Politics to Poetics and Back Again

My conclusion traverses the realms of comparative epistemology, *Begriffsgeschichte*, metahistory, and metapoetics. The development of basic terminology from Formalism to structuralism to cultural semiotics encompassed two conceptual transfers and two conceptual shifts. Initially, the metaphor of social conflict was used to articulate dynamics in poetic texts and literary evolution. Subsequently, a reciprocal process unfolded: the concept of intra- and inter-textual dialogism (what has been referred to as Bakhtin's 'prosaics' *vis-à-vis* Formalist and structuralist poetics)¹⁴ was adapted, first by Lotman and then by other scholars, to analyse social conflicts and propose potential solutions by sublating conflict into dialogue.¹⁵ We can join Mieke Bal in concluding that:

and Evgenia Kalashnikova, entitled *По ком звонит колокол*, was completed in 1962 but first published as late as 1968 because of censorship.

¹⁴ See Morson, Emerson 1990; Betha 1997. Compare Reid 1990 on literature as communication and cognition in Bakhtin and Lotman; Ljunberg 2003 on cultural diversity in Lotman's semiotics of culture and Bakhtin's dialogical model; Avtomomova 2009: 184–202 on Lotman's views of Bakhtin and Bakhtin's views of Lotman; Gherlone 2016 on dialogism and otherness in Lotman and Bakhtin in comparison with dialogue and individualisation in the theories of Lev Vygotsky; Danow 1986 on dialogue in Bakhtin, Mukařovský and Lotman; Laas 2016 on dialogue in Peirce, Lotman and Bakhtin; and Emerson 2022 as an overview of various aspects of the "Bakhtin and Lotman" issue.

¹⁵ See Grübel (2022: 561) on "the migration of [Bakhtin's] thinking through foreign continental European countries (and back to Russia) in the framework of the model of a 'dialogue of cultures' (that is, an 'intercultural dialogue')".

... this is an instance of a concept travelling from one discipline to another and back again. The itinerary is to be termed *interdisciplinary* in this specific sense. To call it “transdisciplinary” would be to presuppose its immutable rigidity, a travelling without changing; to call it “multidisciplinary” would be to subject the fields of the two disciplines to a common analytic tool. Neither option is viable. Instead, a negotiation, a transformation, a reassessment is needed at each stage. (Bal 2002: 39)

Is it a viable theoretical framework or mere wishful thinking? Time will tell, if at all.¹⁶

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SEMIOTICS OF CONFLICT: FROM LOTMAN TO SEMIOPOLITICS

Franciscu Sedda

Introduction¹

“When opposing tendencies coincide, we are not dealing with an absence of conflict but with a particular instance of conflict” (Lotman [1970] 1977: 190). This incisive passage tells us how deep and fundamental the presence of conflict is within Lotman’s semiotic vision. This is even more evident if we place this idea in resonance with the consideration that “the intellectual history of humanity can be considered a struggle for memory” and that “the struggle for biological and social survival is a struggle for information” ([1970] 1975a: 31, 28). It can therefore be argued that in the model of the world that the Tartu semiotician develops everything is conflict and struggle. This axiom derives from the fact that for Lotman there is no meaning, dynamism, life without heterogeneity, tension, difference.

Lotman developed this vision in the 1960s mainly by reasoning on the theme of the artistic text. In the 1970s, he engaged with the typology of cultures and then with the relationships between brain, text, culture, and intellect. In the 1980s, speaking of semiotics of culture and the semiosphere, Lotman focused on the idea of dialogue: however, this wasn’t a way of overcoming the polemological vision at the centre of the works of the previous decades. His idea of

¹ Note that every time the bibliographic reference is in Italian, the translation into English is ours. The Author would like to thank Daniele Monticelli, Mauro Puddu, Merit Maran.

dialogue is in fact based on the same principles as conflict: dialogue and conflict are two sides of the same coin.²

What is conversely less evident in Lotman's thought is a theory of power, or even better a theory of politics. This does not prevent us from thinking in, through and beyond Lotman's *semiotics* (see Sedda 2012).

These are the objectives of this essay: by also dialoguing with other authors and analysing forms of conflict that Lotman has not faced, this essay will first trace the presence of a semiotic of power implicit in Lotman's reasoning on the relationship between fear/shame and contract/self-surrender; then we will outline a semio-political model of semiosis enucleated by the passages that Lotman dedicates to the themes of metadescriptions, dominance, and self-consciousness.³

I. Conflict and power: the emotional structuring of the 'us–them' relationship

If we want to find a point in which Lotman explicitly refers to political conflict – calling into question the birth of the state, the class struggle, the fight between different collectives or antagonistic groups – we ought to refer to a short essay from 1970: “The Semiotics of the Concepts of ‘Shame’ and ‘Fear’”.

² On the roots of this lexicon, based on the Marxist vision and its reworking by the Formalists, see Pilshchikov (in this volume). On the centrality of the theme of conflict in Lotman and its connections with other key points of Lotman's work, see the introduction to this volume by Monticelli and Maran.

³ Among the various attempts to grasp in Lotman's actions and works a theory of power and politics, whether focusing on the Post-Soviet condition or open up to more general theorisations, engaging with cultural studies, political science, philosophy or semiotic theory itself, see Schönle (2006, ed.), Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017), Selg and Ventsel (2020), Restaneo (2018, 2022). For an encounter between Lotman's cultural semiotics and some of the main social issues of contemporary life (politics, populism, social media, migration, memory) see the essays in Lorusso, Sedda (2022, eds.). For an attempt to 'translate' Lotman's concepts in order to deal with the theory and practice of globalisation, see Sedda 2014.

Before delving into its contents, we must underline from the outset that in approaching the question Lotman superimposes a phylogenetic reasoning on a typological one: in fact, he tries to outline the ideal type of emergence and structuring of the political dimension of existence. Lotman knows that the three-step scheme that he outlines to explain the emergence of the political has a “logical-heuristic value, since the real flow of historical processes [has travelled] undoubtedly more complex and infinitely more varied paths” (Lotman [1970] 1975b: 273). So why this approach? First because Lotman, in several points from his work of this period (and his work in general) returns to the phylogenetic dimension of the social, that is to say the distinction of the human from the animal, but also of the individual from the collective. He does so, very often, by putting biology and semiotics in parallel or by applying evolutionary-type schemes that lead from the biological to the cultural. This is, perhaps, a trace of his youthful inclination for entomology. Secondly, because his typological reconstructions – those related to the relationship between Russian culture and attitude towards the sign (Lotman 1973) are exemplary, or to the changing relationship between text and life (Lotman [1973] 1975) – often result in the demonstration that history offers itself as a succession of positions foreseen by the typology and positions that in turn play the dominant role. It is from the intersection of these two inclinations that, in our opinion, the three-stage scheme relating to the emergence of the political is born.

The first stage is the one that distinguishes the human from the animal. This distinction occurs through “the transformation of physiology into culture” thanks to the intervention of the sense of shame (Lotman [1970] 1975b: 273). While the associated living of animals is based on fear – this is the reasoning implicit in Lotman’s text – the emergence of the human and the functioning of human communities is based on the sense of shame. Shame is therefore a form of regulation of experience, a way of establishing that *logic of prohibitions and prescriptions* that Lotman, following Lévi-Strauss, sees as a fundamental trait of the emergence of the cultural from the

natural. Lotman does not tell us how and why the sense of shame arises.⁴ It seems to be the necessary result of an evolutionary story that brings the human out of the condition of *homo homini lupus*, without, however, this condition disappearing completely, as we will see immediately.

In the second stage, man begins to define himself as a “political animal”, a definition that allows us to have a precise glimpse of the emergence of political reflexivity from a condition of animality that is never completely overcome. It is the moment “of the rise of the State and of antagonistic social groups” (ibid.). What becomes dominant in the regulation of cultural behaviour is fear, especially that which articulates the relationship between people and the state.⁵ While people continue to regulate their reciprocal behaviours according to the modality of shame, they relate to what appears to be ‘culturally hegemonic’, i.e. the state, according to the rule of fear. It must be said that at this stage these people seem to exist and organise themselves only through a relationship of dependence on state power.⁶ Lotman’s more general reasoning places the state in the position of otherness: rather than resembling the classic image of the Leviathan as a sovereign body made up of many individual

⁴ On the social significance of shame and its emergence through a mirroring game with otherness, see Turnaturi 2012.

⁵ Restaneo points out that since the works of the 1960s, Lotman’s idea of power has been in line with the then dominant “pre-modern” conception, especially in the Soviet space: “social power as the delimitation of individual freedom” (Lotman, in Restaneo 2022: 271).

⁶ Lotman’s succinct passage leaves open doubt about the status, in this phase, of the aforementioned “antagonistic social groups”: in fact, it is not clear whether Lotman means by them those who contend for state power or those who stand out in antagonism to the predatory power of the state. To some extent, especially with respect to the emergence in the third phase of groups that feel they are the bearers of a “superior organization”, it seems that at this stage these groups lack their own organisation or that they perceive it as subordinate to the state organisation. We would therefore be dealing with groups whose semiotic existence totally depends on the organisation of the state, which they want to take over or with respect to whose predatory power they seek to survive.

bodies, which exercises legitimate violence on behalf of its subjects to draw them out of a potentially unshaken violence, this Leviathan is closer to the image of myth and religion, a sea monster in the form of a serpent, a predatory animal ready to feed on the human animal. Note, therefore, that the human has indeed become a “political animal”, although according to this Lotmanian phylogeny he or she seems to live the political-institutional condition according to an animal, predatory logic.⁷

The third stage leads to the “arising, against the background of the general organization of the community provided by the state, of more particular groups (from the self-organization of classes to parental, neighborhood, professional associations, to artisan guilds, to castes)” (ibid.). The constitution of these individual units is based on shame, i.e. on a behaviour that the given unit perceives as “human”: this behaviour, standing out against that of the others who do not feel ashamed (but it would be more correct to say who do not feel *the same shame*), leads to the perception of oneself as bearer of a “superior organization” (ibid.). This has two consequences that Lotman does not draw: the first is that these units present themselves as islands of humanity within and against the animal state; the second is that among themselves they seem destined to behave in a predatory way, according to the logic of fear. In any case, in this third stage the game becomes more complicated, not in the sense of a synthesis but of a complementarity (the parties know that “whoever is subject to shame is not subject to fear, and vice versa”, ibid.) and of an antagonism (“the disposition of these areas is dynamic and constitutes the object of a mutual struggle”, ibid.). Emblematic in this sense is the position of the Russian aristocracy, whose internal behaviour is regulated by the maxim according to which *feeling fear is a reason for shame* (hence the frequency of duels) while in the relationship with the governing caste the rule of fear is valid,

⁷ On the theme of fear, the dominant perspective and the relationship between Amazonian communities and the predatory state, see Viveiros de Castro 2012.

although the despotism of the autocracy towards the aristocracy is tempered by the solidarity provided by the (familiar, economic, instrumental) links between government and nobility. This example gives us the opportunity to introduce other categories of the political, such as that of solidarity and alliance, which the phylogenetic model just outlined does not contemplate. This is evidently a fundamental issue, considering that even today there is a huge debate as to whether selfishness or altruism, competition or collaboration are at the origin of the social at an evolutionary level (see Wilson 2019).

The dynamic outlined so far leads to two assumptions that, as we will see later in this essay, can be considered a theoretical-methodological legacy to be exploited operationally.

The first assumption is contained in this passage: “The identification in a community of a group organized by shame and a group organized by fear coincides with the antithesis ‘us-them’” (Lotman [1970] 1975b: 271). In other words, determining the boundary between *us* and *them* means determining where shame ends and fear begins. We will see that this idea will be rendered in an even more complex form by the theory of the semiosphere, where the dynamics of the constitution of the us–them relationship intersect with that of the internal–external, civil–barbarian, centre–periphery, majority–minority, many–few. The shame–fear relationship will therefore pass into the background to make room for more intricate discursive-topological games. However, it is neither useful nor correct to underestimate its role. It was Lotman himself, in fact, who in the mid-1980s underlined the need to connect the pragmatics of relations between cultures to the theme of “cultural emotions” (see Lotman [1984] 2023: 114–115), an issue that is explored and developed in his reflections on “witch hunts”, that is to say the unleashing of fear in a situation of sudden acceleration of historical–cultural–technological development (Lotman [1988] 2019). All of this considered, it is evident that the semiospheric space is multi-structured, therefore it is not a question of choosing between, for example, the structuring offered by the majority–minority relationship and that

of shame–fear: it is a question of seeing how the various structurations are welded or disconnected, producing isomorphisms or disjunctures, reinforcing or weakening certain historical dynamics. An attitude that, among other things, relativises the role of the single dualism (which according to Lotman, moreover, is only the minimal model of any differential relation) to grasp it within more complex forms of correlation which determine and explain the degree of effectiveness of specific socio-cultural processes.

The second assumption is implicit in this further introductory passage: “The cultural ‘we’ is a collectivity within which the norms of shame and honor operate. Fear and coercion define our relationship with ‘others’” (Lotman [1970] 1975b: 271-272). As can be seen, the two passions that Lotman chose to structure the phylogeny of the politic actually have another side, a ‘positive’ side: the point is that where shame has as its positive side a passion such as *honour*, fear seems to lead to something that is not exactly a passion, and certainly not a positive one, *coercion*.⁸ This impasse leads to two further reflections. In the first place, it reopens the previously mentioned theme of the multiformity of passions that structure the political field, directing us to the study of historically and culturally situated emotional configurations (see Fabbri [1998] 2008). We find an exemplary case in Lotman’s work, which reminds us how the theme of *honour* carries with it that of *glory*. And how this central relationship in Russian history changes over time.⁹ Secondly, and more generally, Lotman’s idea of linking the (diachronic) emergence and deep (synchronic) structuring of the political field with the shame–fear

⁸ Note the slipperiness of this association: the call for coercion finds meaning and a positive value only if put from the point of view of a power which, being afraid of being challenged or overthrown, acts in a coercive way with respect to its subjects, for example the masses ready to rise up or a population unwilling to follow certain rules.

⁹ The contrasting relationship between fear and courage/freedom that glimmers in Lotman’s analysis of Pushkin’s poetics, as well the conflict between life and power that is at the core of that poetics, needs to be explored (Lotman 1990: 87-100). On the topic of honour, see Appiah 2010. For a semiotic critique of Appiah’s important work, see Sedda 2013.

pairing can take on meaning in relation to other political-philosophical visions of passions. Without going into detail, think of how fear is fundamental in Hobbes and Spinoza but in relation to *hope* (see Bodei [1991] 2018). Why in Lotman do we not find hope but shame–honour? Given that Spinoza aims to overcome both, as linked one to reason of state and the other to the rhetoric that supports religious power, it seems to us that the absence of hope in Lotman is motivated by the specific condition of *homo sovieticus*, above all the condition of the free thinker, who sees (once again) utopia transformed into terror, collective will suppressing individual freedom:

Researchers [of the humanities in the USSR] were dogmatised and partly terrified; teachers could not freely and generously share their knowledge with young people. Reticence, half-truths, fear of denunciations or critical attacks capable of leading to dismissal, public shame and even arrest: these are the hallmarks of research work in [the USSR’s] university and scientific institutions. (Gurevich 2007: XXII)

In this context “the opposition between the official regime and the human person” becomes central (ibid.: XX), to continue with the words that the historian Aron Gurevich – another animator in the early seventies of Russian *kul’turologija*, a sort of soulmate for Lotman (see Rocucci 2018: 312–314) – wrote in the Italian introduction to his famous book *Categories of Medieval Culture*. It is from this point of view that Lotman’s honour must be read: the counterpart to state power, which has perverted and killed collective hope, lies in the research and cultivation of the person, of individuality. Though not necessarily in individualism.

This appreciation of the idea of personality and of the sense of honour can be seen in the many pages that Lotman dedicates to the Decembrists¹⁰ and even more so in the passionate closing of the first

¹⁰ According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “Decembrist, Russian *Dekabrist*, any of the Russian revolutionaries who led an unsuccessful uprising on Dec. 14 (Dec. 26, New

cycle of the *Conversations on Russian Culture* broadcast on TV in 1987:

... the Decembrists were individuals who had self-respect and this is an always indispensable quality... Because whoever has self-respect is a free individual. And, being free, he/she also desires freedom for others:

The sight of popular misfortunes
It is intolerable, my friend;
The happiness of noble minds
It is to see the joy around.

This is Nekrasov. So moral values do not age... in exactly the same way that in the history of humanity works of art, paintings, poems, musical compositions are preserved – and all this must not be destroyed, nor in the present nor in the future – so too is consolidated honesty, nobility [of soul] and self-respect. And these core values must never be lost. (Lotman 2017: 134)

This long passage confirms what we already argued: honour (like any other passion) if understood in detail is declined and articulated in a more complex emotional configuration, in this case made up of honesty, nobility of soul, and self-respect. An emotional configuration that can also include that *sui generis* passion that is *culture* itself; so much so that Lotman will say “but culture, among other things, exists for this, to analyze and dispel fears” (Lotman [1976] 2006: 95). At the same time, the long Lotmanian passage that we have

Style), 1825, and through their martyrdom provided a source of inspiration to succeeding generations of Russian dissidents. The Decembrists were primarily members of the upper classes who had military backgrounds; some had participated in the Russian occupation of France after the Napoleonic Wars or served elsewhere in western Europe; a few had been Freemasons, and some were members of the secret patriotic (and, later, revolutionary) societies in Russia – the Union of Salvation (1816), the Union of Welfare (1818), the Northern Society (1821), and the Southern Society (1821)”. A beautiful semiotic analysis of Decembrists’ poetics of everyday life can be found in Lotman [1975] 1984.

just mentioned shows how the promotion of individuality through self-respect acts, in this context, as an antidote to the fear induced by totalitarian power: it's nurturing the idea of "human person", asserting one's own dignity, that can an individual dissidence and resistance take place, and a glimmer of the collective – or rather a positive sense of the supra-individual – can also be reconstructed. Lotman's theory tries to take the narrow path between massifying totalitarian power and blind individualism. In the cross-reference to honour and Decembrism, a specific model of the relationships that should constitute society can be glimpsed, a model which, focusing on the person, refers to the idea of a horizontal relationship, between equals, marked by mutual freedom and solidarity. And behind this, for a chain of long historical translations, at issue is the model – even a little mythical – of the Greek citizen who lives the polis in a free, non-hierarchical and nonetheless competitive relationship with other citizens. A seemingly contradictory condition that finds its coherence in the idea that competition between free citizens is devoted to the collective good. It is no coincidence that the Greek idea of democracy is rooted in what has been called "a culture of shame and honor" (Vernant 1989).

2. The relationship with power: contract and self-surrender

What we have seen so far leaves open and recalls the question of the forms of *constitution of* and *relationship with* power. To find in Lotman's work an opportunity to confront this theme, we need to go to the contents of the essay *The "Contract" and "Self-Surrender" as Archetypal Models of Culture* ([1981] 2019). This other apparently 'minor' work (which however Lotman inserts in his book *Universe of the Mind*) once again sees Lotman committed to keeping together, by means of a semio-anthropological gaze, the construction of a-temporal typologies and the analysis of their historical developments. Lotman starts by noting the existence of two archaic

socio-cultural models that he conventionally defines as magical and religious, the first one based on contractuality (but we might also say 'agreement') and the second one on self-surrendering (or 'self-giving', 'trusting'). In reality, these are models of the constitution of power, understood both as a way of establishing, organising and hierarchising the relationships between social actors, and in its meaning of strength, the ability to do and make-do.

The relationship system defined as *magical* is based on the following characteristics: *reciprocity* among the participants in the relationship; the *coercion* that obliges participants to respond to the action of the other and implies a certain degree of predictability regarding the course of action; the *equivalence* in the exchanges between the parties, which defines the relationship as an exchange of conventional signs; *contractuality* as a form of conventionalised definition of the relationship, which provides that the production and interpretation of the contract is subject to a conflict between the parties involved and at the same time leaves open the possibility of lying and mutual deceit between the parties.

The system of relationships defined as *religious* is instead based on the inversion of the previous characteristics: the *unilaterality* of the gesture of surrendering oneself to an agent capable of offering protection, whose response is however not obligatory nor does it affect the quality and durability of the relationship; the *absence of obligation*, which means that the action (for example of donation) of the one who surrender him- or herself does not necessarily correspond to a response and even less a just action on the part of the one who is trusted (the one who has received can give to others the merits for the donation); consequently the relationships are *not equivalent* and this means that the communication between the parties does not take place through conventional signs but between symbols whose expression/content relationship appears to be motivated, extraneous to dynamics of deception or interpretation; relationships thus have, unlike the contract, the form of a *gift without conditions*. In summary, Lotman says, "at the basis of any religious

act lies not an exchange but an unconditional surrendering of one-self to a higher power” (ibid.: 50), from which we can see how much the topic in question not only concerns the ways of interaction, of doing and making do between the parties involved, but is also connected to power in the strict sense of the term.

The profound implication this has in terms of political interaction is confirmed through Lotman’s example of the differing impacts of paganism and Christianity on the idea of statehood in ancient Rome, which he uses to develop and give substance to his reasoning. Paganism, through its sacrifices to the gods and the official cult of the emperor, responded to a system of a magical-contractual type and was therefore consistent with the legal mentality at the basis of Roman statehood. Early Christianity could instead be perceived by the Romans as profoundly anti-state precisely because of the semantic incompatibility between its system of relationships, based on self-surrender to God, and the contractual system that regulated the sense of the state in ancient Rome.

Therefore, ‘religious’ modality should not be confused with any historical religion. Nor should the idea of ‘magic’ prevent us from seeing contractuality in action in different contexts, such as Roman law or the system of feudal relationships based on patronage or vassalage. The more one digs into cultural events, the more nuanced this typological opposition becomes, as in the case of the different value and different function which, according to Lotman (ibid.: 51-54), the contract assumes in the West and in Russia between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century.

What remains unchanged is the possibility of studying power relations with these two models in mind. The one that tends towards a conventional-contractual relationship and the one marked by a motivated-fideistic relationship, the former tending towards relationships based on symmetry-horizontality while the latter on asymmetrical-vertical.

One might wonder what the benefit of self-surrendering is. This can be understood if one considers that the opposite model,

the contract, leaves the possibility of deceiving and being deceived open. The contract model implies (and produces) a substantially fragmented society, exposed to the plurality of competing points of view and interests, whose composition is always contingent. A society exposed to anguish, to a sense of ontological fragility. The second modality, in the face of a sort of voluntary renunciation of power in the form of giving trust, implies (and produces) instead a cohesive society, united by common trust in some kind of superior entity. Thinking of the two models as inverted polarities of a common semiopolitical field, one could say that *what the individual (or rather, the partialising) subject loses in power and freedom the collective (or rather, totalising) subject gains in terms of strength and unity*. And vice versa.

The resulting dynamics can take various forms: 1) an alternation of the two models over time, for example the transition from a relationship of self-surrendering to a contractual one with the divine in the history of a given religion, or the emergence of a new religion precisely through the transition from one model to another, as in the case of the transition from the relationship with God based on Law in Judaism to the relationship based on Faith in Christ in nascent Christianity; 2) their simultaneous application to different fields and social situations within a semiosphere: “to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”; 3) a constant tension between two forms of modelling that can involve the same phenomenon, as in the internal tension between the faithful of the same religion or the followers of the same political leader, where some understand the relationship with the deity or the leader in the form of self-surrendering and others in a contractual form. Without forgetting those ‘negative’ positions that emerge more from the case studies than from Lotman’s theory: those events where subjects define themselves not so much in connection with one of the two models but rather through the negation of one of the two. An issue that among other things recalls the question of graduation – with possible points of neutralisation and inversion – between the two extremes. All these

elements are in themselves, and even more together, potential factors of conflict.

This reasoning around the modalities of agreement and trust can help us to better outline the outstanding issue of fear. What is the 'positive' side of this way of relating to power? In our view, it is the sense of safety and security. This might sound paradoxical, if we consider that Lotman, in his model on the emergence of the political power, focuses on the fear that a collective, the *us*, feels with respect to the state, perceived as a predatory *otherness*. However, the paradox can be explained, or at least made fruitful, if we consider one of the archetypal models of foundation of sovereignty, that of the *foreign king*. As argued by Graeber and Sahlins "stranger-kingdoms are the dominant form of premodern state the world around, perhaps the original form" (2017: 5). The peculiarity of this original form of sovereignty lies in the fact that it is based on the taming and sublimation of the monstrous and violent nature of the image of the foreign king, a nature which, moreover, remains consubstantial to it. In other words, the 'we' immunises itself against the 'other' it fears by incorporating it and translating the violent nature of otherness to the advantage of the general interest, for example in the form of the 'legitimate use of force' as a means of regulating internal conflicts and the constitution of the state itself. The mechanism, Sahlins and Graeber say, is intimately dual, and, we could also add, correlational: the 'we' establishes the foreigner as king by entrusting him with power and self-surrendering to him, at the same time the 'we' conceives itself as constituted by the foreign king in so far as the sovereign is bearer of that political organisation that the 'we' seem incapable of producing itself. Not only that, the two remain in a constant relationship of reciprocal tension with on the one hand, the foreign king with his work of 'civilisation' defining and delimiting the strength and form of the principle of sovereignty, which remains in the hands of the 'we' who invested him as sovereign; on the other hand, the 'monstrous'/'divine' otherness of the king is constantly limited by those 'sacralisation' procedures that the collective

operates to cage, tame, and direct the constitutive violence of the foreign sovereign, procedures that passing through the ritualisation of the sovereign's actions can go as far as his sacrifice.

This is an important structural dynamic that, in our view, survives in democratic contemporaneity too, where the sphere of freedom of citizens and that of action of the state tend to limit each other. To give just two examples, think of privacy as an individual bulwark against the power of state control and vice versa of the forms of limitation of individual freedom of expression that the state can establish by law (punishing defamation, incitement to hate, apologies for fascism, etc.) to guarantee the stability of the collective. More generally, it is possible to think of the decision-making procedures (voting, parliamentary dynamics, referendum, etc.) and of the balance of power in a democracy (division between legislative, executive, judicial power; presence of supervisory authorities in various areas; possible bicameralism, etc.) as forms of sacralisation of state power because it is formally articulated, ritualised, celebrated, while in fact it is broken up, harnessed and weakened in its capacity for direct action.

Lotman's hypothesis is both confirmed and specified by this comparison. It is confirmed to the extent that the sovereign state is perceived as an otherness as fearsome as it is necessary, and here it is worth remembering that in general, for Lotman, there is a need for the other rooted in the 'bowels' of each semiosphere. It emerges specified to the extent that the comparison with what Sahlins and Graeber argued shows how the counterpart of fear is not pure and simple coercion but something more articulated, which refers to what is deeply at stake in the dynamics of self-surrendering, i.e. a feeling of security, a condition of protection. An ambivalent condition, given that it is at the same time *protection with respect to* and *protection thanks to* the otherness in relation to which the 'we' define itself.

Let's put our reworking of Lotman's arguments to the test of contemporary xenophobic populism. The threat – real or

imaginary – from some otherness favours the internal cohesion of a collective through the act of self-surrender to some ‘strong’ leadership, a leadership whose strength is the cause and effect of the very gesture of self-giving produced by the ‘we’ in search of protection. The ‘we’ is literally and exponentially founded on the fear of the other. In fact, in its dawning moment it lashes out not only against those kind of otherness that can be considered as external (migrants, strangers, foreigner countries, supranational institutions and powers, etc.) but also against various forms of internal actors treated as enemies-otherness, in so far as they are considered being complicit with the actors (and the threats) coming from the outside. It is no coincidence that this outcry takes place in the name of the nation-people against the state and its ruling ‘elites’ (the very term nation-state maintains within itself that founding and conflictual dualism we mentioned earlier). Nor is it a coincidence that once the people elevate some of their ‘anti-political’ leaders to the position of state power, they tend to take on an ambivalence, a sovereignty extraneousness that very easily exposes the leader to expendability. Especially so in the more mature democratic systems and in the troubled times we live in, marked by the volatility of moods, fame, and reputation via social media.

It is also worth noting how the ‘we’ at stake is profoundly, and in many ways, partial. Let us take the issue of migrants, which is particularly felt on the Mediterranean edge of Europe. Fear justifies the rejection of migrants, unifying a certain ‘us’ against ‘them’ in the name of security and a sought-after sense of protection. At the same time, the rejection of migrants, their deaths at sea, causes shame in another part of the collective, generating the idea of an honour to be saved by acting in the name of a common humanity or affirming the ‘best part of the soul’ of the given collective, which sees its name tarnished by those among its own compatriots who reject other human beings. In the end, the national collective finds itself deeply divided and in conflict, because it codifies and feels the encounter with the otherness represented by migrants in a radically different

way. The part who is afraid of the migrants tends to feel closer to other peoples (or parts of them) who feel fear of migration, hence the solidarity, even geopolitical, between different populist formations whose chauvinistic nationalism, if consistently applied, should make them if not adversaries at least in competition. The part who feels ashamed for the way migrants are treated tends to feel closer to those migrants with whom they think they share the same sense of humanity. Here the relative overestimation of the 'progressive' and 'emancipatory' identity of each migrant, of which all identarian and differential traits tend to disappear except for the human. In conclusion, the two parts of the same community, confronted and reacting to such a 'hot issue', tend to become *reciprocal others*.

What is true for migrants can be true for the treatment of other forms of identities experienced as potential 'otherness', albeit all internal to the collective. Think of the various minorities, from the classic ones of a linguistic, ethnic, or national type, to those that fall under the LGBTQIA+ flag, with respect to which perceptive and political caesuras are defined according to the application of the fear–protection or the shame–honour scheme. This reminds us that the fault line between 'us' and 'them' is plural and therefore unstable and contestable. Each person stands at the intersection of many articulations of the us–them relationship. This is also why the definition of what is the main theme of public attention and action, where the line between fear–protection and shame–honour crosses, is a decisive matter of conflict. By defining the theme – the constant that generates a dominant *motif*, taking up an idea of Jakobson (1975) – we define which relationship between us and them acts as the dominant, at least momentarily structuring the internal hierarchy of the given semiosphere. This dynamic remains decisive even where a policy of alliance and coexistence is imagined and practiced, a policy that aims to recompose different fault lines created by different forms of shame and fear. This is because such a policy does not go beyond diversity but undertakes to identify themes and forms that make it possible to articulate the

plurality of us-them who inhabit the social space and pass through us individually.

These arguments raise many questions. Some of these relate to what we saw in the first part, namely to what extent the logic of fear/security and that of shame/honour are exclusive or primary. And therefore, what role do other passions such as courage, hope, love, freedom play in evolutionary history and in historical becoming, in the political present and in the individual semiospheres.¹¹ So, are these passions phylogenetically secondary? And is that why they are (or appear to be) less practiced or less effective? Should they be more decisively reintegrated, upstream and downstream, in the framework outlined so far? Not only. We could also ask ourselves what role does *pleasure* play, the pleasure produced and offered by power, on a model like Lotman's which seems to exclude this dimension in order instead to valorise, even on an ethical level, the theme of sacrifice in the construction of personhood (Lotman 2017). Perhaps the first effect of a reintegration of the theme of pleasure would be to consider the idea of pleasure in connection with the basic passions identified by Lotman – certainly the pleasure of honour and security, the pleasure of agreeing and trusting, but why not also the pleasure of fear, of risk, of the conflict itself – and consequently to understand how these pleasures are rooted in the materiality and rituals of everyday life. The Latin maxim *panem et circenses* ('bread and circuses'), so deeply connected to the theme of power, comes to

¹¹ In the final phase of his work, Lotman returns emphatically to the theme of freedom, particularly in connection with that of randomness and explosion. For instance, consider this important passage: "The most complex object we can imagine is one possessing the capacity for intelligence, as its behavior at a bifurcation point assumes the character of a conscious choice. The potential for intelligence lies in the presence of randomness in nature. However, a structure that rises to the level of intelligence transforms randomness into freedom, which greatly complicates its relationship to causality because now, between cause and effect, there lies an act of intellectual choice, free from automatization." ([1989] 2019: 90). The question here is to understand whether freedom is conceived as a *passion* or as a *condition*; even better, as a 'situated passion' or as an 'a priori condition' of culture. We allow ourselves to leave the question open for future exploration.

mind. It seems to indicate that pleasure is perhaps more linked to the management than to the foundation of power. But it is, evidently, something to which we will have to go back.

Concluding this part, it is worth noting the following points. The first is that if we have integrated the theme of fear with that of trust/self-surrender, then we can try to imagine that the theme of contract/agreement reverberates on the shame–honour nexus. In this sense what would give strength to a conventional contract in which the parties are free to deceive, distort the meaning of the agreement, presenting exactly the risk of losing face and being excluded not only from that symmetrical game that underlies the prosaic (unequal but not intangible) distribution of power but, more radically, also from the ‘we’, the community itself. The second is that nothing prevents Lotman’s two pairs – shame–honour and fear–security on the one hand, contract and self-surrender on the other – from giving life to a more complex matrix of positions and types of relationship, capable of articulating and making us perceive the more nuanced and stratified dynamics of power at play in cultural processes.

To all this it must be added that in Lotman’s work there is a theory of dominance that is linked to the theme of self-consciousness, which makes the vision of power that we can reconstruct starting from his work even more articulated.

3. A semiopolitical model of conflict

3.1. A SYNTHETIC OVERVIEW

What has been seen so far must be integrated with the ‘major’ conception of power in Lotman. A conception which, as summarised by Restaneo (2022), revolves around four key concepts: description, dominance, self-description, semiotic personality.¹² The challenge

¹² On the relationship between Lotman’s semiotics and the analytic of power, as well as on the dialogue between Lotman’s vision and that of authors such as Gramsci, Foucault, de Certeau, see the essays in Schönle (2006, ed.).

that arises is to understand if and how these concepts, beyond their separate and punctual analytical applicability, can be seen as part of a single model that Lotman has not fully outlined. In previous works (Sedda 2012, 2015) we sketched this model talking about a movement of semiosis between flatness, elevation, and flattening produced by a constant clash between semiotic (meta)formations. In an attempt to imagine it, we spoke of an accordion-like or bellows-like movement of the semiosphere, which in its occurrence generates a pulsating effect, or a ‘bubbling’ effect, following a vivid description of the semiospheric space given by Lotman. In this vein, wanting to add another image, one could think of a musical equaliser that must display the performance of not one but multiple songs and music. Here we would like to try to outline this model in a more articulated way, knowing well that its complexity, paradoxicality and dynamism make it in many ways elusive and difficult to linearise and visualise. Before tackling the challenge, one must emphasise that it is both a model of power relations and of cultural semiosis in general, and that it is this double soul that leads us to see and conceive semiotics as a *semiopolitics*.

In synthesis, here is a visualisation of this model (Figure 1), followed by an explanation that anticipates the conclusions of the following and more in-depth investigation through Lotman’s work.

What we are proposing is a model 1) made up of different levels which, however, in reality can always interact as if they were (on) a single level; 2) in which the definition of levels and meta-levels – i.e. a hierarchy, with its isomorphisms and disjunctures – is exactly one of the stakes in the clash between (and in the correlative definition of) different semiotic personalities; 3) in which the coexistence of attempts at elevation and effects of flattening/crushing produces a constant conflict between meta-formations and between self-models, as well as that apparently contradictory coexistence of chaos and order in the space of culture; 4) in which access and positioning on the different levels indicate an asymmetry of power in the definition of what is real in reality and therefore different levels of realisation

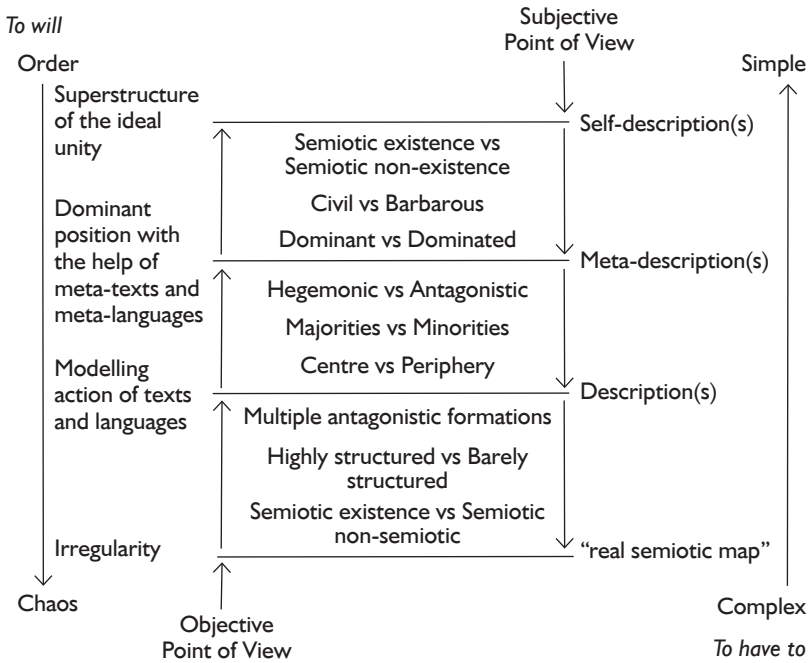


Figure 1.

and strength (levels of semiotic existence) of the different semiotic personalities; 5) in which, from a theoretical point of view, descriptive, meta-descriptive and self-descriptive work (but in order not to give the impression of a purely verbal dynamic one should more correctly speak of modelling, meta-modelling, self-modelling work) can be distinguished as a passage from structuring, to dominance, to unification (where the last level does not abolish the others but is a form of structuring and dominance brought to the maximum stage of effectiveness); 6) in which the conflict passes from the presence of a plurality of antagonistic semiotic (or semiopolitical) formations, to forms of dualism (centre–periphery, majority–minority, civil–barbarian), up to an ideal totalisation of the social field (with relative exclusion of counterparties) that exacerbates the conflict while making it invisible; 7) in which self-description – the production of a

proposal for self-consciousness – can serve both to react to an original or incipient chaos, and as an ‘almost natural’ development of a synthesis that simplifies social semiosis and orients the collective within complexity; 8) in which the perspective at stake can make the production of order appear as a fact of will, to draw reality out of chaos, or as a form of duty, which leads to the production of simplifications that stand out against a complex semiotic background that they make manageable; 9) in which a theoretical-objectifying perspective, which favours the idea that the dynamics starts from the basic irregularity of reality to go towards the synthesis of self-consciousness, and an operative-subjectifying perspective, in which reality with its levels of structuring and its irregularities is grasped starting from a specific semiotic personality with its own self-consciousness, intersect; 10) in which, practically, each level can reproduce the dynamic existing between the real semiotic map and the level of self-description, or the clash between irregularity and modelling, with the relative caesura between semiotic existence and non-existence; 11) in which the drive to produce dominated and barbarians (to the point of being able to reduce otherness to non-existence) passes through the attack on the structuring of others, that is to say both through their deconstruction and through their impossibility of (re)producing and spreading themselves; 12) this radical drive towards dominance, in order to be able to unify the social field, is the most evident form of constitution of power, although it must not preclude us from seeing (and experimenting with) other forms of self-description and self-awareness.

Before showing how such a model can be reached by reworking different Lotmanian passages in an original way, it must be said that in our hypothesis this model is transversally crossed both by the way in which fear and shame (but also other and more articulated emotional configurations) produce forms of us–them, as much as the way of generating relationships between us, others and power marked by forms of contract or self-surrender. Forms of structuring the semiopolitical personality which moreover, from case to case,

are welded in an original way with those other basic structurings that are the relationship between antagonistic formations, between hegemonic position and antagonistic forces, between centres and peripheries, between majorities and minorities, between the dominant and the dominated, between civilians and barbarians.

3.2. THE PARADOXES OF THE SEMIOSPHERE

To investigate the complex mechanism of semiosis and power it is useful to start afresh from two apparently contradictory sentences: “The self-model is a powerful means of ‘pre-regulation’ of culture, which gives it systematic unity and determines in many ways its qualities as a reservoir of information. However, it is a matter of a reality of a different level than that of the texts” (Lotman [1971] 1975: 73); “In the reality of the Semiosphere, the hierarchy of languages and texts, as a rule, is disturbed: and these elements collide as though they coexisted on the same level” (Lotman [1984] 2005: 213).

The first quotation interests us for its concluding sentence, which highlights how the self-model and the texts, against which the self-model of culture stands out, are realities of different levels; and this although a self-model is still a self-image developed, incorporated and conveyed through texts (be they narrations, images or rituals). This tendency to differentiate self-model and texts is confirmed by the next passage, where the semiosphere is spoken of as a hierarchy of languages and texts, implying that the self-model is a text-language placed at the highest vertex of the semiotic hierarchy, as will be said elsewhere. However, this second passage also tells us that this hierarchy – its existence, its stability – is constantly undermined. In fact, the various languages and texts collide, as if they were on the same level.

This state of things has two consequences that are as paradoxical as they are fundamental. The first is that the underlying irregularity is at the same time an amorphous and textual space: it is both

the space of the extra-semiotic and that of unanalysed texts, that is to say of a multiform, overabundant semiotic process. The extra-semiotic is not only the unknown, the non-semiotic in itself, but what is produced through the mixing and confusion, the conflicting and deconstructing of competing semiotic formations. In a constant circular mechanism, the irregularity that causes the need for modelling to arise is also the effect of the clash between the plurality of modelling actions that insist on and constitute the space of the semiosphere.

The second consequence is that if we take Lotman's two passages as true at the same time then we must draw the consequence that at the most abstract theoretical level the semiosphere is *both hierarchical and flat* and that in a normal condition the hierarchy produced by texts and languages is *as effective as contingent*.

3.3. THE INSTITUTION OF REALITY

If we think of the process of structuring reality starting from a condition of irregularity, we can and must postulate a first level of pure and simple *description-modelling actions*.¹³ For the purposes of an analysis of the relationship between semiosis and power we must note that the description doubly institutes the real. In fact, 1) the production of a description, its realisation, is already in itself a sign, however feeble and disputable, of power and existence because of

¹³ The specification is necessary and must always be kept in mind because the idea of 'description' tends to overvalue the verbal and intentional semiotic work. The modelling work, on the other hand, is necessarily plurisemiotic and translational. And there may be highly pervasive forms of modelling the world whose modelling intentionality is not explicit or is not the engine of the modelling action itself: just think of customary behaviours, incorporated practices, rituals. It remains true that meta-descriptive action can often appear as a (meta-)meta-comment (in a Geertzian sense) (see Geertz 1973). This favours the idea of a verbal-intentional grasping and fashioning of the world, although, let us repeat, here too we should not underestimate the force of self-modelling that can be exercised by other languages or by the interplay between different languages.

the subjectivity that produces it; 2) the describing, identifying and articulating of a portion of reality, populating it with things and relationships between things, makes it more real than what is not described. In this sense, every semiotic act, even the most ordinary, contributes to weaving the plot of what a given semiotic personality deems real. And this cannot but conflict with other proposals for the instauration of the real.

Meta-description relaunches this mechanism to the degree, given that by *describing descriptions* it can contest their status of reality, that it can reorganise their disposition and meaning, it can affirm a given present reality by situating it within historical reality, or within a certain description of the development of historicity;¹⁴ meta-description, acting as a meta-language, can establish a language as reality¹⁵ by making other semiotic configurations lose their reality, can generate with and through a given language a model of the world that offers the collective a tool for producing the real as well as an implicit source of the sense of what is real inside reality. Meta-descriptions, in other words, generate the living memory of the collective, which guarantees it a present reference ground and a sense of continuity over time, excluding, marginalising, disintegrating those memories that could turn out to be alternatives.

Where a description offers a primary structuration to reality, a meta-description tries to exercise more explicitly a dominance function, (re)organising a given cultural material, a given semiotic space of reference, generating more systematic effects of reality.¹⁶ Conversely, it can be said that a dominance is always a form of

¹⁴ "...the creation of a system of self-description reorganizes and simplifies the object of research (by cutting off what is 'superfluous') not only in its synchronic but also in its diachronic state: that is, self-description creates the history of the object from the point of view of its own model of itself." ([1974] 1977: 200).

¹⁵ "...the language becomes a social reality from the moment of its description" ([1974] 1977: 205 and 197).

¹⁶ On the production, right from within the here-and-now of interaction, of meta-texts and meta-discourses in a hierarchical function, cf. Silverstein (2023:11). See also, in the same author, the idea of a *hyper-meta-semiosis* "as a strategy for self-grounding

meta-description, an elevation of the point of view, the construction of an asymmetry of power which is already contained in the difference between who can describe and who is described, who within the relationship assumes the position of subject and some of object, who by telling the story proves to have a story (to 'own' the story) and who cannot, who can say what is real and what is not, who can generate forms of modelling of reality and who sees this form of power weakened or precluded.

3.4. META-DESCRIPTIONS

We have seen how from the outset this mechanism is fraught with paradoxes, first of all that between an irregularity that is made up of the same texts and languages that seek to structure the semiotic space. It is this condition that leads to the continuous production of meta-texts and meta-languages, which by rising above a given linguistic-textual layer – which from their point of view, as anticipated, can even appear as a shapeless chaos – try to articulate it more profoundly, differently or *tout court*. In any case, the production of texts and languages acts by defining internal hierarchies, whether this happens to establish or sanction, to fix or change, to strengthen or weaken them. The dynamics of the semiosphere therefore presents itself as a continuous *clash between meta-formations*, a game around the power to modelling and define the world.

With regard to this work of meta-description, Lotman emphasises the search for stability, i.e. the fact that when a given structural equilibrium enters a crisis, a sort of homeostatic reaction is activated from within the system, which is produced precisely through “metadescriptions [that] are transformed from the sphere of meta-language to the sphere of language and become a norm” ([1974]

of a text outside the realm of the here-and-now and thus for authoritative textuality seemingly coming from itself” (ibid.: 14). An elevation, we would say, of portions of reality that acquire existence, authority, personality.

1977: 207). Here Lotman is referring specifically to the way of establishing, above a space of linguistic heterogeneity, a standard national language which, by becoming the norm, will be the basis for new ways of speaking, new individualisations, new linguistic variety. The game is obviously prospective. The space of heterogeneity could, in fact, be saturated with linguistic varieties with their own potential or tendency to become ‘the norm’ for some group if not for the whole collective. It is no coincidence that Lotman underlines that the meta-description and then the metalinguistic elevation places that heterogeneity, with its alternative hypotheses of normativity dominance, towards the periphery (think of the definition of ‘local dialects’ of the national language), dismisses them as incorrect (as happens with other linguistic varieties, which undergo processes of minorisation and diglossia) or makes them appear non-existent (as in cases of attribution of barbarism, i.e. non-recognition of the linguistic nature of the language of the ‘enemy’ or of the more radical other). This example can be generalised and taken as a paradigm of the clashes between (meta)semiotic formations mobilised and/or created with a view to power, after all, the case of the definition and hierarchisation of linguistic varieties is connected to evident political projects, of which the nineteenth-century constitution of European nation states is the most striking example. In other words, behind a meta-description there is always some subjectivity that aims to intentionally ‘write’ cultures, identities, collectives to give them a form in which to recognise themselves, which can be assumed, disseminated, reproduced. Lotman refers to a writing that takes place through “the pen of critics, theorists, legislators of taste and legislators in general” ([1984] 2023: 99). As can be seen, our author does not explicitly refer to political work and power in the strict sense, but this can be glimpsed behind the reference to legislators in general. All the figures listed by Lotman exercise a meta-descriptive power: political discourse does it, by statute, at the highest level.

To conclude, let’s note that when Lotman speaks to us about the crisis of a given structural equilibrium, he is in fact staging a

sort of collapse or flattening of the hierarchical space, which generates irregularities and triggers the need for new elevations. This confirms our idea of a continuous movement of elevation and flattening, which becomes a *simultaneous movement* if we think of the struggle around the definition of memory and reality waged daily by multiple semiotic personalities and formations.

3.5. THE DOMINANT

The framework outlined up to now could appear too unstable with respect to the capacity of the semiospheres to offer a sense of unity and continuity, even beyond the apparent confusion and volatility of experiences (the inverse condition to that can be produced by looking at the world from the closed space of one's own self-model of reality, from which daily reality and interactions can appear excessively stable, if not fixed, as if it were a stormy sea seen from an aeroplane window).

Lotman's answer to this question is found in the idea of dominance. Lotman takes up the idea of the dominant from Jakobson ([1935] 1971) and extends it from the dynamics of artistic texts and art – spaces par excellence of heterogeneity, polyglotism, conflict – to that of culture as a system:

...A substructure subjects all the others to its organisation, acquires the right to speak on behalf of the given cultural object and finally produces a metalinguistic self-description of the language of culture, which eliminates everything that is opposed to these substructures as extra-systematic. (Lotman [1984] 2023: 102)

Each territorial cultural centre behaves like the dominant substructure in Jakobson's description. Through a process of great activity of production of texts and senses, it aggressively spreads its semiotic mechanism and its texts in the spheres of the cultural periphery. This periphery is considered "empty" from a semiotic

point of view. All his previous cultural-semiotic experience is considered non-existent. (Lotman [1984] 2023: 103)

Let us dwell on these two passages to grasp their details and implications.

The first, as can be guessed, underlines more the qualitative aspect of the process of dominance, whereas the second makes the quantitative aspect more apparent.

The qualitative aspect focuses on the ability of a 'substructure' – a partial local structure – to rise above other competing substructures, to extend over their space, to penetrate it. All with these possible effects: 1) bending the other substructures to one's own organisation; 2) make the other structures inactive and as if non-existent; 3) or even expel them from the semiotic space that the dominant substructure is re-organising.

It should be noted that this process involves a double mechanism. On the one side, the part speaks in the name of the whole, maliciously arrogating itself the right to speak in the name of something wider than itself. Lotman says that the substructure speaks for the object of which it is a part; the interesting thing is that in the dynamics of power this object is a subject – for example a people, nation, class, humanity, etc. – which aims to affirm some founding value such as justice, freedom, peace, honour, security, democracy, etc. This dynamic must be underlined because it pushes us to think about how abysmal the physics of power is, for example the father who speaks in the name of the family and its honour and the daughter who answers him speaking in the name of women and their freedom are projecting themselves within two substructures which in turn are projected into the role of current or potential dominants. And even the individual who describes him- or herself to assume an identity, to some extent subjects his/her heterogeneity, his/her many voices, to a dominant. If every hypothesis of totalisation generates amputations, exclusions, remains (see Monticelli 2008) it is equally true that our taking a position necessarily implies forms of totalisation and essentialisation (see Clifford 2003). And the more we are

dealing with social and political stances, the more this dynamic is exacerbated. The reasoning thus brought us to the other side, the second side: speaking in the name of something or someone a meta-language is produced or recalled that conforms to a hypothesis of dominance. By this we mean that, even when one does not explicitly want to totalise the social field, speaking 'in the name of...' tends to cast its shadow over the whole social space, in the sense that it reorganises it and makes it meaningful starting from a given point of view with its pertinences, its hierarchies, its system of values. The more this systematisation becomes evident and insistent, the more this partial image aims to model the entire socio-cultural field, the more the search for dominance is loaded with implications specifically linked to the conflict over power.

By arguing this we are calling into question the quantitative aspect of the process. As the second quotation suggests, dominance does not only depend on the will to speak 'on behalf of' and on the ability to produce metalanguages that conform to this intentionality, it also depends on the willingness to spread such texts and languages aggressively – think again of the Jakobsonian theme of the constants that diffused in the work of an author unify it – while contrasting, limiting, inhibiting the possibility of diffusion of other texts and languages, of other meta-descriptions. The first act of power, one could say, is to prevent the other from defining him- her- itself, to delegitimise or undermine the possibility of a self-definition.

How is this dynamic of aggression accomplished? Lotman, referring to the conversational model, argues, perhaps with an excessive but heuristically effective schematism, that in the relationship between cultures phases of reception and transmission alternate: a centre diffuses its texts, puts a periphery or an otherness in the position of reception, preventing this structural pole from producing texts, or at least from producing original ones. The periphery, or alterity, unable to define itself, produces what conforms to the emerging and then dominant centre with texts that are imitations of the dominant ones, stories in which it enhances the links with the

dominant (even at the cost of inventing a common memory from scratch), self-descriptions in which it annihilates itself to better conform to the dominant substructure. All of this, until the condition of passivity – which apart from cases of complete cultural destruction is nothing more than a complex condition of translation (whose functioning we cannot elaborate on here) – leads the peripheral/other space to generate something new, while the centre ossifies and loses all vitality. Hence the possible reversal of roles. It is a becoming of history in which the new arises (often, if not always) in the midst of conflicts and violence, misunderstandings and annihilation.

Finally, how the concept of dominance is connected with the relationship between the centre and the periphery of the semiotic system should be noted, which in turn – as we know – in Lotman tends to be homologous to the distinction between grammaticalisation and textualisation, or rather to the rigid and explicit codification of norms and the fluid and customary production of rules of conduct. In articulating what Lotman says, two things must be underlined: the first is that in the process of dominance the centre–periphery relationship is both a point of departure and arrival of the entire dynamic. In fact, the dominance mechanism starts from the presumption of a given substructure of being a centre and from the consideration that its surroundings are a structureless periphery awaiting organisation. Actually, however, the definition of who is the centre and who is the periphery is the result of the process of dominance itself, which tends to produce in the peripheral space that kind of deconstruction functional to its incorporation and metabolisation. We are dealing here with that fundamental dynamic, in terms of power, which Lotman calls the “semiotic construction of the barbaric”. However, and this is the second aspect to underline, we believe that here Lotman superimposes two different phenomena, the distinction between the periphery and the extra-semiotic and therefore between an internal and an external relationship, which can also be considered two stages of the process of dominance. This is a question that affects Lotman’s theory in several ways. Here it

suffices to say that in a normal condition the periphery is not a totally unstructured or even resolutely empty space but rather the space populated by all those formations – overtly antagonistic or different in so far they lack a recognisable, full and stable organisation – that appear alternative to those occupying the centre of the semiosphere. If this were not the case, we would not understand why Lotman tells us that the new arises more easily in the periphery, where new texts and languages, new creations can be generated from the encounter between formations that appear less rigidly structured than in the centre. In essence, the centre–periphery relationship seems to us to be the basis of power relations within a given semiosphere. A basic structuring that can be refracted internally – given that there can be centres inside the periphery, just as there can be peripheries in the center – or that can be embedded in other structures: think of how the centre–periphery relationship can correlate to that between majority and minority, such as when an ethnic or religious majority group holds power and exercises it according to its values and against minorities, but also of how the clash between a majority and a minority can be reproduced within the centre, such as when the two major coalitions of a country, which both respect (and refer to) constitutional values, after the elections find themselves playing the role of government and opposition. The deconstruction and emptying of the periphery, until it turns out to be a barbaric or extra-systematic space, are therefore the result of a much more radical and exceptional process of domination, of the elimination of any form of heterogeneity, plurality, antagonism, opposition, which can find a landing place in a self-consciousness that “expels every contradiction” (cf. 3.7) and therefore also (the appearance of) every internal conflict, as happens in a dictatorial regime. Nonetheless, in the poly-logical dynamics of a semiosphere there may be zones and phenomena that are structured according to different principles, generating different semiotic layers and infinite refractions of the model, as happens, for example, with the creation of ‘internal barbarians’: think for example of the treatment of refugees, country-less people,

nomads or homeless, who are inside the system but at the same time escape or are kept out of the dominant codification of the social.

3.6. THE LEVELS OF ARTICULATION OF THE CONFLICT

What has been said so far leads us to hypothesise that the elevation mechanism that leads from irregularity to self-consciousness can be imagined as a graduated passage from multiplicity to unity. This work starts from the models offered almost implicitly by the production of texts and languages, which structure the semiosphere in a more or less intense and extensive way and incorporate different points of view and positions of subjectivity. At this stage the semi-otic space can be thought of as populated by multiple conflicting formations.

However, at the theoretical level, this conflict is mainly implicit: real semiotic personalities are formed when semiosis rises to a meta-level and therefore a dynamic of *performative reflexivity* is produced (cf. Sedda 2012, 2015). In other words, subjectivities are constituted at the very moment at which they act consciously to model the existing descriptions, generating more evident and normative regularities. This dynamic generates attempts at dominance which, following Lotman, we can articulate around major polarities such as centre–periphery, majorities–minorities, many–few, hegemonic–antagonist. It all correlates with the construction of the us–them through the mobilisation of passions such as fear and shame. What interests us here is that this path can be understood as an elevation towards forms of dualism that polarise the social field by simplifying its semiosis. An apparently contradictory aspect should be noted in that this polarising effect is the prerogative of each of the categories we have seen, while at the same time being denied by the coexistence of all these (and other) forms of polarisation of the social field. Not only can each polarity be made plural, mobilised in a fractally recursive way, intertwined in a chiasmatic form, but also each of them can act while the others act and therefore the proposal for structuring

reality can conflict with that of the others. At the same time, when several structures 'align' their effect becomes more intense and polarising. The recurrence on several levels of the fault between a given 'us' and a given 'them' exacerbates the polarisation. This is the case, for example, when the us–them split is isomorphic to the joint and aligned distinction (at least on a self-descriptive level) between two faiths, two languages, two ideologies, two national affiliations, favouring the radical nature of the conflict.

However, each of these dualistic structurings can be functional in totalising the social field. Let us take the case of the relationship between majorities and minorities, which, as we know, transcends mere numerical data. In the case of minorities within a collective, those who perceive themselves as the majority can be led to conceive of the minority as the annoying, if not threatening, residue that prevents the unification of the social body and its imaginary perfect functioning. Hence the 'witch hunt' studied by Lotman, whose arguments are in profound harmony with what will be argued in more detailed studies on ethnic violence (see Appadurai 2006).

The opposition that seems to us to most clearly point towards the totalisation of the social field is that which opposes the civilised to the barbarian because it most clearly follows the net distinction between semiotic and extra-semiotic, thus projecting into the social field – above all where it is mobilised explicitly, extensively and with a clear correlation with the positive–negative and shame–fear demarcations – the image of a complete semiotic personality as opposed to an absence of semiotic personality, i.e. absence of that minimum level of values, legitimacy and power which would serve an otherness to constitute itself, at least, as a counterpart of the relationship. Obviously, many other considerations should be made in this regard but let's stop here.

Three things remain to be noted. The first is that at the highest and lowest level of our semiotic bellows a radical opposition is reproduced between semiotic existence and non-existence, which confirms how the mechanism is circular or, if one prefers, how the two extremes of

the hierarchy, which are the moment of its elevation, coincide as the hierarchies flatten. The second is that what can be described as starting from below as a theoretical overlapping of levels ranging from irregularity to ideal unity, can in other ways be grasped as a refracting from above, starting from a synthetic self-consciousness of a stratified image of the semiotic space. Against the background of an apparently monological position of subjectivity radiates the network of dualisms with respect to which that identity defines itself and the plural field of formations with respect to which its conflictual existence stands out. The third thing to note is that we also find this tension between plurality, dualism and unity in the tension between contract and self-surrender. In contract and self-surrender we seem to be confronted with forms of dualism, the difference between which would be that the relationship between the interacting parts is horizontal in one case and vertical in the other. On closer inspection, however, we must note that the 'dualism' of the contract is connected to a pluralist idea of power (dualism is the cell of polylogism) while the 'dualism' of self-surrender is connected to a monist idea of power (the dualism is the cell of the monologism). In this way, that stratified dynamic, that play between elevation and flattening, which is at the heart of the model we are developing, is recreated.

3.7. SELF-DESCRIPTION/SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

The passages approached in section 3.5 refer to the idea of self-description, meaning the apex of the process we are analysing. It is a process that appears to be graduated, as if the dominance almost necessarily arises from the game between the plurality of models that insist in the semiotic space; it develops through the ability of a model to bend others to its organisation, making its dominance evident; it finally reaches the point of describing itself and speaking on behalf of the whole, thus making the diversity of competing modelling disappear. This dynamic is confirmed by this important passage within the essay "On the Semiosphere":

If one of these nuclear structures not only holds a dominant position, but also rises to a state of self-description, thereby separating itself from the system of meta-languages, with the help of which it describes not only itself but also the peripheral space of a given semiosphere, then the level of its ideal unity creates a superstructure which itself is above the irregularity of a real semiotic map. (Lotman [1984] 2005: 213)

Here, dominance and self-description are more sharply distinguished. Dominance emerges as a meta-description (meta-modelling), which is accomplished through a set of meta-languages and still implies the presence of other antagonistic substructures that resist or distort it and make the outcomes of the dominance process partial. Self-description (self-modelling) instead appears as an even higher and more uniform level of organisation, in which a superstructure is established and imposed. The formation of this structure is activated by the search for an ideal unity which, if and where it occurs, is in fact the result of the entire process.

This process is thought of as the raising of a superstructure above the irregularity of the 'real semiotic map'. This seems to us that here the real semiotic map can be understood in at least two ways. In the first case, it corresponds to the layer immediately below the one occupied by a given semiotic personality. Let us take the dominance layer for example: although much more structured than the lower levels of pure and simple description, from the point of view of the layer above it, that of the ideal unity sought and produced by self-description, it still appears as an irregular space, teeming with heterogeneity and conflict, in which antagonistic forces respond to the dominant or a residue of otherness remains in the dominant-dominated implicit dialectic. In the second case, as we have seen previously, the irregularity of the real semiotic map is that inevitable condition of collision of texts and languages, which makes them all exist and interact at the same level.

These two aspects refer to a basic paradox: every text is potentially a meta-text and that every self-description is only one project

of unity among others. The abstract scheme that we are reconstructing is therefore like a bellows that can be extended or compressed, which with its accordion-like movement distinguishes a hierarchy of levels and meta-levels, on one side, or is crushed until everything is mixed on a single flat, irregular space on the other side.

However, there is another dynamic that needs to be taken into consideration. It is a sort of historical-evolutionary hypothesis that questions the possible union between self-description and self-consciousness.

These aspects can be seen in this long and important passage from Lotman and Uspenskij:

And yet culture requires unity. In order to fulfill its social function, culture has to appear as a structure subject to unified constructive principles. This unity comes about in the following manner: at a specific stage in the development of culture, there comes a moment when it becomes conscious of itself, when it creates a model of itself. The model defines the unified, the artificially schematized image, that is raised to the level of structural unity. When imposed onto the reality of this or that culture, it exerts a powerful regulating influence, preordaining the construction of culture, introducing order, and eliminating contradictions. (Lotman, Uspenskij [1971] 1978: 227)

Here the two authors argue that:

- 1) Culture, however intimately heterogeneous, needs – to fulfil its social function – to function as a unitary structure;
- 2) This unity seems to be the result of the evolutionary history proper to each culture, which, having reached a certain degree of development and maturation, acquires self-awareness and creates its own model;
- 3) This self-model defines the self-image of the collective at the highest level. This self-model, which occupies the position of structural unity, introduces order into cultural reality, expels internal contradictions, powerfully directs the development of that given culture.

As regards the first point, one must remember that for Lotman one cannot escape the tension between simultaneous drives towards heterogeneity and homogenisation. The point is that while the drives in the first direction seem almost natural, the latter seem to be the product of will. It's a bit like with 'natural languages'. Left to themselves they tend towards variation, differentiation in space and time. Only actions aimed at cohesion create a certain unity and relative stability.

However, and we are at the second point, our scholars seem to identify a necessary character in this reflexive mechanism. Here they refer to the theme of the internal development of a culture, as if an immanent development could be given which necessarily tends to resolve itself in self-consciousness. Elsewhere, however, Lotman places the moment of self-consciousness, of the production of a unitary meta-model, in very different situations: at the moment of a profound encounter with another culture or of an excess of internal differentiation which tends to disrupt the collective. More than the happy fulfilment of a story of gradual immanent development, self-consciousness turns out to be triggered more often (and perhaps realistically) by the crises suffered by the collective, both due to endogenous and exogenous forces. As put by Lotman himself: "the dominant social forces in the different phases of history have created their own models of the world in a situation of bitter conflicts" (Lotman 1973: 41).

The third point brings us back to the link between self-description and self-consciousness, which occupy the same structural position, that of the top in the hierarchy of a culture, that of the ideal unity or unification of the semiotic space. So are they the same thing? Yes, but to the extent that self-description is understood to be the means of which self-consciousness is the end. A culture describes itself, operates this higher-level movement of reflexive performativity, in order to invent – find/create – its own self-consciousness, that identification – 'a narration', 'an image' – to be believed as just, true and authentic. To be effective, the semiotic game tends to hide the

creation process to better highlight the naturalness, the traditionality, the authority of the result, to generate a narration that can be assumed as one's own. Self-consciousness is a deliberate belief, a belief in a synthetic self-image – which as believed tends to come true – that is more profoundly the result of a process of deliberation, of conflict around what one 'really' is. Not by chance, very often, behind the fetish images of the community – think of the national constitutions – historians reconstruct the plot of violent clashes, intense negotiations, hard decisions that led them to be what they are, while the vast majority of citizen-believers tend to 'mythologise' them, to see these national constitutions as the natural result of a search for unity (while in everyday life they act positioning themselves within the conflicts these national constitutions organise). So, it is no coincidence that we have used the term *faith* since for Lotman this term indicates "a powerful means of self-organization" ([1992] 2009: 145) that produces unity inside and through contradictions.

This brings us to one last issue we want to address. In the famous previous quote, self-consciousness expels contradictions and therefore conflicts. One would think Lotman had in mind the way Stalin erased his opponents from photographs to make history appear continuously coherent and pacified.

Yet this extreme model is not and cannot be the only one. Lotman is aware of this and addresses the question, albeit mainly typologically, in the essay on "Culture and its 'Teaching' as a Typological Characteristic". Here he outlines three types of relationship between self-model and culture.

In the most radical case "the self-models, the ideal self-consciousness of culture exist and function separately from [culture itself]" (Lotman [1971] 1975: 73). Here what has value is primarily the existence of this self-models in themselves, the fact of being affirmed, building a self-referential sphere of power, we could say.

The second case is that in which "self-models distinct from the practice of culture and calculated for the modification of this practice" (ibid.) are created. In this case the self-model takes on the

function of an ideal condition, a reference with respect to which to orient and direct behaviours.

Although in different ways, both modalities tend to correspond to the idea of an elimination of contradictions and the construction of an ideal superstructural. What has instead been less valued, in our view, is the third type of relationship: “The creation of self-models of culture who aim for a maximum approximation to the really existing culture” (ibid.). It should be noted that Lotman exposes this relationship first among the three but says nothing more than what we have reported, while the others find immediate exemplification with cases from Russian political history.

Given that, as we have said, every meta-description and therefore also every self-description seeks to establish a real above reality, we believe that the underestimation of this relationship of construction of a desired rapprochement or mirroring between cultural reality and self-model, between life and self-consciousness, opens the field to a multiplicity of forms of (semiopolitical) articulation of power all to be analysed and indexed. For example, in democratic contexts there is no lack of drive to self-describe, but this occurs by describing the social space as a place of legitimate conflict. Of course, this always happens by excluding some forms and types of conflict, unifying the space by defining the ‘right’ conflicts, tracing the system of values within which to conflict in an orderly manner, but it is still an attempt to ‘reflect’ the daily conflict in the self-model of the collective. Not only that. The past and present history of cultures offers us many other cases to be investigated. If we broaden the horizon, we will see cultures that tend to achieve unity by describing themselves as a flow or as a mixture, which define themselves from the point of view of their enemy, as united precisely by virtue of their own disunity or existing only as failed. These are some examples of models of unity, often stored in everyday rituals and trivial utterances, which condense and reproduce self-images that are the product of complex histories, saturated with conflict and configurations of power that are not always clearly perceived as such.

Let's stop here. The hope, with regard to this third part, is to have shown two things: the first is the wealth of ideas relating to the dynamics of power present in Lotman's work, as well as the interweaving of this theme with the deepest and most essential dynamics of semiosphere and social semiosis. The second is the possibility of reworking this material, of reinventing the semiotics of culture, going beyond Lotman's dictation but at the same time showing its overall scope better, with its openness to further developments. If these two things are found to be convincing, then the reference to a *semiopolitics* will not appear as an affected neologism but as a self-description that directs future thoughts and actions.

And finally, it is crucial to underline that the abstract nature of Lotman's reasoning relating to dominance and self-awareness, which to others might seem a defect or a limitation, seems to us the guarantee of an adaptability of those thoughts to today's times, a guarantee of their flexible use aimed at investigating the multiplicity of past, present and future phenomena.

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UNIVERSALITY AND CONFLICT AS A DECOLONIAL AND CULTUROLOGICAL PROBLEM

Laura Gherlone and Pietro Restaneo I

Introduction

Authors and ideas from the post-Soviet world have witnessed a prosperous encounter with post-colonial studies for some time now. At the same time, contact with the so-called ‘decoloniality’ – a body of thinking that emerged from the Latin American context – is still in its infancy. Some dialogues, however, have already been initiated (see Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012; Tlostanova 2015a; Tlostanova 2015b; Silova et al. 2017; Tlostanova 2018; Gradskova 2019; to some extent Koobak et al. 2021; Fry, Tlostanova 2021; Tlostanova 2022), in the belief that a decolonial framework could help to clarify the political, social, cultural history and dynamics of the post-Soviet space. Such an encounter could also contribute to a retrospective interpretation of the intellectual tradition of the Soviet Union and its tensions between imperialist policies and discourses of freedom and equality.

This hypothesis has been strengthened by recent studies that highlighted the cultural entanglement that bonded the USSR and the Third World (see in particular Djagalov 2020; Popescu 2021; Bystrom et al. 2021), with Latin America playing a key role, as well as Soviet Orientalism’s precocious awareness of ‘coloniality’,² which would anticipate the very birth of a(n) (anti- post- de)colonial theory (Young 2023).

In the following pages, we aim to continue, foster, and deepen the encounter between decoloniality and the (post-)Soviet world by

¹ The two authors contributed equally and are to be considered equal first authors.

² See section two of this paper for a definition of coloniality.

engaging in a dialogue between the decolonial investigations and Soviet-era thinker Juri Lotman. After passing through a productive political and (partially) postcolonial interpretation (Schönle 2006; Waldstein 2007; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017, 2018, 2022; Restaneo 2022a), Lotman can today be read through the decolonial lens, as shown in previous works (Gherlone and Restaneo 2022; Gherlone 2022a; Gherlone 2023). At the same time, his theory can offer fresh perspectives on decoloniality itself and its potential interpretative contributions to the Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual traditions.

To narrow the scope of our analysis, we decided to focus on two interrelated core concepts that crisscross both the investigations of decolonial thinkers and Juri Lotman's cultural theory: universality and conflict.

The work is divided into four parts. After a general introduction to postcolonialism and decoloniality in relation to the Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual traditions (Section 1), we will address universality and conflict from the decolonial (Section 2) and Lotmanian (Section 3) perspectives. Finally, we will pinpoint the contributions that Lotman's theory could offer to decoloniality, in order to lay the groundwork for decoloniality to contribute more effectively to an analysis of the post-Soviet. Indeed, we believe that, although we do not specifically tackle post-Soviet area studies in this paper, decolonial theory – complexified by Lotman's culturological perspective – can potentially be used as a framework for examining the immense *field of (cultural) conflicts* that came to life out of the ashes of the Soviet empire.

I. Postcolonialism and decoloniality in the Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual traditions

Postcolonial studies grew around the South Asian-US-UK academic axis. Its political and scientific goal was the de-orientalisation and the decolonisation of the “experiences of ordinary people” (Young 2020: 9), starting from the specific research context of post-1947

India and its process of independence from the British Empire. Only later was the research expanded to include colonised Africa and its connections with the USSR.

The post-Soviet world was well-equipped for the reception of this field of study. It could draw on a long anti-colonial tradition of its own in Oriental Studies (*Vostokovedenie*) dating back to late Imperial Russia and active throughout the Soviet period. As Craig Brandist (2022: 476) puts it,

[w]hile heavily repressed, the Russian ‘East’ was subject to considerable study by academic orientologists, who sought to dispel stereotypes about their cultures and celebrated past achievements while seeking to encourage their peaceful integration into the Russian state. These thinkers developed a critique of French and British studies of the Orient, particularly as embedded in Indo-European philology, on the basis of the colonial ideology that permeated them.³

This common ground paved the way for the encounter between the two ‘post-’, the trigger for which was the Palestinian-US critic Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978). This seminal work represented a major milestone for enquiries into subalternity and the imperialistic mechanisms of imposition ‘from outside’ on the non-Western identity, thus helping to introduce postcolonialism in scholarly debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Albeit tentatively at first (Moore 2001), the possibility of articulating their own geopolitical vicissitudes in postcolonial terms did not go unnoticed by scholars from territories of the former Soviet Union, some of whom were diasporic intellectuals active mainly, but not exclusively, in English-speaking countries.⁴ Said’s set of ideas and assumptions proved to be meaningful to re-imagining a context – the space of Eurasia after

³ For further discussion, see Tolz (2011); Kemper (2018); Brandist (2018a); Young (2022).

⁴ For a reconstruction of the network of contacts and influences, see Uffelmann (2023).

the fall of the Berlin Wall – where Orientalism and Imperialism had traditionally been thorny issues, both in the Tsarist and Soviet eras (Spivak et al. 2006; Feldman 2018).

However, the cross-pollination between postcolonialism and the post-Soviet sphere was not one-sided. As the methodological approach of the former was linked to discursive enquiry, literary criticism, and minority literature, it drew on (mainly translated) works by authors from the Soviet cultural scene whose intellectual and scientific tradition was rooted in literary and philological studies (Avtonomova 2002). Indeed, since postcolonial studies aimed to make the silenced voices of colonial histories speak out, it emerged as a field of exploration driven by the concept of (subaltern) discourse (Parry 2004; Bhambra 2014; Ruíz 2021). The encounter with the Russian tradition, and the great importance the latter gave to ‘discourse/*slovo*’, gave great impulse to postcolonial studies, acting as a sort of amplifier. Mikhail Bakhtin was perhaps the most inspiring figure. Since his rehabilitation in the USSR in the 1960s and the subsequent circulation and translation of his writings, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist became a reference point for post-colonial anglophone writers in the 1980s and 1990s (Brandist 2018b; Hirschkop 2021: 146–158; Drews-Sylla 2022).⁵ Largely disregarded by postcolonial critics, however, has been the contribution of Soviet orientologists to anticolonial and anti-imperialist debates, whose works mainly circulated in the Slavic research milieu.⁶

⁵ See also the special number of *Baltic Worlds* devoted to “The Bakhtinian theory: The postcolonial & postsocialist perspective” (Gradszkova and Chakrabarti 2017).

⁶ As Robert Young (2023: 140) has recently said, “what one might now call Soviet critical Orientalism” has a history that long predates Anglo-Saxon postcolonial studies, coming into being as the Soviet Union’s political-cultural response to the imperialist West. From this perspective, it was not so much the post-Soviet world that showed itself well-equipped to receive post-colonial studies, but rather it was the Soviet intellectual tradition that ‘invented’ this field of research, giving it an impetus able to reach as far as the Anglo-Saxon world. As a result, “‘postcolonialism’, as we conceive [it] today in the West, could be understood as a somewhat delayed historical aftereffect of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, or perhaps alternatively as a *translatio imperii* in which the ...

The encounter between the post-Soviet world and the decolonial scholarship has so far been limited, for several reasons. First, decoloniality is a relatively recent body of thought which took shape in the first decade of the 21st century after breaking away, so to speak, from postcolonialism. The goal of the so-called ‘Modernity/Coloniality Group’ (Escobar 2007: 180) was to shift the attention (and the action) from South Asia to Latin America. The Modernity/Coloniality Group asserts that Latin America, despite its two hundred years of autonomy from colonisers, still clearly illustrates how colonial condition does not heal in the short term through the mere process of political-governmental emancipation: in this perspective, Latin America represents a key field of exploration for investigating colonial mechanisms in the long run, also considering that postcolonial research was mainly focused on the 20th century.

A second factor in limiting the reception of decolonial scholarship in the post-Soviet sphere is tied to the issue of the linguistic divide, since several debates and foundational works of decolonial scholarship began to circulate in Spanish and Portuguese.⁷ This is also an indicator of a different geopolitical and sociocultural engagement that is not so directly concerned with Orientalism.

A third reason we wish to point out for the limited encounter between the post-Soviet world and decoloniality concerns the theoretical approach of postcolonial studies. While it found a mutual echo with the post-Soviet intellectual debates, it has also engendered

preoccupations of the Soviet sphere were taken over and appropriated toward the end of the twentieth century by the victorious empire of the West” (2023: 152).

⁷ English has been a bridge between the West and Soviet and post-Soviet scholars, the US being one of the leading countries of the diasporic dislocation and academic resettlement of Russian-speaking emigrants (Puffer et al. 2018: 105–148), a substantial proportion of whom belonged to a highly skilled migration (Heleniak 2004: 105). Nevertheless, the linguistic question implied in the encounter between decolonial thought and the post-Soviet world finds a solution in the scientific production published or translated into English in these years, considering that the development of the Modernity/Coloniality Group is inseparable from the US academic environment (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007: 9–12; Mignolo 2021: 80).

a dissonance in the decolonial reflection. Indeed, Latin American scholars who were working on subalternity in the late 1990s (and who later merged into the Modernity/Coloniality Group) began their very reflections from a critique of postcolonialism, and in particular of its engagement with Marxist philosophy, the Gramscian approach to Marx and poststructural criticism (Grosfoguel 2006; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007; Grosfoguel 2011; see also Young 2020: 32–40). Decolonial scholars regarded those theories as a Eurocentric body of knowledge that produced “studies *about* the subaltern rather than studies *with* and *from* a subaltern perspective” (Grosfoguel 2011: 2, our emphasis). They thus questioned the post-colonial claim that such a theoretical background could help to give a voice to the Global South. Considering also that the problematisation of race (or better, a longstanding global system of racialisation) and the hierarchy-driven and whiteness-centred worldview is a central concern of decoloniality, the representatives of this body of research have thus inclined towards the general abandonment of a Marxist framework in favour of other sources of inspiration coming from indigenous knowledge(s) and Afro-Caribbean and Chicano thought.⁸ This set of sources, largely tied to their idiosyncratic

⁸ In general, the decolonial critique of Marxism is centred around its Eurocentrism. On the one hand the claim is that Marxism limits the subject of history to the European proletariat, and to its universalistic goal of communism. On the other hand, Marx reproduces an epistemic racism that negates for non-European peoples the possibility of relevant philosophical thought. As proof Marx’s early support for the British invasion of India or the US invasion of Mexico are cited (Grosfoguel 2007: 70). The relationship between Marxism and indigenous or anti-colonial movements is complex and often contradictory. We will not deal with it as it falls outside the scope of the present paper. We would like, however, to address briefly only one aspect of the decolonial critique, since it has been tackled by more recent Marxian scholarship. In his early writings, Marx does indeed treat the ‘Oriental question’ dismissively and is more influenced by the (Eurocentric) Orientalist literature of his time. Later in his life, however, he returned to the issue with a more critical and open approach, taking on sources less biased and more familiar with the topic (especially Russian sources, which are much less dismissive of the colonised people’s primary sources than work by British and French scholars). This led him to a radical change of heart on the ‘progressive’ value of colonisation. On the topic see for example Lindner (2022).

context, is less well-known in the cultural post-Soviet scenery and is partly the cause of its unfamiliarity with decolonial scholarship.

In the following chapter we will explore the decolonial scholarship by addressing the two core concepts that will also serve as a bridge to Lotmanian theory: universality and conflict.

2. Conflict and resistance

Far from being a homogenous field, decoloniality exhibits a certain internal differentiation among its thinkers, so much so that, in a way, it can be considered an umbrella term for a multi-faceted set of reflections and interests. The main internal difference can be found perhaps in the disciplines from which these thinkers approach decoloniality. For example, it is very easy to find differences, even substantial ones, between the decolonial approach of Aníbal Quijano, coming from sociology and world-systems theory, and that of Walter D. Mignolo, coming from semiotics and literary theory. However, there is enough common ground between the authors to justify using a common name.

One of the main frameworks shared by decoloniality authors is the critique of the idea of universalism which, when interpreted as an ontological category, becomes universality. Virtually all the exponents of the decolonial scholarship place emphasis on the hierarchical-oppositional relationship between the *universal* and the *particular* to explain coloniality. Coloniality is understood as a long-standing scheme of domination and exploitation where racist relations of power supply the lifeblood of its subsistence over time. These relations arose in the bosom of a worldview – that of nascent modern Europe in the post-1492 era – that claimed itself to be a Culture valid for all, forcibly imposing its whole set of ideas, languages, values, habits, symbols, and imagery, along with its secular institutions and techno-economic system of exploitation and accumulation.

As maintained by decolonial thinkers, Eurocentric civilisation, by affirming its *universality*, turned the ‘strangers’ (indigenous and

enslaved black people from the Atlantic coasts of Africa) not only into a disposable labour force but also into subjects unworthy of Culture. The instrument adopted by the colonisers to make the inhabitants of the Americas intelligible, i.e., the classification system based on skin colour, entangled the colonised to such an extent that they became convinced that their *particularity* (or idiosyncrasy) was tantamount to inferiority. Not surprisingly, Aníbal Quijano (2007: 71) suggested that “there is no abstract universalism without epistemic racism”.⁹ The core principle behind the pretence of universalism is the so-called ‘zero-point hubris’, an expression that stands for the arrogance and excess of the Western mind, whose sin was to feel like a god, i.e., an observer who “observes the world from an unobserved platform of observation”, bestowing its truth to the observed (racialised) subjects (Castro-Gómez 2007: 83, for an extensive discussion in English see Castro-Gómez 2021). This cultural mechanism of ‘inferiorisation’ remained unquestioned over time, simply changing depending on the core codes of Western civilisation, as Ramón Grosfoguel has stressed:

from the sixteenth-century characterisation of ‘people without writing’ to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century characterisation of ‘people without history’, to the twentieth-century characterisation of ‘people without development’ and more recently, to the early twenty-first century of ‘people without democracy’. (Grosfoguel 2011: 6)

Far from having exhausted its agency, this worldview fuelled by the universal-particular dichotomy and centred on whiteness still today permeates people’s daily lives on an allegedly decolonised planet, while creating the conditions for the liberation of *conflict*. The latter is a key concept in decolonial reflections as it concerns the places of resistance occupied by the subjugated subjects in the face of the mesh

⁹ Walter Mignolo has recently returned to this topic, pointing out that “[t]he colonality of knowledge is tantamount to epistemic racism” (Mignolo 2021: 399).

of colonial power, a power that operates from within the *geopolitics of knowledge*, which “tends to overshadow and make disappear local histories, while authorising a ‘universal’ sense of multicultural societies and the multicultural world” (Walsh 2007: 54). Indeed, conflict is understood as a (mainly community-based) action of reappropriation of those spaces where the other-than-Western ways to understand the world (conceptions, beliefs, assumptions, values, norms, narratives, etc.) have been delegitimised by the Eurocentric universality. In other words, conflict concerns the border zones of marginalised collective self-consciousnesses – Mignolo calls them ‘exteriorities’ (Mignolo 2021: 36, 46, 191–192) – “from where the energies of reconstitution emerge and are nourished” (Mignolo 2021: 46).

Nevertheless, conflict does not aim to awaken a kind of golden age of civilisations, where original worldviews remained incorrupt, nor does it seek to destroy, deny, or replace Western culture. As Elena Ruíz noted (2021: 544), the ‘de’ of decoloniality is, in reality, an “‘un’ – undoing, unmaking, untying colonialism from its active life source, but not in a romantic way that tries to reverse or go back to an imagined pre-colonial past unmarred by colonialism”. Furthermore, the ‘de’ of decoloniality is also a ‘re’ – redoing, remaking, retying. A concrete example of this approach is the indigenous action to get the UN to consider a different vision of water and its management, a vision as part of a broader worldview that, while radically questioning ‘modern’ concepts such as utility, economy, sustainability, autonomy, proposes a different idea of community and the model of the human-environment relationship (Arrojo Agudo 2022).

Conflict, in decolonial terms, has a generative scope, by aspiring to engender a critical mass of ‘knowledges’ that Eurocentric civilisation could not destroy but only relegate to the peripheries of Culture.

Arising from below, these knowledges can today *co-exist* with the Western worldview and encourage ways of understanding, sensing and living reality that are alternative to those enshrined by colonialism: according to the de-colonial attitude “the subject in

the slave position does not merely seek recognition but offers something” (Maldonado-Torres 2007a: 158, see also 2007b). Because of this, decolonial critique emphasises that the reconstitution of world-views other than the Western one also means delinking from the process of ‘a-aesthesis-ation’¹⁰ set in place by Eurocentric civilisation, which hyper-valorises Reason to the detriment of the body and its other ways of knowing reality (perceptions, feelings, emotions, intuitions, etc.).

It is no coincidence that decolonial thinkers prefer the suffix *-ity* instead of *-ism* to name the key concept of their area of enquiry. In this sense, decoloniality does not claim to be a codified stream of study or a movement of thought (that is, decolonial-ism). Rather, it aims to offer a horizon of reflection centred on the description and analysis of the agentive condition that affects the being of people and things – the condition of being decolonial –, providing practical solutions for those spheres of social living that drag colonial wounds into the daily routine (public politics and democratic participation, economy and production logic, science, education and academic system, etc.). For this reason, the vision of decolonial thinkers is also a sort of political agenda, and decoloniality is seen as “a long-term [global] process of re-signification” (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007: 17), where semiotics, in dialogue with social sciences, plays a key role. It is not enough to make the silenced voices of colonial experiences speak out, because those same voices are imbued with a (colonial) conceptual-linguistic apparatus that, to some extent, invalidates their possibility and potential of enunciation. How to express, for example, certain emotions if the only words available are those of the coloniser, while those in one’s own language are ghostly traces of a violated past? The interstitial production of a new language (imagery and symbols, thesauri, definitions and terminologies, logical-discursive constructions) is a *condicio sine qua non*

¹⁰ ‘A-aesthesis-ation’ is a term we use to summarise Mignolo’s position on the problem of aesthesis in the colonised world (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013).

for transforming ghostly traces into active presences, for asserting 'marginal' knowledge(s), and ultimately inverting the universal-particular relationship. Indeed, in decolonial terms, conflict is closely related to the epistemological problem of meaning-(re)making and semiotic modelling of the world(s), while undoubtedly concerning a pragmatic aspect aimed at changing the status quo through the eyes of the Global South.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that universality and conflict in decolonial thinkers are tightly connected with another key concept, that of 'pluriversality'. Although widely adopted by the Modernity/Coloniality Group, pluriversality is an idea that distinguishes the work by Walter D. Mignolo. According to the Argentine scholar, in the long run, the conflict inherent in the process of resignification fostered by decolonial thought and action should lead to a situation of coexistence between geo-chrono-localised ways of interpreting the world (or local histories, in Mignolo's words). This condition would occur to the extent that any worldview relativises its own universality, producing a sort of pluri-versal horizon of knowledge: "[o]nce universal global designs are no longer in place and the aim is to live together convivially instead of competitively, the will to cooperate displaces the will to dominate" (Mignolo 2021: 188). The cultures living in the pluriversal world are those that achieved a "truth/objectivity with parenthesis", that accept "that there are numerous possible realities" and, therefore, "cannot demand the subjection of our fellow human beings" (Maturana in Mignolo 2011: 71). Those are in opposition with the 'universal' (Western-European-colonial) Culture that claims "truth/objectivity without parenthesis": "it believes in the possibility of an external validation of statements" and "entails the negation of all those who are not prepared to agree with the 'objective' facts" (Maturana in Mignolo 2011: 71).

Therefore, pluriversality is not synonymous with cultural relativism (for further discussion see Mignolo 2021: 223–226) and does not exclude conflict. Conflict remains a constant tension between local universes of meaning that have intentionally put their truth

into parentheses and the Culture(s) that continues to assert its universal truth (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 175).

We will return to this most important idea after outlining the core concepts of universality and conflict in Lotmanian terms.

3. Conflict and explosion(s)

While conflict for decolonial thinkers is a central concept, it is not itself the object of theoretical analysis. Lotman, instead, in many of his works reflects on the role of conflict in the wider context of cultural dynamics, making it a central node of his semiotic theory.

In its fundamental form, conflict in Lotman indicates an anti-nomical opposition between two mutually complementary elements, for example, the conflict between author and publisher (Lotman 2009: 116); between the poetic text and the laws of natural language (Lotman 1990: 33); between repetitiveness and internal dynamism (Lotman 2013 [1992]: 356). Especially when referring to dynamic semiotic structures, such as culture, this opposition is not to be regarded as a simple act of exclusion. It has instead a dialectical character (Restaneo 2022b), as it represents a complex but fundamental semiotic dynamic: “conflicting systems do not replace each other, but enter in a structural relationship” (Lotman 1990: 164). As semiotic structures (for example, cultures) exist immersed in a semiotic continuum populated by other semiotic structures, “any system lives not only according to the laws of self-development, but is also involved in various collisions with other cultural systems” (Lotman 2009: 65). When two structures collide, they enter a dynamic relationship and shift to a state of mutual “structural autonomy, and begin to cultivate their own particular and mutual contrasts [*kontrastnost*]” (Lotman 2019 [1989]: 87). This is a fundamental feature of cultural dynamics which Lotman inherits, in part, from Soviet Oriental Studies, and in particular from Soviet orientalist Nikolaj Konrad: the self-perceived characteristics of culture emerge in oppositional terms during the encounter with another culture;

they do not exist as such outside of the contact with the ‘other’ (Lotman 2019 [1989]: 92, on the topic see also Gherlone, Restaneo 2022: 247–250).

From an informational point of view, conflict has what Lotman calls an explosive character¹¹: two mutually untranslatable structures that enter a relationship need to elaborate a new metalanguage of description to accommodate the untranslatable elements of the other. The self-description of the culture, in turn, is transformed, thus enriching it by creating, or simply giving pertinence to, new features. An example of this dynamics could be found in the explosive paradigm revolutions that European linguistics saw in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thanks to the influx of new materials from the colonised indigenous populations (Errington 2001).

The relationship between conflicting structures, however, is rarely symmetrical.¹² When one of the two structures acquires a dominant position it can elevate its own self-description, i.e. that system of meta-languages that it employs to describe itself, to the level of the ideal unity of all the surrounding semiotic space (Lotman 2005 [1984]: 213). Dominant structures thus can come to regard themselves as the norm bearer for all cultures, i.e. as the carrier of a neutral metalanguage of description (Lotman 2019 [1989]: 88), and consider the other cultures – bearers of different languages not subsumable under its own – either semiotically empty, or chaotic, or consisting of an anti-culture of sorts:

[the dominant sub-structure] subjugates all other [structures] to its own organisation, acquires the right to speak in the name of the given cultural object and produces, in the end, a metalinguistic

¹¹ Lotman’s fundamental notion of explosion has been widely discussed elsewhere and will not be explored further here. On the topic see, among others: Gherlone 2022b; Deltcheva and Vlasov 1996; Torop 2014; Avtonomova 2009.

¹² A type of a symmetrical conflict is found by Lotman in the case of the literary text: “In the literary text there is an optimal correlation whereby the conflicting structures are disposed not hierarchically (that is, on different levels) but dialogically on the same level” (Lotman 1990: 163).

self-description of culture, that eliminates everything opposing to said sub-structure as extra-systematic (Lotman 1985: 132).

The self-description of the dominant structure acquires thus the function to describe the periphery to control it. According to Lotman, however, just as the border (in this case, between the norm-bearer and the 'empty periphery') can be a line of exclusion only from the immanent point of view of the dominant culture, also the subjugated, 'extra-systematic' structures are never fully eliminated, if not from the immanent point of view of the dominant culture. As the 'universal' metalanguage needs to transform itself in order to describe the subjugated cultures (since 'universal' was, in fact, not), 'extraneous' elements, those alien 'untranslatables' that cannot be fully accounted for, persist hidden in the deep layers of cultural memory.¹³ Cultural texts and cultural memory retain, according to Lotman, a potential to re-emerge and generate powerful explosions throughout the various layers of the dominant culture. To represent this idea, he uses the famous and evocative image of the minefield (Lotman 2009: 8), reminiscent of his years at war (in this regard, see the chapters in the second section of this volume).

We can notice here the deep relationship between the ideas of conflict and universal: conflict arises from the constitutive contradiction of culture, stemming from the fact that under the idea of 'universal/Universality' hide two different realities, the first being the 'universal' (for the sake of clarity we will indicate it with a lower u) which is any culture that regards its own self-description as

¹³ This idea can be found applied in the works of such historians as Carlo Ginzburg, for example in his attempt to reconstruct the 'magical' elements of folk culture, supposedly eradicated by the Inquisition, through a critical analysis of the records of the Inquisition tribunal itself, in search of those extraneous elements that the 'higher' culture failed to fully translate (Ginzburg 1992). In this respect, it should be noted that the idea of the survival of cultural forms is in turn taken by Lotman from the Soviet philological tradition, and especially from the virtuous application of that 'paleontological' methodology that the best of Marr's students was able to produce (Lotman 1973), also with the fundamental influence of the works of Ernest Cassirer and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Moss 2006; Velmezova 2007).

universal, and its own languages as ‘neutral’ bearers of truth. This Lotmanian ‘universal’ is functionally analogous to the decolonial idea of ‘universality’, i.e. the *self-asserting* universality of the European-Colonial cultures “that regard themselves as the embodiment and guardians of knowledge” (Mignolo 2011: 46). Both are, in reality, a false universality that needs to perpetuate itself by imposing its own languages on the ‘other’, often through violence – Lotman talks in terms of ‘invasions’ (Lotman 1990: 126) and ‘aggressions’ (Lotman 1985: 133).

The second idea hidden under ‘universality’ in Lotman is what we call ‘Universal’ (with a capital U). As Monticelli (2022: 323) also notices, Lotman never abandons the search for those fundamental mechanisms that belong to any culture as such, that determine the possibility of semiosis itself. Lotman here is directly walking in the wake of the Kantian tradition of the critique of knowledge (Lotman 2009: 1).

These two types of universal are in constant tension. The true Universal is not a ‘knowing’ but is the *possibility for any knowledge*: it is not a place, rather it is the condition itself of being situated. Thus, the ‘place of knowing’¹⁴ is *not* an a-historical, disembodied eye, as the decolonial critique would claim; and, at the same time, there is not *one* privileged point of view. Each universal striving to embrace and assimilate the whole of reality would necessarily fail because the Universal cannot be represented or accessed by *one* point of view but emerges only during the dialogue between all points of view (Lotman 2009: 2). Conflict, again, is in Lotman the result of the inner, inescapable contradictions of culture: between the aspiration to universality and the situatedness of each point of view; between the

¹⁴ The ‘place of knowing’ represents, in the decolonial critique to the Kantian tradition, the privileged place to which access knowledge: “[according to Kant] the knower (or observer) can establish objectively that there is a correspondence between the description ... and the world described. The knower occupies a place, the place of knowing. And – according to the premises of truth without parenthesis – the place of knowing is beyond geopolitical histories and beyond body-political subjectivities: that is again the hubris of the zero point” (Mignolo 2011: 191)

necessity to encounter others in order to embrace reality and the necessity to reject the other in order to preserve the self; between the stability of the centre and the chaos of the periphery.¹⁵

Conflict thus described is the encounter of the untranslatable and the precondition for the explosion. As such it is not negative *per se*. Rather, its explosive character has a different outcome, destructive or constructive, according to the type of structure it reverberates in. Rather than avoiding conflict, according to Lotman, we must thus strive to build a (ternary) cultural system where its explosive potential is harnessed without destructive consequences.

In this context, Lotman inserts his reflections on the new possibilities created by the fall of the Soviet Union and the new opportunities that this explosive moment will create for its former territories. With prophetic words, he claimed a year before his death: “H. Heine once wrote: ‘When the world splits in two, the fracture runs through the heart of the poet’. We can say that when the world splits into East and West, the fracture runs through the heart of Russian culture” (Lotman 1997 [1992])¹⁶, an idea also present in the conclusions of his very last book, *Culture and Explosion*, where Lotman, appealing for union and cooperation, invites the (former) Soviet people to overcome the dichotomy between East and West and search for a ‘ternary path’ of reconstruction: “[t]o overlook this possibility would be a historical catastrophe” (Lotman 2009: 174).

In a nutshell, we can say that the relationship between conflict and ‘universal/Universality’ accompanies Lotman throughout his whole intellectual life from the earliest reflections on human language, passing through the exploration of dynamics of culture(s), until he comes up with the conceptualisation of explosion in a culturological sense, where antinomy can become synonymous with openness, freedom, growth.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the topic of centre and periphery see Gherlone (2022a).

¹⁶ “G. Gejne odnaždy napisal: «Kogda mir raskalyvaetsja nadvoe, treščina proxodit čerez serdce poëta». My možem skazat’, čto, kogda mir raskalyvaetsja na Vostok i Zapad, treščina proxodit čerez serdce ruskkoj kul’tury.” Accessed online 01/09/2024.

4. Lotmanian ‘interferences’ with decolonial ideas

In this final part, we wish to explore the ‘long distance’ relationship between the decolonial tradition and Lotman’s semiotics of culture. As mentioned in the introduction, we believe that the latter can offer fresh perspectives on decoloniality itself and empower decolonial interpretive contributions to the Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual tradition.

This cross-fertilisation is engendered by what we believe is an ‘explosive’ element of untranslatability between the two perspectives, situated in the relationship between the two key notions of universality and conflict. However, before examining this element of untranslatability, we wish to explore instead the elements of closeness between the two perspectives, because the necessary condition for dialogue between different standpoints, as Lotman reminds us, is the compresence of “both heterogeneity and homogeneity of elements” (Lotman 2005 [1984]: 220).

We pointed out, in this text and elsewhere (see Gherlone, Restaneo 2022), many conceptual and methodological similarities between the Lotman and the decolonial scholars. In our opinion, however, there is an overarching and fundamental affinity: they are all situated on the periphery. Lotman’s point of view was always looking at the centre from the outside: as a Russian, looking at the great tradition of European literature and philosophy; as a person of Jewish tradition looking at Russian culture; as an emigré in Estonia looking at the cultural centres of Leningrad and Moscow. It is not a coincidence that much of Lotman’s theorisation seems to valorise the role of the periphery in cultural production while giving the centre the role of imposing the norms and slowing creative processes (see also the chapter by Pilshchikov in this volume).

Decolonial thinkers begin their intellectual journey from the unavoidable condition of dependency, from the ‘zero-point’ (Castro-Gómez 2007: 83), the Western privileged ‘place of knowing’. Their condition is founded on the impossibility of delinking from a

(geographically, politically, economically and culturally) marginal position, which ultimately delegitimises their point of view. Thus, both Lotman and decolonial thinkers strive to rediscover and give new life to those paths that have been lost, forgotten, destroyed or simply deemed unworthy. Conflict necessarily becomes, in this context, a key notion.

The above-mentioned 'explosive difference' lies, in our opinion, in their different *projects*, directly tied to their understanding of conflict. In other words, what to do with these 'marginal' paths and experiences once they have been brought back to light?

According to Lotman, as already mentioned, the value of the 'marginal' is in its capacity to enact processes of translations and hybridisations with the surrounding environment, especially with the dominant culture. Decolonials, instead, see in the marginal position a path that brings it to 'conquer' its own space, and defend its identity as a world apart, as one of the many in the 'pluriverse'. Decolonial thinkers speak of conflict with non-Western subjectivities in mind, which form their own space of resistance and begin a struggle of remapping, meaning-making, defence and promotion of their own identity.

Within the pluriversal project, conflict is not characterised as a struggle, implying a relational, dialectical idea of conflict, but as a 'resistance', a unidirectional action of one subjectivity on another that does not consider any dialectics between the 'subjugated' and the 'universal' Culture. Faced with the encroaching of the latter, the former reacts by centripetally asserting its own subjectivities, its own histories and experiences, in an effort to repel the hybridising forces of its (colonial) environment: "pluriversality promotes the coexistence, in cooperation among compatible universes based on truth in parentheses and in antagonism and conflict with universes of meaning based on truth without parentheses" (Mignolo, Walsh 2018 175). As a long-term project, pluriversality aims for the various non-Western verses to 'knock out' and divest the 'Truth without parenthesis'. The Western-Universal point of view should become

then simply one among many worldviews. Conflict is therefore not constitutive but the result of a contingent situation: according to Mignolo, for example, there is always the possibility, however difficult and hypothetical, to strive towards “pluriversality as a universal project” (Mignolo 2011: 44).

Decolonial theory and praxis can offer, in our opinion, interesting suggestions for the study and critique of culture, including the Soviet and post-Soviet. One of its main points of interest is the constant appeal to focus on questioning the power/colonial relations that, through the institutionalisation of certain premises, practices, methodologies and know-how, created zones of forced signification. Decolonial reflection is, at the same time, a practical exercise to perform throughout our daily lives, and a cultural-political agenda. The decolonial exercise starts by interrogating our realities, asking questions to our context that stimulate the ‘de-linking’ from supposedly universal and unchangeable processes of signification where the pronouns ‘us/our’ represent the collective subject asking questions, i.e. the marginal and divested subjectivity of the colonised.

For example, some of those questions could be:

- What are the words in our language that cannot be translated or adapted? How do we feel about the warping of their meaning?
- Is there a place for our worldview in the disciplinary articulation of our education system?
- How does the library system, on which our education institutions rely, articulate knowledge? Does it give priority to certain identities or histories?
- Is there a place for the imagery born from our worldview in the museum system, narrating our cultural history?

Decoloniality, dealing with “the control of knowledge and the regulation of ways of knowing and being” (Mignolo 2021: 28), is an exercise in ‘semiotics of conflict’: the past becomes the battleground of the present. The reconstruction of the ghostly traces of possible worlds, to be rediscovered and cultivated from an epistemological,

symbolic and aesthetic point of view, is integral to their agenda of re-mapping the semantic networks of the present. For his part, while similarly considering the past as having an explosive effect on the present, Lotman's theory is focused on understanding the dynamics of culture and, in general, is not aimed at the transformation of the present through a constant 'doubtful' questioning, which is instead becoming more and more a priority in contemporary scholarship¹⁷:

interest has moved away from articulating the inequities of colonial history or detecting signs of indigenous resistance in the past, to decolonizing the present. This shift from past to present forms part of the general contemporary waning of interest in history in favour of foregrounding the perspectives of today.... (Young 2020: 38)

However, reading the decolonial theory through the lenses of the universality-conflict-pluriversality nexus reveals what are, in our opinion, some critical points. These especially revolve around the pluriversal project, whose realisation appears to us highly improbable as it appears to be grounded on a static and non-dialectic notion of culture. The simple and pacific coexistence between de-linked universes is conceivable only as an instantaneous and zoomed-in frame within the continuum of culture.

The goal of the 'pluriversal project', to put the Western culture and its geopolitical, economic and epistemological identity within parenthesis, appears difficult to achieve without a dynamic

¹⁷ This does not mean that Lotman did not regard political engagement as an indeclinable personal and social duty, to the extent that at the end of his life he made explicit suggestions about the future of the Soviet Union. However, there is no real political theory or praxis in his thought, but rather an intellectual space for thinking about the political (see the introduction by Monticelli and Maran in this volume, and the chapter by Sedda). Finally, it is worth mentioning that, as noted elsewhere (Gherlone 2023), Lotman's understanding of difference and conflict, as a culturological problem, allows us to think about an issue that is central to the decolonial agenda today, specifically the culture-nature relationship. For further discussion, see Zengiaro's chapter in this volume.

understanding of cultures and human collectives, such as that elaborated by Lotman, which calls for a mechanism of translation in lieu of a place of resistance: “[i]t is not just the cultures of postcolonial countries that need to be decolonised, but even more so the cultures of the once-colonising countries too...” (Young 2020: 38).

Decolonial thinkers have in mind as archetypal conflict the European invasion and the subsequent colonisation of the Americas. The objection to a dialectical model of conflict in favour of a model of conflict as resistance is therefore understandable. However, what the decolonial see as a one-sided subjugation can be framed in Lotmanian terms as a very extreme and catastrophic form of dialogue, a binary explosion (Lotman 2009). In this respect, we believe that through an encounter with Lotmanian cultural semiotics decoloniality could acquire a more complex understanding of culture. In our opinion this potential for cross-fertilisation could be much more evident if we were to turn towards the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural history. In it, many meaning-making processes and emancipatory projects were not grounded on resistance, opposition and exclusion, but rather on *translations*, on the generation of a ‘third space’ of cultural re-appropriation. Decolonial theory, enriched by the complex and dynamic understanding of conflict proposed by Lotman, has indeed the potential to be greatly helpful in understanding the post-Soviet space. It invites us with its maieutic approach to engage in the ‘decolonial exercise’ of constantly questioning daily life in order to search for and uncover what has not yet found a way to escape marginality.

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II

**CONFLICT, TIME AND
TEMPORALITIES**

RE-COLLECTING FAMILY: A LOTMANIAN READING OF TRANSGENERATIONAL MEMORY IN POST-CONFLICT CONTEXTS

Mario Panico

Introduction

Although it is often labelled as too sociological a topic to be of interest to semioticians, the meaning redistribution of the past at transgenerational and familial level is, in my view, a prolific arena for semiotic research on cultural memory¹. It enables a reflection both on the dynamics of cultural preservation – i.e., the ability of a group to adopt or avoid certain narratives in order to maintain its longevity (Lotman, Uspenskij [1971] 1975) – and on its deconstruction, enacted by subsequent generations that interpret and resemantise the past according to their *hic et nunc* positionality and value system. Bearing in mind research conducted on groups and individuals who construct their own posterity (Lorusso 2020) and who receive the past as inheritance (Pezzano 2020), on this occasion, I want to investigate the pragmatic attitude of those who came after a given

¹ In recent years, academic interest in family memories has grown exponentially. Suffice it to think of the numerous publications in the field of Memory Studies that address the transmission of memory at the family level as a theoretical and analytical terrain that serves to clarify the ways in which collective and national identities are constructed.

One thinks of the pioneering studies conducted by Maurice Halbwachs (1925), in which family was defined as one of the first social frameworks within which the subject constructs his or her social vision of the past and his or her beliefs around it. Similarly relevant is the opposition between communicative memory and cultural memory as conceived by Jan Assmann (2008). From these theoretical elaborations, the debate then turned to representations of traumatic memory at the family level, culminating in Marianne Hirsch's work on family photographs (cf. Erll 2011).

past and who are entitled to convert its *passive* transmission into a process of *active* translation.

In these pages, I deal with the dynamic and creative process of translation that allows texts to change their value through their account of the past. I consider one particular case of family memory rooted in post-conflict scenarios (Demaria 2020, see also the chapter by Demaria and Violi, and the one by Chávez Herrera in this volume). After the end of a war or a dictatorship, on a collective/national level as well as on a personal/family level, there is a tendency to be selective about information that is considered traumatic², often adopting a strategy of avoidance and proceeding with a life that is (seemingly) unencumbered by those painful or shameful events. These narratives undergo diachronic changes, often under the agency of subsequent generations that have no direct relation to the traumatic events (Hirsch 1997). Hence, these generations seek to increase their cognitive knowledge of their family or nation, trying to ‘see’ more than what is made visible. Given a necessary temporal distance from the events and a desire to comprehend past aspects of their own community, they propose a redistribution of memory through creative processes and active, generative interventions on family texts. Often rewriting leads the subject of the subsequent generation to clash with the irremovable family self-representation, as they are forced to challenge silences, reticence and atavistic emotions (cf. Kuhn 2002).

In this chapter, I look at cultural and memory theory as featured in the semiotic writings of Juri M. Lotman³. Considering the topological relations existing within the semiosphere, I devote the

² In this chapter I use terms like “traumatic event” or “traumatic past” in relation to specific painful and negative events and circumstances that have collectively affected an entire society (such as a war or genocide). When I deal with “traumatic memory”, however, I consider the forms of remembering of a specific event through different types of textualities. On this topic, see, for example, Casper and Wertheimer (2016).

³ On the relationship between cultural memory and Lotmanian semiotic theory see, in particular, Tamm 2015a. For a reflection on the different semiotic ‘schools’ and cultural memory, see Mazzucchelli 2022.

first part of the chapter to the description of a memory mechanism, “re-collection”, which highlights the semantic potentiality of the semiosphere’s peripheral reserves. In other words, I deal with the agency of a subject who has not experienced the repressed event and who decides to re-centralise it in the family narrative, going *against* family loyalty, modifying both the regimes of visibility of the past and what is textualised as “the past”. In this sense, he or she proposes an operation that Umberto Eco (2014) might call textual “thawing” within a local encyclopaedia⁴. In the second half of the chapter, however, I will explore some aspects of this mechanism of transgenerational memory in the post-conflict context through a text, the graphic memoir *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*⁵ by Nora Krug (2019). The visual text recounts the journey of the author, a third-generation German woman, a naturalised American, as she comes to terms with her “generational guilt” for the Holocaust and the other crimes committed or permitted by the German people under the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler⁶. After a short presentation of this case, I will discuss in what terms it is possible to talk about re-collection as a memory strategy in post-conflict contexts and in relation to family texts. In the subsequent sections, I demonstrate how the graphic memoir by Krug is an interesting semiotic object that materialises the movement of texts between the space of the periphery and the space of the centre, allowing the heir

⁴ In his semiotic theory of filtering, Eco deals with the information “placed” in a space of latency within the encyclopaedia and writes: “it is, so to speak, ‘frozen’, and all the expert has to do is to take it out of the freezer and put it in the microwave to make it available once again, at least as much as is needed to understand a given context. This latency is represented by the model of the library or the archive (or even the museum)—containers always available even though no one may currently be using them, and even if they haven’t been used for centuries” (Eco 2014: 88).

⁵ The title refers to the American edition of the volume, the first to be published. In other countries outside the United States, the graphic memoir was published under the title *Heimat: A German Family Album*.

⁶ On the topic of German generational memory after the Holocaust (and its representation) see Rosenthal 1998.

subject to construct an alternative path to the official and partial history transmitted from generation to generation.

I. A German Case Study

Belonging is a visual text that does not follow the formal rules imposed by its genre. Indeed, rather than a classical graphic novel, it mimics the shape of the author's personal diary, alternating between written pages, drawings, archival documents and – infrequently – drawn scenes framed by vignettes. The text is divided into three parts (15 chapters and an epilogue). The first section frames the context of the story and thematises the author's emotional status: the collective guilt of her generation felt for the crimes committed by the German people during the Second World War and the shame of being German, which is more evident when she is “the stranger” in international situations. The second and the third sections, which are presented in the text as alternating (one chapter about the second, one chapter about the third, etc.), deal with Krug's journey into both her maternal and paternal families, to understand the role of her ancestors in the Nazi past. In particular, Krug deals with her father's brother, Franz-Karl – with the same first name as his brother –, a young man indoctrinated by Nazi ideology during his childhood, who died in battle in 1944, two years before Krug's father was born; and her maternal grandfather Willi, who ran a driving school during the war, and who – the author later discovers – was a member of the Nazi party from 1933. On this occasion, I deal mainly with the first and third sections, looking at how the complex system of collective emotions, i.e., which are socially structured and influenced by the national narratives of her time, inspired Krug to start a private investigation and discuss her personal, diachronic implication (Rothberg 2019) in a macro-history.

The artist offers an intriguing reflection on how successive generations might feel affected by the shameful actions committed by someone else with whom they feel an emotional and/or cultural

connection. Krug's work provokes and redefines themes such as difficult inheritance, diachronic distance and emotional implication in crimes committed by 'others', of which subsequent generations feel obliged to produce an almost cathartic translation and recontextualisation, precisely because of this "genealogical belonging" that positions them on a narrative level as both strangers and accomplices at the same time.

Through the analysis of some parts of this text, I want to highlight how subsequent generation memory priorities are textualised, especially, as in this case, when groups have different ideas about what from the past must be considered *memorable* (thus worthy of being remembered) and what is *memorialised* (and expressed in various texts for the longevity of the cultural system). Probing the investigative and abductive process that Krug proposes, I consider how she inverts modes of semiotic existence, *filtering the already filtered* in order to obtain the missing information she needs. Interrogating family archives to answer her generational guilt of being German in a post-war context, Krug sets out to probe the sources that had textualised an accommodating family memory, deciding to face the truth and understand the kind of involvement her family (both mother and father) had in the Nazi dictatorship and violence. The 'dimensions' of the semiosphere in which this memorial translation plays out are twofold because the author's positionality in this story is twofold: she is a grandchild but also a European German woman who grew up on a peaceful continent. The text makes evident the isomorphic relationship between the micro and macro levels as regards family (national forgetfulness and personal and social responsibility).

Much has been written about this graphic memoir, the representation of German identity it offers, and its artistic and historical importance. Scholars who have analysed this text have focused on the thematisation of generational responsibility and the diachronic filtering system that led to the memory of Nazism being highly represented on a collective level but less from a family perspective (see,

for instance, Grujić and Schaum 2019; Clewell 2020; Agazzi 2022; in 't Veld 2022). The graphic memoir highlights the socialisation of Germany's traumatic memory (the author shows the reader a page from one of her school exercise books in which she critically analysed, at the teacher's request and word for word, a speech by Hitler) and the generational silence that affected her family, on both sides. On this occasion, I do not consider the section devoted to her uncle Franz-Karl – her father's brother – who was indoctrinated from an early age by Nazi propaganda and died in the War. Instead, I deal with the section devoted to her maternal grandfather, Willi, who owned a driving school during the war and, Krug discovers, was a member of the Nazi party. This initial shock is followed by the discovery that after the war, with Germany occupied by the Allies, her grandfather was defined according to the cataloguing system adopted by the Americans as a *Mitläufer* (a follower), a person who did not actively participate in the Nazi crimes and whose only responsibility was to have passively accepted that Nazi violence was inflicted. Here, I am not dealing with deep textual analysis of the graphic memoir, but rather investigating the artist's strategies of giving a new semiotic life to the selected materials (mainly photographs from private and public archives) to re-collect the figure of her grandfather. Krug provides a new and different semiotic life for old pictures and documents from private archives, shifting their status from reliable sources to ephemeral ones that can moreover be used against one's own genealogy to overturn a narrative made of secrets and reticence.

2. Re-collection

The key term for this discussion is re-collection. Following the dictionary definition, recollection means “the ability to remember things” (Cambridge dictionary). Common sense therefore says that recollection is thus regarded as a cognitive capacity, a kind of *ars memoriae*, bringing back past events and being able to narrate

one's experience progressively from the past to the present. On this occasion, I consider the word re-collection with a more metaphorical nuance, emphasising the prefix 're', separating it with a hyphen from the rest of the word. In this way, it is possible to draw attention to two main aspects: (i) the relevant semantic aspect becomes not so much remembering as a cognitive act, but collecting, i.e., keeping together a significant number of objects; (ii) the prefix 're' can imply the possibility of an action that is repeated by someone, performed again but always after a previous action with similar characteristics.

In this regard, re-collection designates the ability to put back together, in the present, the pieces of a previously assembled story, with the aim of teasing out new meanings but also new codes (Lotman 1990; Steedman 2006; Lachmann 2022). It is adopted as a textual strategy by the heir in order to produce a redefinition of events as proposed to him or her. Through an abductive and investigative process, devoted to the unmasking of ideological schemes (*à la* Eco 1975) and asking open questions or presenting open hypotheses, to which it is impossible to find answers, re-collection helps the heir to centralise textuality that was otherwise left in a semantic reserve on the periphery, hardly visible and hardly accessible. This approach relates to the epistemological premise of "mnemohistory" (Assmann 1997; Tamm 2008, 2015b), which focuses on the reception of the past in the present (Tamm 2008), with the additional aim, in my case, of observing the textual strategies used by an heir subject to increase his or her knowledge of what he or she had hitherto been allowed to name and believe as "the past". Re-collection helps to change the value and meaning of what has been centralised in a semiosphere, producing a change in the structure of the system that creatively rebalances the centre-periphery relationship (Lotman 1985).

I address this issue by looking at a particular type of memory, transgenerational family memory, when it is transmitted vertically against the backdrop of a collective trauma such as war or genocide. Adding to the mechanism of forgetting proposed by Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij ([1971] 1975: 46), re-collection focuses more

on information that has been disguised by secrecy, shame or fear, and placed in the periphery of the semiosphere. What interests me is understanding how traumatic memories are re-placed and remembered by those generations who do not have a direct phenomenological experience of the traumatic event, but who are cognitively and emotionally conditioned by it due to kinship or affiliation to a national context and its narratives. In the field of memory and holocaust studies, this phenomenon usually goes under the name of “postmemory” (Hirsch 2008, 2012) and refers mainly to the memorial work that is carried out by the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of those who survived a trauma (in Marianne Hirsch’s case, the Holocaust). On this occasion, following the work conducted in the secondary literature on postmemory (see, for example, Frosh 2019) as well as the ideas of “diachronic implication” (Rothberg 2019) and “haunting legacies” (Schwab 2010), I do not deal with the transgenerational memory of the victims but rather look at those families whose members include a person with direct or indirect responsibility for the enacted violence. This specification anticipates some information about the case study of this chapter and provides a contextual frame for the complex positionality of subsequent generations that must face the social responsibility of their ancestors and process the fact that they are part of their own genealogy.

3. The Potentiality of the Reserve

My reasoning on re-collection is rooted in the topography of the semiosphere. Indeed, all the redistributive work that second and third generations trigger with respect to the inherited past is spatialised between the centre and periphery of the family and national semiosphere. The most influential section that holds information that is useful for past resemantisation is not in the centre of the semiosphere – where what is considered truth and trustworthy is floating – but in the periphery, which, following the description proposed by Lotman, could be intended as a semantic reserve. In these

zones, ideally close to the border with the extra-semiotic, some areas host *almost forgotten* texts. They are not essential for the survival of the group and are therefore not included in its self-representation, but, at the same time, they are part of it, so they have not been wholly forgotten but placed in latency, thus potentially reactivatable. Renate Lachmann (2022), in recent work on the issue of memory in Lotman's semiotic theory, has written about the interest of cultural semiotics in dealing not so much with the storage of cultural experience but more with the modes of its reconstruction. Discussing the semantic instability of memory due to the filters imposed when it is textualised, Lachmann writes:

The crucial factor is that which presupposes a mechanism of *inclusion and exclusion of cultural meaning, which allows us to interpret forgetting as a pause for rest*, in the sense of temporary inactivity in the system of meaning, and the shift between forgetting and remembering as an inherent movement of culture.... This mechanism is set in motion by specific *techniques manifested as the de- and resemioticizing of cultural signs*. Desemioticizing means that a sign vehicle loses its signifying quality, that is, both the semantic and the pragmatic function it fulfilled within the system and its institutions. If an element loses its signifying quality, this means it becomes culturally inactive, although not erased, since *the 'vacant' signs remain within the culture in a kind of reserve that acts like a negative store*. In a later phase in its development, due to changes in its self-description model that make certain exclusions appear problematic, culture can reinclude and thus resemioticize the forgotten elements. In other words, the signs whose relegation to latency creates cultural forgetting are taken up by the semiotic process and can be reactualized in the existing culture. (Lachmann 2022: 236, my italics)

On a theoretical level, this generative mechanism allows culture not to entrench itself in pre-constituted structures. In the case of traumatic family memories, this operation of *resemantising the*

desemantised cannot be separated from the theme of the generational clash. This is not intended just as the clash between different value systems, given the different temporal dimensions in which they are conceived, but as an inevitable process enacted by those who want to fill their “in-competence”⁷ of memory by going against those who produced it. Furthermore, considering that re-collection takes place precisely in the accumulation of specific and chosen latent texts, the space of the reserve can be imagined as the heir’s memory laboratory and as a space where transgenerational re-collection is actualised. The reserve focuses on a new selection of what the centre does not say or show. However, it is important to remember that partiality reigns not only in the ‘official’ family narrative but also in the selection made by the subsequent generation. The practice of re-collection creates a new layer and thus accentuates what is not textualised in the centre, while denouncing the filtering system adopted in the past to create the difference between memorable and memorised. The heir succeeds in making the peripheral re-emerge from the background of the self-preserving narrative, producing, in contrast and adding his or her own filters, a *new* memory that parallels and clashes with the one that was formalised by the community, thereby offering a different understanding of the past conflict itself.

The metaphor of the reserve refers to the idea that culture can organise its peripheral knowledge into sections that – albeit in the shadow of the semiosphere’s core – serve as spaces from which it is possible to draw information, to generate internal implosions which can overturn common knowledge and redefine memory priorities. In this sense, the reserve is a kind of space that is only seemingly weak; in fact, it represents countless future narratives. Reserves are

⁷ In this chapter, the term competence is to be understood in relation to the semiotic and structuralist perspective of Algirdas J. Greimas. Specifically, competence refers to a specific step in the *Schéma Narratif Canonique* (SNC) when the subject succeeds in obtaining all the necessary information and know-how to achieve his or her mission. In this sense, it is a competence that we could call “cognitive competence”, since it concerns the amount of information the subject must know to interpret the past.

areas of potential generational clash and *futurability*, where it is possible to draw on information deemed obsolete at the mainstream level (or in the past) and give it new value and relevance in the geography of the contemporary semiosphere. The reserve can thus speak of the possible future of a given culture, of new possible pertinences. This is true of the situation in which recollection can be activated thanks to the agency of those who came after a traumatic event yet do not possess all the pieces needed to complete the contextual or memorial puzzle and, therefore, use the reserve's rich resources in their investigation.

Dealing with family memory, the reserve can be comparable to the attic of a family house where disused objects are piled up in boxes and left to gather dust. If a family member, by chance or by will, returns to the attic, he or she can certainly decide to re-value the found objects, entrusting them with a new semiotic life and thus a new pragmatic function and emotional valorisation. The reserve is the ideal space for the activity of re-collection because it is the source the subject uses to circulate a new (or rediscovered) narrative about the past, overturning the regimes of truth imposed by the centre and using marginal sources. The prefix 're' in re-collection indicates this process of *re*-including texts in the centres of narratives – from the attic to the living room, so to speak – in a process that can augment meanings and change memory narratives. Therefore, the 're' also stands for a critical *re*-actualisation, “for rediscovery but also for relocation. From the reserve to the centre of the same semiosphere or even of a new one” (Demaria, Panico 2022: 13).

4. Emotions as the Inciting Incident of Re-Collection

Every re-collection, being comparable to a process of abductive investigation, requires what in narratology is called an “inciting incident”, a “surprising fact”, as Peirce would say (CP 7.164-255), referring to abduction, which, however, can be a single event but equally a more complex sum of different emotions. This is the case

for Krug, as the decision to learn more about her family history has a recognisable *casus belli* but also conceals a very complex spectrum of emotions.

Specifically, this refers to an event set shortly after the author's move to New York. While standing on the terrace of the building where her only friend lives, the author relates that she had a conversation with a woman sitting on a chair nearby, who, perhaps because of her accent, had guessed Krug's Germanness. To the question "where are you from?", the author replies, "From Germany", and she asks whether the woman has ever visited this European country. The answer is affirmative, but it hides a story of suffering. The woman, in fact, recounts how she was on German soil as an inmate in a concentration camp and how she survived thanks to a female guard who, probably because she had a crush on her, saved her from the gas chamber sixteen times. The interaction is based on a central aesthetic operation adopted by Krug, wherein she distributes, over a full page, in a sort of black and white mosaic, the photos of some of the most notorious female German SS-Auxiliaries and prison guards; those who became infamous for their violence during the trials in which they were condemned for crimes committed in labour and concentration camps. Some of them look straight into the camera, looking the reader in the eye. But it is not the reader's point of view that is important here but the positionality of the artist, i.e., the person who is about to begin her personal, emotional and cognitive journey into the meanders of her Germanness as well as into her family history. The gazes of the female perpetrators propose a mirror reflection between nationality and gender: those women are German, like her; they are women, like her. This sense of belonging causes, paradoxically, a strong sense of disorientation for Krug, so much so that on the next page, she writes: "A familiar heat began to form in the pit of my stomach. How do you react, as a German, standing across from a human being who reveals this memory to you?"

In the two chapters following the narration of this event, entitled "Early Dawning" and "Forgotten Songs", Krug expands the

emotional state that lies beneath this question, dedicating numerous pages to two “situated passions” (Sedda 2012): collective guilt and individual shame, using the desire to deal with these emotions as a starting point for her trip into the family reserves.

The first emotion Krug deals with can be defined as an “affiliative sense of guilt”, to use a category proposed by Paul Ricoeur (2012), where the subject recognises that he or she has no direct responsibility for atrocities committed by others (in this case, in the past) but cannot help thinking that somehow those same crimes are part of his or her genealogy. It is a condition of diachronic implication (Rothberg 2019) that drives the subject to self-actualise both as judge and judged. Krug similarly does not absolve the crimes committed by her German ancestors but places herself among the proxy-guilty, among those who owe a debt to history. Affiliative guilt implies that there is a negative self-perception rather than actual responsibility. Feeling guilty, of course, does not necessarily correspond to being guilty. Alongside *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which indicates a collective German sentiment of coming to terms with one’s Nazi past without the burden of guilt, Krug places the social construction of guilt as it was present in the school narratives, stories, and educational trips of her adolescence. Exemplary of this guilt-ridden self-representation is a page in *Belonging*, in which she recounts school trips to concentration camp memorials in Germany, Poland and France. Krug accompanies the narrative with photographs she took on those days, depicting her classmates with sad and grief-stricken faces. At the end of the page, it reads: “Here was the evidence of our collective guilt”. These photographs represent the artist’s need to textualise guilt, to immobilise it in a photographic image to study it, to make it evident to her eyes, to express it as a collective, characterising narrative and, arguably, as a coping strategy. A culture of guilt, Lotman would say, is governed by prohibitions (cf. Pezzini 2008); in this case, the prohibition that sustains it is a double negation: one cannot not remember the trauma committed by one’s ancestors.

If guilt is constructed as a shared emotion of her youth, shame (and then, meta-shame) in *Belonging* is the emotion of adulthood. This concerns her Germanness, which the artist simultaneously rejects and accepts. As many semioticians have pointed out (see, for example, Marsciani 1991; Cavicchioli 2002), shame is the most socialised emotion of all. Shame, indeed, is constituted in intersubjectivity, when a model of behaviour that defines some actions as acceptable and others as deplorable is imposed on a person or group. When subjects find themselves performing the latter, the sanction of their group (be it direct or indirect) pushes them into this emotional state. Lotman ([1970] 1975), working on cultural emotions, defined shame as a modelling emotion that can shape specific internal dynamics of a collective group in relation to individual behaviours. According to Lotman, shame operates with the “we” inside that community, shaping norms and habits (Lotman [1970] 1975: 271). In this sense, it differs from fear, which instead relates to “otherness”, to the definition of who is the *alien*, from whom to distance oneself. Considering the specific case of Krug’s work, shame is dictated by the norms and stigmas concerning the external perception of German people, with the attached stereotypes of humourless people that Nazism certainly did not help to alleviate. As the story unfolds, shame is not limited to social embarrassment, but is recalibrated through a more “active” form of meta-shame, the shame of being ashamed, through which the desire to recognise oneself as an insider in the group of ‘Germans’ in spite of the trauma of the past, begins to take shape. In other words, Krug, as she continues her life as an expatriate in the USA, begins to reconsider her anti-German shame, activating the emotional impulse to re-engage (not only physically) with her culture and history, trying to work through even its darkest parts.

The meta-shame felt for the possibility of “making” others uncomfortable with her Germanness leads Krug to awaken within herself a shy sense of belonging, not quite a driven national pride

but at least a desire to understand what her *Heimat*⁸, to which she has never been attached, is all about. To do so, she starts collecting German objects from markets and frequenting groups of German emigrants who have been meeting regularly to speak German since 1943. However, as she accumulates information here and there, she feels that the search will not take her far.

This is why the mix of guilt, shame and pride drive the artist to collect information buried not in the German markets of New York, but in her closest possible *Heimat*, her family. This shift from the macro to the micro level demonstrates how *Heimat* can have different 'sizes', since the nation and family, in relation to responsibility, are isomorphic in post-conflict contexts. This idea is substantiated in the sentence that concludes the section devoted to emotions and opens to a re-collection of her family history:

No matter how hard I look, a nagging sense of unease won't disappear. Perhaps the only way to find the HEIMAT that I've lost is to look back; to move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask – about my own hometown, about my father's and my mother's families. To make my way back to the towns where each of them is from. To return to my childhood, go back to the beginning, follow the bread crumbs, and hope they'll lead the way home. (Chapter 2)⁹

5. Probing the Archive

The first chapter, devoted to the re-collection of Krug's maternal family, opens with a page that is coloured green, using a watercolour style. The first sentence the reader encounters is an effective

⁸ A German term that is impossible to translate without losing part of its meaning, indicating the feeling of attachment to one's birthplace, homeland or family.

⁹ The graphic memoir does not include page numbers. The text is divided into fifteen chapters and an epilogue. For this reason, every time I directly quote one part of the artwork by Nora Krug, I will indicate the chapter which contains the referenced section.

synthesis of the divergent generational awareness of the traumatic German past: “My mother grew up in the age of oblivion” (Krug 2018). From the beginning of her investigation, Krug offers the context for the beginning of her research: in the 1950s (her mother was born in 1946), the Holocaust had not yet been thematised, let alone mediatised, as a collective trauma as we know it today. Her mother, indeed, saw the first images of a concentration camp by chance, looking at a left-wing magazine found in a trash bin. This lack of representation about the Nazi atrocities of the Second World War evidently contributed to the movement of these events to the periphery of the national semiosphere (i.e., due to its scarce textualisation). This is not surprising, considering Jeffrey Alexander’s social theory (2012) of how the Holocaust has been consolidated in Western social perception as a collective trauma many years after the event itself, following the dissemination of an increasing number of texts that mediated a wider narrative about it. On the same page of Krug’s graphic memoir, the memory in-competence of the second generation is expressed through another quotation from the artist’s mother, recounting from her own perspective the kind of relationship that Willi had with Nazism: “I don’t think that my father was a Nazi: he told me he didn’t like Hitler because of the way he screamed all the time. I remember once overhearing a conversation my parents had with friends over coffee. ‘Nobody knew what was happening to the Jews,’ they said. ‘But six million sounds a bit exaggerated’” (ibid.).

This doubtful attitude was not unusual for the generation of Germans who lived through the war. Indeed, in one of his works on the Holocaust as a traumatic reference in the construction of contemporary German identity, Bernhard Giensen (2004) used the term “denial” to describe the process that characterised the first generation after the Second World War. This process contributed to the transmission of a partial and myopic memory to the second generation (Krug’s mother), moving the information that was needed in order to deal with trauma into a peripheral, hidden space, in both national and familiar semiospheres. It was through this denial that

the semiotic reserve of unwanted memories began to be built up, composed of texts that could have further destabilised a nation that had been socially and economically defeated and morally implicated by the war and by Hitler's dictatorship. The admission that the mother was born in a context in which, given the proximity to traumatic events, denial prevailed over elaboration, and the admission of guilt also serves to anticipate how little reliable information about her grandfather Krug has in her possession.

A few pages later in *Belonging*, the "gaps" in Krug's understanding of her grandfather's life are expressed in a fascinating manner: she presents a recoloured photograph of Willi, cuts out his face (which we find broken into pieces on the next page, like a jigsaw puzzle that needs to be put together) and in the blank space over his face she articulates her ignorance: "If someone were to ask me what kind of man my grandfather Willi was, whether he was quiet or exuberant, soft-hearted or severe, I wouldn't know how to respond" (chapter 4). The face – typically recognised as the most defining part of a person's body – is erased from this photograph, indicating the artist's cognitive gap regarding the *true* identity of her grandfather. In addition to this more metaphorical aspect, the way Krug decides to proceed is also interesting on a formal and aesthetic level: she intervenes chromatically on the photo of Willi, who is portrayed half-length, dressed in a suit and wearing a tie. These elements lead us to suppose that the image was used as a passport photo, devoted to showing the person's 'best face'. The same face that Krug erases and divides into small pieces, thus thematising her active investigation work and her search for coherence in and around her grandfather and her family.

As the narrative proceeds, the use of photographs of her grandfather as a young man becomes more and more consistent. Krug does not merely take them from the family archive and make them public and visible, she materially intervenes on them, modifying their artistic expression. This includes recolouring the photographs, writing on them, cropping at will and according to her intentions.

This operation makes the photographic and familiar material lose its referential function and therefore its indexical qualities with regard to an element of reality. The photographs of Krug's grandfather are translated as incomplete texts, hiding something that is left out of the photographic representation, and which can be unravelled through the creative practice of the author. In this sense, Krug's work intervenes on the familiar text to interrogate that which is out of focus, invisible, far from the self-representation that her grandfather (a synecdoche of the whole family and a metonymy of Germany) proposed for posterity (Lorusso 2020).

As the graphic memoir progresses, Willi's life is told to the readers in the terms that Krug originally knew, lacking in detail and with much left unsaid. The reader learns that during the Second World War the artist's grandfather was the driver for a Jewish linen salesman, who ultimately decided to leave the country because of the racial laws. On his departure, the man left Willi a large amount of money. With it, he opened a driving school, an activity that kept him away from the battlefield as he was busy teaching soldiers how to drive.

The compelling aspect of this text is that all the information that Krug 'shares' with the reader is continually challenged by a questioning attitude that becomes more insistent as the story progresses¹⁰. The many narrative gaps, the impossibility of asking her grandparents directly, the unreliability of her mother (who offers an overly sweetened and hazy account of the family past) drive Krug to seek out more information, combining the family archive with the public one in Willi's hometown, Karlsruhe. It was there that she was able to browse through an American military file for the first time, which included a questionnaire that the Allied forces obliged all German citizens to fill out, trying to define almost quantitatively

¹⁰ For example, this includes the questions Krug poses regarding the relationships between her grandfather and the Jewish employer: "What did they talk about on their long rides through the country?"; "Did they become friends over the years?"; "Was the story my grandmother told her about the Jewish linen salesman really true?"

their collaboration with the regime that had just fallen. In this part of the book, Krug interrogates the official source, mixing it with her own concerns and textualising the process of re-collection, through which the artist herself discovers unfamiliar (i.e., unknown, but also ‘unfamiliar’, outside the familiar semiophere) materials. These objects are filtered by the artist’s pathemic investment and re-ordered according to her “memory goals”. In this sense, Krug’s approach can be compared to that of the historian. She is indeed interested in the familiar truth not in an ontological sense but as something that is manifested in the texts each time in a different and local way. Acknowledging the partiality of the documents she has at her disposal, in which Willi smiles at her but does not communicate his implication with Nazism, she tries to make trauma intelligible, decoding and bringing into the home material that is capable of creating semiotic tides and rebalancing the hierarchy between known and un-known pasts.

An interesting example of this combination of historical sources is displayed in a page of the graphic memoir in which Krug, in the archive in Karlsruhe, discovers that her grandfather was a member of the Nazi party. The shocking news is visually rendered in a very interesting way, forging a semantic correlation between “new memory” and “the face”.

The background of the page in question consists of the American questionnaire filled out by Willi, in which he states that he had been a member of the Nazi party since 1933. It was because of this answer that Willi decided to categorise himself as a passive *Mitläufer* (follower) at the end of the questionnaire, instead of as Major Criminal/Minor Criminal/Prosecutor, the other categories used by the Americans to define the Germans at the end of the war, through which it was possible to try those directly responsible for the atrocities perpetrated. The centre of the page reproduces a photograph of the grandfather’s face, not broken up as previously, but this time sharply in focus, staring at Krug (and by extension, the reader) with a half-smile.

The questions in the document in the background are written in English but the answers are filled in by Willi, written in German and with different typewriter lettering, making them stand out. The artist guides the reader in deciphering the document. To all the questions asking the respondent whether he was a member of an SS squad or if he ever received titles or medals from Nazi organisations, Willi answers *nein*. Only to the one that asks if he was a member of the Nazi party does he answer *ja*. A “yes” that the artist does not dare to rewrite (in fact, she cuts out and reproduces a piece of a document and affixes it to the description of her feelings), therefore charging it with intensity thanks to the presence of this *trouvé* face that is finally shown its entirety, visible in the sense of *being finally knowable*. The memory of the grandfather is rewritten in the light of this discovery; the serene face of an ordinary man is revalorised and resemantised for the artist and the reader as the face of an implicated subject (Rothberg 2019). Now that the responsibility has been documented, Willi’s smiling face in a family photo no longer has the same meaning: it only indicates the partiality of the family’s common language (cf. Lotman [1986] 2019), the strategies of cover-up and dormancy adopted to present a better self-image in the post-conflict context.

Although separated by several chapters, these two pages can be considered complementary as they visually perform two crucial parts of the re-collection operation: the re-organisation of the materials, the re-distribution of texts’ positionality in the semiosphere, and the resemantisation of the primary text (the family photo on this occasion), transmuted into something with more valuable information than before. Through the juxtaposition of her grandfather’s face and the official document that magnifies a piece of information which was hitherto latent in the family (“My mother and aunt had been wrong”, writes Krug on the same page), Krug becomes the antagonist, narratively speaking, disclosing the undisturbed secret that had been transmitted from generation to generation.

The re-collection of documents also demonstrates the interconnection between private family history and collective history of Hitler's Germany. The background re-actualises the relative in the foreground; he becomes *closer* (Ricœur 2000) because more details of him are known, now as an implicated subject, not responsible for committing or ordering violence against Jews and minorities but responsible for passively contributing, through party membership, while others carried out these acts.

6. New Family

The sections of *Belonging* considered here emblematically represent the main traits of the re-collection mechanism in relation to trans-generational memory in post-conflict contexts. Necessarily, I have omitted certain scenes from the volume, to allow more space for the two key sections that best illustrate the process of re-collection. In this chapter, I have looked mainly at the strategies of re-collection of inherited memory, considering the active role assumed by those who were born after a specific traumatic event and who perceive that they do not own all the necessary information for a clear understanding of their family past. What I have decided to highlight in this chapter is how inheriting is not to be considered a passive and aseptic activity of preservation but, on the contrary, a fully-fledged activity of semantic and textual redistribution.

In this sense, re-collection is to be understood as a translation produced by a subject working directly on public and private sources in order to question familiar or public truth statutes. While not granting all the answers, in some cases, re-collection can serve as a form of partial pacification with one's past ghosts, with the emotions that 'incited' the search in the first place and with the members of the family being investigated.

In this regard, the dedication that Krug places at the beginning of the book is emblematic: "To my old family and my new family". It is important to note how this dedication only takes on a different,

reconciliatory meaning at the end of the volume. Read before knowing the artist's family past, it seems to concern only her family of origin and the family she built as an adult, with her partner. At the end of the text, having given "a face" to those who were little known, the adjectives "old" and "new" seem to correspond to two versions of the same family, acknowledging the diachronic evolution granted by the activity of re-collection. From this perspective, the dedication seems to emphasise the theme of discovery that is inherent in the process of memorial reconstruction, dedicating the work produced – in a reconciliatory manner, thus "peacefully" recognising herself as part of the traumatic history she investigated – also to the "new", hitherto peripheral part of her family.

Through this process, the subject is granted a new knowledge of the past, a new competence with regard to certain events and the way they were told and transmitted. This is the competence that Lotman calls the "memory capacity" (Lotman 1990), which does not refer to an individual, cognitive capacity to remember or not to remember events of the past, but rather signals how texts, after undergoing a process of repositioning from the reserve to the centre, externalise new memories, contaminating all other narratives concerning that semiosphere. Re-collection is proposed as a useful process in the construction of a new memorial (and family) know-how and, by extension, it allows us to *unmask* the filters adapted to communicate the events from one generation to the next, enabling people to look at past events in a new light.

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AT DIFFERENT SPEEDS: CANCEL CULTURE AND TEMPORALITY

Anna Maria Lorusso

Introduction

One of the aspects that Juri Lotman's theory of culture has helped us to focus on and analyse is certainly that of the temporal heterogeneity of semiospheres.

The structuralist approach has made us accustomed to thinking of cultures as coherent organisations; semiotics has often looked for the isotopic redundancies that permeate the different universes of culture; narrative semiotics has helped us to identify strategies, narrative programmes and frames that hold the various elements of culture together. And all this has, in a way, led us to see how cultures function as powerful devices for standardising, connecting and structuring the heterogeneous elements of a *state* (a synchronic state) of culture.

And yet, sometimes the heterogeneity is not, so to speak, 'horizontal'; it does not concern the coexistence in the same space of different languages, or different habits, or different principles of common sense. Sometimes heterogeneity is 'vertical'; within the same semiosphere (in which perhaps the same language is spoken, the same habits are shared, etc.), it concerns the different temporalities that cross it. It has to do with a *temporal misalignment*.

As Lotman explained at several points in his research (from Lotman 1973 to Lotman 1984 and 1990), cultures are usually capable of handling such heterogeneity. For Lotman heterogeneity is the condition of the vitality of a culture. The semiosphere presents a structural heterogeneity, as the basis of its mechanism, and such necessary heterogeneity manifests itself both in the dialogical dimension of culture, and in the enantiomorphic dimensions of culture, through

which different elements generate analogous texts, or vice versa analogous elements create different texts. Anyway, when heterogeneity generates excessive differentiation, within that virtuous mechanism that is the semiosphere, stabilising, unifying mechanisms are triggered, i.e. mechanisms that reduce heterogeneity. We can read many forms of semiotic adaptation in this light. To give just some concrete examples: urban forms, in which non-aligned modalities of the suburbs are 'recognised' and institutionalised (as when social centres become spaces of municipal co-housing); counter-culture artistic practices that find recognition and acceptance in the institutional system of the arts (think of murals in museums); advertising communications that begin to include different subjects, until then kept out. In all these cases, the heterogeneity of the different was becoming so strong that a recognition, an inclusion, intervened, which certainly moderated some of the most heterogeneous aspects of the different, but accepted it.

The self-descriptive practices, the forms of adaptation and translation, the capacity for dialogue with otherness inherent in every semiosphere should also regulate relations with temporal heterogeneity: polychrony should not be a problem, but rather the simple condition of cultural dynamism. Sometimes, however, the tendency towards normalising inclusion gets stuck, and when the temporal mismatch prevails, when it cannot be accommodated and resolved, short circuits are generated, sometimes explosions, other times real blockages. In these cases it is not possible to make texts and values of the past coexist with texts and values of the present. One temporal pole wants to dominate the other, to somehow crush it.

The contemporary phenomenon of cancel culture corresponds, in my opinion, to this type of short-circuit, and it is through some cases of cancel culture that I would like to reflect on the temporal complexity of semiospheres.

I. Lotman and Temporality

For a long time, Lotman's theory of culture was read in the light of eminently spatial criteria and metaphors: boundaries, inner and outer space, spheres... (see Remm 2010).

As Gherlone (2014) has already noted, however, Lotman's contribution in considering the temporal dynamics that characterise semiospheres is fundamental (see Lotman 1990 and Lotman 1992; see also Lorusso 2019). It is even more fundamental in light of the predominantly synchronic and often anti-historical (or a-historical) approach that semiotics has taken.¹

There are always different temporalities in the same single state of culture. Culture is made up of layers that develop at different speeds, result from different stories and present a different 'solidity', or stability. Lotman's metaphor of the museum is well known. He uses it in order to explain what he means by the synchronic state of a culture, how many temporal codes and temporal pasts it includes:

Imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; there are also the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also tour-leaders and visitors in this hall, and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which in a certain sense it is). This is an image of the semiosphere. (Lotman 1990: 127)

¹ I am referring here to the fact that semiotics of structuralist derivation has largely developed its analysis in a synchronic perspective and, in general, semiotics in the 20th century defined itself in opposition to historicism. In non-structuralist semiotics, more influenced by the Peircian legacy, temporality has been considered to a greater extent but – in my opinion – more as cognitive temporality (of the perceptive process or of the interpretative process). Even in the Peircian frame, therefore, there has not been a real focus on historical diachrony. Apart from Lotman, Umberto Eco seems to us to be the only other theorist who *clearly* poses the question of diachrony, inviting (in Eco 1984) the development of an archeology of concepts.

Clearly, each of these elements has a different temporal identity: elements of the distant past (a *closed* past, in a certain sense); elements of a durative present (inscriptions, captions, instructions), a present called to last for a certain time in the future; elements of a present in action (the present in which the visits and practices of the visitors are given). The museum lives precisely thanks to this heterogeneity, which does not represent a problem. Conversely, it would be a problem to place everything on the same temporal level: what would happen if we pretended to write captions in ancient Greek to describe a Greek *kouros*? Or what would happen if, as visitors in progress, we decided to stand there, in contemplation, motionless, for years? Or if we decided to dress our Greek *kouros* in a modern coat because we are visitors of the present time? We will see that some of these questions, which seem provocative and paradoxical, are not as distant as they might seem from the issues raised by cancel culture.

In this heterogeneity that characterises polychrony, we can identify at least three elements of differentiation:

- The *different speed* of development of the elements of a culture;
- The different *temporal depth* of each element;
- The different '*resistance*', i.e. the different capacity to endure.

When polychrony goes into crisis, we should therefore ask ourselves which of these dimensions becomes prevalent.

- 1) With regard to the speed, i.e. the rhythm, of each element, we see a great variability, from the slowness of some genres of folklore that seem not to change at all (fairy tales, for example), to the speed of forms such as fashion, which want to change completely every season; and from the slowness of a very complex constitution (i.e. the constitution of the European Union – probably never-ending and still in progress) to the explosiveness of a sudden and unforeseen change (such as the Covid-19 pandemic that we have just experienced). The latter is what is defined by Lotman as an *explosion*. Lotman (1992) makes us reflect on what

explosions really are: are they always really unexpected, or can they be seen in retrospect as almost 'prepared' and understandable? Let us think about the explosion (in the literal sense) of the conflict due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine: it had a precise start date (February 24, 2022), but did it really explode on that day? Or was there a slow deterioration in relations and a progressive escalation of conflict, which then in February 2022 found a more manifest and aggressive form?

The points of attention, regarding the various rhythms of life forms, are two: on the one hand, the rhythms differentiate and characterise the life forms (some life forms, such as fashion, have a faster rhythm; other life forms, such as folklore, have a slower rhythm of change). But beyond this, the different rhythms come into conflict with each other, because each semiosphere simultaneously hosts more than one life form. To stick to the previous examples, fashion and folklore coexist in the same culture. The same culture therefore has layers that change quickly and layers that change slowly. This can generate a virtuous vitalisation (enlivening stimuli for slow forms; stabilising stimuli for fast forms) or an explosive conflict.

Culture, whilst it is a complex whole, is created from elements which develop at different rates, so that any one of its synchronic sections reveals the simultaneous presence of these different stages. Explosions in some layers may be combined with gradual development in others. This, however, does not preclude the interdependence of these layers.

Thus, for example, dynamic processes in the sphere of language and politics or of morals and fashion demonstrate the different rates at which these processes move. And although more rapid processes may exert an accelerating influence on those that move more slowly, and whilst the latter may appropriate for themselves the self-description of those that move more quickly and thus accelerate their own development, their dynamics are not synchronic. (Lotman 1992: 12)

- 2) Temporal depth is different, opening up to an archaeological dimension. Every element of culture is rooted in a more or less distant past: some religious formulas are two thousand years old, others are of recent introduction; some foods correspond to ancient traditions, others are contemporary inventions. But the difference is not just one of 'seniority', it is not purely chronological, it is not a matter of date of birth. The difference is about 'depth', as I said. An architectural form of the 18th century can look back at the architecture of Greek temples; the 16th century perspective, on the other hand, starts in the 16th century and looks back at nothing; it is an invention, in the literal sense of the term, which is certainly based on knowledge and cultural acquisitions (those of geometry, for example) but which has no precedents. Therefore, although the perspective form is older than 18th century classicism, it has less temporal depth. Similarly, an absolutely contemporary food can refer to and 'quote' ancient production techniques (I am thinking of many flours that are in use today in Italian cuisine), assuming in that a wide depth.

Every element of culture, therefore, lives and describes itself according to a certain depth of time, which legitimises it and defines its identity. This depth does not depend only or so much on its date of birth but on the genealogy in which each cultural form recognises itself and with which it explicitly describes itself. As Foucault (1969) taught us, cultures do not evolve linearly, they often proceed by leaps and bounds. The genealogical gaze serves precisely to re-establish the lines of continuity observable beyond these leaps, and it is these forms of continuity that define the temporal depth of a form of culture.

- 3) Finally, there is the question of *resistance*. By this I mean the capacity to endure over time, which is therefore a characteristic that relates to the strength of temporality. We can, indeed, think of strongly resistant elements of culture and much more fragile ones. This capacity depends on various factors, or rather on how

various factors can intersect, but it seems to me that the central element for a form of culture to be resistant is its capacity to adapt (think of certain ritual forms, which persist while changing; or certain folk songs). The more a cultural form is able to adapt, the more it is able to endure. This makes its 'temporal life' uninterrupted and persistent, persisting in cultural negotiation. It is difficult to think that a form persists unchanged over the centuries. Resistance therefore is not rigidity.

All three of these components – speed, depth, resistance – contribute to defining in some way the *performative force of temporality*, an aspect which, as we shall see, has a certain relevance in our controversial cases of cancel culture.

If we want to rethink the Lotmanian example of the museum room in the light of these criteria, we should distinguish elements with different *depths* (ancient paintings alongside contemporary functional graphics alongside forms of description of the artworks, in the captions, of the nineteenth-century tradition), elements with different *speeds* of evolution (the architectural evolution of museum rooms is certainly slower than the evolution of its rules of entry, which perhaps change from year to year), and elements with different *resistances* (the 'museum form' endures, for example, through time, whereas we do not know whether and how artistic performances will endure).

In this dialectic of elements, ancient and modern do not immediately translate into stronger and weaker. There are very recent forms that impose themselves with great force and very ancient forms that have the weight of history on them, but are fragile: a cultural form like Gregorian chant is ancient and authoritative, but weak in our society because it is now little practiced, frequented only by niches of listeners and experts, etc.; vice versa, a recent form like trap music today is strong (even if its endurance over time is unknown). Other ancient forms are strong, because time does not always consume: think of the cadences of tempered harmony, just as

some contemporary forms are weak because they are still too niche (like some experiments in so-called contemporary classical music). In short duration and strength are independent, and can combine in completely different ways, sometimes generating real short circuits. It is precisely from a temporal short circuit that, in my opinion, the controversies of cancel culture arise: a recent cultural form takes on more performative force than a consolidated form from the past, winning over the temporal solidity of a form of tradition that is attested and appreciated.

The conflict that cancel culture brings to the stage is a conflict on the temporal plane. The culture of the present is not able to manage the heterogeneity of the past, to accommodate it, and so it prefers to destroy it, experiencing a clash of temporal cultures. If I want to tear down a 19th-century statue because it does not correspond to today's sensibilities, I am asserting that the strength of a value that belongs to the present is more relevant than the solidity of something that has maintained the seal of appreciation for centuries. I am saying that change is more important than temporal depth. I am saying that the resistance of the past is not a value in itself. I know that these statements may seem extreme, and that in whatever form cancel culture takes, it never condemns the entire past as such but it works on specific forms, local expressions; however, the point in my opinion is precisely the *radical nature of the founding principle* of cancel culture: if I am willing, indeed if I hope, to erase something (a statue, a scene from a film, an adjective from a book), it is because I believe that the sensitivity of the present is more relevant than respect for the past. From my point of observation in contemporaneity, I look at the past (and I am willing to eliminate aspects of it) and I look at the future, indeed I often legitimise the cancellation of the past by thinking precisely of a better future (I erase the traces of colonialism so that it does not happen again in the future, I erase the traces of slavery so that it does not happen again in the future). The dimensions of temporality – past, present and future – therefore converge; they are all *functions of the present*. And perhaps we think

of the future in a simplistic way, in the belief that History can be rewritten: we can erase the aspects that are problematic for us. Even before being a conflict on the level of ethical values, cancel culture is a conflict on the level of history: it is the value of temporality that is called into question, above all other values.

2. A semiotic look at cancel culture

Today there is a lot of talk about cancel culture, mainly within the journalistic discourse. The controversy has become very perceptible with the attempts (or actions) to pull down many Confederate statues in the US; in Italy, there is the problem of the persistence of fascist monuments; in Eastern Europe, the conflict plays out over Soviet-era monuments in the former countries of the USSR and the Socialist Bloc; the most recent case that has caused a scandal concerns 'sensitivity readers' editing some of the language used in Roald Dahl's books.

As I have already claimed in other contexts (see Lorusso 2021, 2022), I believe that the problem of cancel culture is a radically semiotic problem, and not at all a journalistic one, because it brings into play many semiotic dimensions.²

First of all cancel culture is a practice that advocates the *removal of certain signs* (statues, words, images) from their cultural contexts. Already here, as we know, an enormous semiotic problem opens up: is sign erasure possible? And what does erasure mean? Eliminating from *circulation* (letting the sign nevertheless remain in the memory of a culture, for example in its archives), or *eliminating the code* that is at the base of production of a sign? One thing is to prohibit the circulation and use of a coin with the face of a dictator; another thing is to eliminate forever the mould that allows the production

² More generally, on forgetfulness (obligatory and not) we have to mention some reference studies, very interesting also from a semiotic point of view, such as Assman 2009, Connerton 2008 and 2009, and some recent contributions such as Mazzucchelli 2017, Uslu 2020 and Tamm 2019.

of that type of coin (see also Mazzucchelli 2017 on the difference between preventing communication and eliminating a code which would reproduce types of sign).

Moreover, the desire to eliminate the signs of manifestation of an adverse cultural form produces a constant contradiction because it gives visibility to what one wants to eliminate. It is the problem of *ars oblivionalis*, covered by Umberto Eco in *From the Tree to the Labyrinth* (Eco 2007) in the chapter where he addresses the problem of memory and, consequently, of forgetting. While we can organise strategies to strengthen and order our memories, we have no strategies for forgetting on command. Eco notes that there is no *ars oblivionalis*. There are mnemo-techniques, but there are no oblivion-techniques.

Reflecting on a text from the 16th century by an author named Filippo Gesualdo, Eco ponders the possibility of an art of forgetfulness, and notes:

... it is legitimate to suspect that all these tricks [those outlined by Gesualdo] would not allow something to be forgotten, but only *to remind them what it is they wanted to forget*, thus creating greater intensity of memory – as happens to lovers who try to erase the image of those who have abandoned them. (Eco 2007: 99, our trans., our emphasis)

Deleting involves just such a semiotic work (of elimination, superimposition, rewriting, destruction...), and often also requires a communicative framework (to declare the action, manifest it with pride and programmaticism) such as to end up translating into a multiplication of signs. Of course, one can imagine a future in which there is no more memory of the clamour, and only the absence remains (in which the 'problematic' object simply does not exist), but what I want to highlight is that elimination is a semiotic act *productive of signs*, at least in the present.

Secondly, cancel culture raises the issue of *social agency*: who is responsible for sign circulation? Once one would have thought

primarily of institutions, of politics, but today we know that, also thanks to social media, social initiative and influence are distributed in a way that is not at all vertical. Cancel culture, moreover, derives from practices of online activism from below (see Ng 2022) and therefore raises and amplifies the question of activism, collective responsibility and accountability. How do collective subjects emerge, and how are they modalised from a semiotic point of view?

Cancel culture is also interesting from a more proper *narrative point of view* because it raised the question of what the narrative programme of those who promote cancellation is. The practices of cancel culture are very diverse: in some cases it is a matter of eliminating, in other cases of marginalising, in other cases of re-semantising in a masking way. But, beyond the forms that the practice takes, what is the founding object of value of that practice? To deny certain values? To protect certain hitherto marginalised categories? To sensitise public opinion? Depending on the objective selected, the modes of cancel culture change a lot.

If the object of those who promote a cancellation action is to protect some weaker social groups, as happens when cancel culture is inspired by respect for diversity, the protection of memory becomes secondary. At stake are the rights of the present, not those of the past. Attention: I am not saying that this is right or wrong; I am saying, however, that if I decide to tear down the statue of a protagonist of colonialism in the name of equality between dominant subjects and colonial dominated subjects (a theme to which we are all sensitive today and in which we should all recognise ourselves today) I am deciding to make a civil value that belongs to the present prevail over the value of respect for the past. In this sense, the present is valued more than the past, and in this sense memory seems to me not a value for cancel culture.

Indeed, we should say that the temporal dimension on which cancel culture is placed is radically situated between present and future. If the value object of those who promote cancel culture is *to educate* citizens to the right values, providing them with positive

'models', then the stake is in the future because the point is to give the right models and examples to younger generations (which can be done by eliminating the negative examples of the past or simply by showing their limits).

It is already clear from what has been said up to now that the different narrative programmes play differently with temporality.

Finally, it is very important for me to emphasise the *ideological nature* of cancel culture. When I speak of ideological nature I do not just mean that the actions of cancel culture correspond to a certain worldview; any cultural object expresses a vision of the world and is therefore, in a certain sense, ideological. However, I want to understand 'ideological' in a narrower and more exquisitely semi-otic sense, the one theorised by Umberto Eco. As Eco explains in *Theory of Semiotics* (1976), a discourse is genuinely ideological when, in asserting its position, it conceals the partiality of its position, claiming on the contrary that it is the only one possible, thereby *concealing the contradictory nature of semantic and cultural systems*. It is not, therefore, a question of simple partiality; it is a partiality that claims to be universality, that claims to be the only possible point of view.

If we think of a case like the attempted toppling of the statues of Christopher Columbus, I think this mechanism is quite evident: people want to topple the statues of Columbus because he was the one who made possible and therefore inaugurated the colonisation of South America. But to attribute *only* this to Christopher Columbus is clearly a reductive view of the complexity of this historical figure, which is far more contradictory: he has the merit of having made known the existence of a new continent (which he believed to be the Indies, but which was instead America); he has the demerit of having in some way made colonisation possible. I anticipate an objection: the statue also hid something, that is, it hid the 'negative' side of Christopher Columbus, presenting him as just a hero. I do not believe, however, that the two 'hidings' are comparable. When the statue was erected there was no awareness of that 'dark' side

of Columbus; colonialism was not under discussion; in the semiosphere of the past in which that statue was erected, there was no critical awareness of colonialism as a shared, socio-cultural phenomenon. Therefore, the statue did not hide; rather, it expressed the sensitivity of the time, which was blind to the drama of colonialism. Today the situation is different: in our semiosphere, the 'merits' of Christopher Columbus and his negative responsibilities are present. Therefore, if one reacts only in the name of negative responsibilities, one carries out a programmatic operation of hiding the merits.

The statue, therefore, in my terms expresses a *limited vision* of the world; the cancellation of the statue expresses a *semiotically ideological vision* of the world. For this reason, I believe that the only non-ideological operations are those that expose the negative responsibilities of historical subjects (as the Rijksmuseum has done on several occasions, for example, by not eliminating the paintings depicting slaves and various forms of subordination, but by adding to the normal captions some explanatory panels that highlighted the colonialist vision of the world that emerged from those paintings). The only genuine anti-ideological operation is to make explicit the contradictoriness of semantic systems.

Among these aspects which, as I said, seem to me radically semiotic and which make it possible to look at the phenomenon of cancel culture not as a fad, but as an interesting semiotic problem, I would like to focus here on the aspect of temporality. Indeed, as I've already anticipated, I believe that it is impossible to understand cancel culture without considering the dimension of temporal conflict. What is at stake in these conflicts is a temporal short-circuit, a misalignment: the (Lotmanian) different speeds of the elements of a culture can no longer coexist peacefully (as in the Lotmanian metaphor of the museum).

Let us look now at some examples of this kind of short-circuit. As we shall see, precisely because of the role the present plays in relation to the past, various forms of cancel culture can be distinguished (which, moreover, are not always forms of literal 'cancellation');

marginally, we can see how the semiotic gaze can help to distinguish what the journalistic gaze instead brings back to a single category).

3. Conflicts between temporalities

Some of the cancel culture cases, perhaps the most controversial, concern the attempted *outright elimination* of a culture text. I am thinking of the case of many confederate statues in the US, or of the cases of distribution platforms (such as Netflix or Prime Video) which have withdrawn films considered linked to racist, homophobic stereotypes, etc., from their catalogues.

In these cases, it is considered unacceptable to have monuments to individuals who in their lives were clearly against those values we believe in today: how could those who supported and practised slavery deserve a statue today? It makes no sense, according to our standards, to pay homage to these kinds of people, and this is why their statues must be pulled down. It is a question of removing the sign of honour, the tribute of memory, from these personalities. This conflict is not an abstract and theoretical conflict between past and present; it immediately translates into a conflict *in the present*, between communities that affirm different values: correctness and respect vs preservation of the past; militant denunciation vs historical explanation. The crucial point that differentiates and polarises these attitudes remains, however, the fact that the values of the present are taken as the criteria for judging the past. There is *no separation between past and present*. One reacts as if one were in an *indefinite present* that cannot accommodate the differences of the past. An *absolute present* responds to absolute values, which legitimise their circulation. The others must be eliminated. (I am not referring here to the cases of displacement, in which a statue is moved from the square to a museum. I am thinking of the cases in which a statue is torn down and eliminated or stored in pieces in a warehouse because it is not accessible to the public. I will mention the cases of displacement at the end of this paragraph.)

This idea of an ‘absolute present’, which I see as underlying the actual attempts at erasure, does not belong to other forms of intervention.

I am thinking of cases of *rewriting*, which do not violently eliminate, with planned and precise actions, the signs of the past, but produce new versions of those sign-texts with some elements of variation. This is what Disney did with some of its cartoons: the *Aladdin* remake of 2019 has a cast composed of several actors of Middle Eastern and Oriental origin; in *The Little Mermaid* remake (2023), the main character is played by an African-American actress. It is evident that these fairy tales have been revised, without changing their structure. Some elements have been edited, but nothing substantial.

It is a similar intervention to the case of the Roald Dahl’s edits: depending on today’s values, certain words used by the author seem to reinforce stereotypes and may hurt certain categories of people (there was some irony about the elimination of words that have to do with being fat). Therefore, these words, in the new editions of his books, have been eliminated and replaced with alternatives or periphrases, making political correctness the criterion of cancel culture.

In such cases, the past gradually becomes a palimpsest. One corrects what, in the texts of the past, is wrong to the contemporary eye, so as to produce a progressive improvement. The past is corrected, overwritten, but just some details are worked on, which do not erase the cultural text in its entirety. The work in its entirety remains, it is not banned. Individual expressions in the new edition are replaced, while the original version remains available to those who prefer the initial text and wish to deepen and reconstruct the palimpsest of subsequent textual modifications.

The problem is that very often this operation is not declared; if it is detected, it is admitted and explained, but usually it is not communicated in a programmatic way. These are often mute operations, which somehow erase or correct history using make-up, without

giving it away. We see a sort of principle of *refinement*: over time, texts can improve, adapting themselves to new values.

Another case involves the ‘deletion’ of problematic texts from the past by over-production of new texts in the present. In France, for example, the Education Minister, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, has identified some fairy tales (such as Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella) as having negative gender stereotypes and has therefore called for new fairy tales to be circulated in schools, with other gender models, in tune with present values. In this case, therefore, it is not a question of removing texts from circulation (by no longer having Little Red Riding Hood read), but rather of expanding the circulation of other texts, so that Little Red Riding Hood becomes marginalised.

This case is different from the previous one because we do not proceed either to correct a text considered incorrect (hoping that little by little people will forget the original version) nor to delete, in the strict sense. The ‘negative’ text is kept as it is, but it is made less and less relevant, accelerating the normal way culture works (and the manipulative dimension of the operation lies precisely in accelerating marginalisation).

The present, therefore, here does not correct the past, but *wins over the past* in terms of relevance. This mode of cancel culture privileges texts with less temporal depth, whereas the previous mode privileged temporal persistence.

Finally, I would like to mention *reframing*, which does not seek to erase problematic texts from the past but rather to frame them correctly, identifying the problems and relocating them in a critical context. In this case we are outside of the operations of cancel culture properly speaking, even if sometimes in journalistic discourses this type of reframing operation is labelled a form of cancel culture.

As an example of this kind of intervention, I could recall what HBO has done with *Gone with the Wind*, a movie that affirms and relaunches erroneous stereotypes about black people, slavery, and women's roles, also adding the theme of nostalgia for an idealised

past that is, in today's eyes, an obvious falsification (on this subject, see Gros 2019). After a very brief suspension from its film catalogue (a suspension that gave rise to accusations of cancel culture), HBO made the film available again, but added two documentaries to the viewing. In the first, titled *What to Know When Watching Gone With the Wind*, Jacqueline Stewart, film professor and director of the non-profit organisation Black Cinema House, introduces *Gone with the Wind* by providing an explanation as to why the 1939 film should be seen in its original form, albeit contextualised and discussed. The second video entitled *The Complicated Legacy of Gone With the Wind*, consists of a one-hour recording of the debate that took place in 2019 at the TCM Classic Film Festival. Invited to discuss the legacy left by the film were film historian Donald Bogle, producer Stephanie Allain, author Molly Haskell and the aforementioned Jacqueline Stewart.

In this case, therefore, *the past is returned to History*. The present comes later; it looks at the past with a critical eye but does not question its value and legitimacy. Rather, it highlights the distance between now and then and opens up paths for critical reflection.

I think that the operations related to the relocation of statues, which I mentioned earlier, could also be included in this type of operation. If a statue is removed from a public square and taken to a museum, where it is explained and framed, the sense of History is preserved; it is not a question of tearing down and erasing the past but of framing it differently.

4. Conclusions

It is clear, therefore, that grouped under the umbrella term of 'cancel culture' are some very different phenomena, ranging from outright attempts at erasure to a simply more critical consumption that identifies the problems that texts from the past pose for the contemporary gaze. Four forms (or perhaps three plus one) have been identified:

- deletion by elimination
- deletion by correction
- deletion by marginalisation
- revision by reframing

The different forms that these actions take largely depend on the conception of temporality that the subjects promoting the intervention have.

We are well aware that, from a semiotic point of view, temporality is not linear. Lotman has explained this to us extensively (Lotman 1992): the past is a retrospective reconstruction that we elaborate in the present, and which we often elaborate according to the project of the future that we assume. It is precisely through this retrospective reformulation of the past that we adapt the heterogeneous polychrony to the present: we construct the past, from the present, looking to the future, and thus somehow making everything coherent: we contain heterogeneity.

But in the cases of cancel culture we find something different: we do not proceed to the adaptation of the past, we do not reformulate it according to a narrative that tells the past in a way that conforms to the present and the future that we would like. Instead, we focus on its heterogeneity, marking a new beginning, a palingenesis of redemption. For this reason, cancel culture certainly represents in Lotmanian terms an explosive phase of the culture in which it occurs: it brings into conflict two strongly heterogeneous elements – the past and the present – affirming such an undisputed superiority of the present as to authorise the elimination of the past.

In the cases of deletion by elimination, we have *an absolute present*, which assumes, devours, temporal heterogeneity: everything is the present.

In the case of deletion by correction, we find the idea that over time there is progress, civilisation. Our view of the past changes and, where it sees errors, forcing, rigidity, it can intervene and correct. The past ends in the present, and the present is a corrected, amended past. Time, in this case, is *a palimpsest*. The risks of this

kind of operation have been well illustrated by George Orwell in his *1984*, where the Ministry of Truth constantly corrects the past in order to make it match the exigencies of the (changing) present.

In the cases of deletion by marginalisation, we find the idea of a temporality that is a force for change. Time does not go backwards, the present does not correct the past, but produces something new, a redistribution of values and knowledge, and in doing so, responds to the past. *Time is dynamism*; go ahead and change the balance.

Finally, in the cases of revision by reframing, we see a genuine critical attitude which distances this practice from cancel culture proper, so called: the past shows us positive values and errors; the present gives us the awareness to look at the past with disenchanted eyes and criticise it. *History teaches*, but it also teaches through its errors, its negative models; we, at present, must have the intelligence to look at History and draw lessons from it.

My interpretative hypothesis, however, is that all these forms of cancel culture respond, albeit with different nuances, to an absolutisation of the present which, at best, leads us to frame the past critically; in other cases, it leads us to erase it in various ways. The phenomenon of cancel culture is therefore another form of the so-called *presentism* (see Hartog 2003), i.e. of that cultural paradigm typical of contemporaneity that tends to neutralise the difference between past and present in order to actualise everything in a continuous and absolute present.

We usually speak of presentism in reference to memorial practices (with the widespread celebration of anniversaries, or the proliferation of memorial sites that seek to revive past traumas in the present). It could seem a sort of truism, as the present always represents the point of view on memory and Lotman reminds us that memory is a mechanism and a resource of the present, but the idea of presentism, as elaborated by Hartog, contains the idea of a 'deforming' practice. Presentism creates the illusion that the past *is like* the present, basing access to the past on the mechanism of actualisation. In these cases, presentism is the temporal paradigm that allows

us to actualise the past in the present, projecting today's subjects into yesterday's dramas, making us relive today the problems of the time, in terms of conflict, responsibility, victimisation. In a sense, presentism is the paradigm that *guarantees the persistence* (a kind of persistence) of the past by translating it into the present.

In the cases of cancel culture that I have mentioned, presentism plays a different role; it is the presupposition that justifies the erasure of the past in a temporal short-circuit whereby the point of view of the present becomes the reference for evaluating the past. The evaluative dimension becomes central, more important than the commemorative one. The present becomes *a court* for the past, not just a theatre for a re-enacted past.

In this way, due to a radically negative sanction of the past according to the criteria of the present, a *neutralisation of the past* is desired, with the different gradations we have seen (cancellation, correction, marginalisation; as we said, just reframing is different, with a reconsideration and revaluation of the past). Cancel culture therefore becomes a strongly anti-historical practice that, by erasing what is unjust in our eyes today, ends up erasing the difference between past and present.

One cannot help but notice a paradox in all this: on the one hand, a phenomenon like that of cancel culture emerges thanks to the awareness of different histories, thanks to the emergence, for example, of the historical experience of marginalised communities. On the other hand, however, in the most radical and aggressive forms of cancel culture, one does not simply want to spread this awareness, asking that the historical experience of these marginalised communities have space and place alongside the historical experience of the dominant communities. Rather, the time has come for marginalised communities and the others should be cancelled. Greater historical awareness therefore leads to the vindication of another type of historical myopia, in a sequence of partial visions.

From a semiotic point of view, therefore, the problem of cancel culture is not only a problem of signs (can the signs of the past

be erased?) and a problem of agency (who can assume the role of deciding on the cancellation?), but also a problem of the structure of temporality: for the semiotic gaze, polychrony is fundamental, as Lotman taught us; thinking of reducing everything to the present can be just an illusion (and often, an ideological illusion), or represent a typical explosive phase that serves to accelerate change but which will soon have to return to a phase of milder mutual adaptation. Even at the temporal level, it is necessary – after the explosive conflict – to find *a new descriptive metalanguage* that takes into account the new instances. In these cases, it is a question of finding a new historical narrative (metalanguage for temporality) that is new because it is more complex, because it is capable of recounting the contradictions that have led to the present, because it is capable of holding together the strength of the past and the urgency of the present. A metalanguage that knows how to describe, and that does not want to erase.

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CONFLICT AND POST-CONFLICT CULTURES AS EROSION: POST-DICTATORSHIP SPAIN AND CHILE

Patrizia Violi and Cristina Demaria

Within the relational and polyglot organisation that characterises the space of a semiosphere, where texts are heterogenous and various forms of temporality interact, what forms can the process of conflict take in different cultural, political, and social structures? How does conflict assume a role in the definition of cultural dynamisms as prototypical cases of explosion? Moreover, how can we better understand the aftermath of a conflict as a *chronotope* (Gumbrecht 2014), a space and a time of competing memories and difficult knowledge transmission?

Amongst the four mechanisms discussed in this book by the TRAME group (see Lorusso, Mazzucchelli and Panico *supra*)¹ in order to investigate the different redistribution and translation of texts and values inside a semiosphere under conflict, in this chapter we shall investigate a fourth form of transition, that is the process of erosion that often characterises the aftermath of civil and intra-state conflicts. By erosion we refer to a phenomenon that often follows the end of a conflict – in our case-studies a dictatorship – and the reassessment of democracy; it is a process that can last for decades, whose main feature is an underground persistence of ‘past’

¹ The two authors of this chapter belong to the University of Bologna’s TRAME Centre for the Semiotic Study of Memory (see <https://centri.unibo.it/trame/en>), as do two other authors who contributed to this volume in the section dedicated to Conflict, Time and Temporalities (Anna Maria Lorusso and Mario Panico: see chapters 4 and 5). Together with these colleagues, we have elaborated a possible typology of different semiotic forms of conflict and post-conflict situations.

values that remain present in a society despite the official change of its political governance, eroding from inside the new democratic system.

We believe erosion to be particularly relevant because of its independence not only from the forms of the transition to democracy, but also, at times, from the forms of control established by the previous dictatorship. The two-case study of post-dictatorship we will consider here – Spain and Chile – are indeed examples of different transitions to democracy, although they are both emblematic cases of erosion. By looking at two apparently distant, albeit at times previously compared (cf. Martin-Escudillo, Ampuero 2008), national histories of civil turmoil and state repression, we aim to explore their ambivalent and charged post-conflict cultures, characterised by a form of change that is neither explosive nor gradual.

We shall then focus on two paradigmatic cases-studies: Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy, which lasted for a long period even after Franco's death; and Chile, wherein long after the 1988 referendum and Pinochet's resignation in 1990, there are still past values and forms of life that were consolidated during the time of the military regime. To the forms of development and transformation proposed by Lotman in *Culture and Explosion* (2009) – continuous evolution and abrupt, unpredictable transformation (i.e. explosion) that turns a culture, especially a binary one, upside down – we add erosion as a particular arrested evolution, a blocked transformation. By attempting to broaden the scope, and to enhance the understanding of a Lotmanian semiotics of conflict and post-conflict situations, we aim to verify how erosion might follow explosion and change by encapsulating what happened – the past – into forms of divided national metanarratives that coexist after the change, thus eroding, slowing, changing the pace of any cultural dynamism.

I. Conflicts and post-conflict discourses in Spain and Chile

In what follows, we will focus on two different discourses related to our case studies: the juridical discourse in Spain and the cinematic one in Chile. These two different perspectives will allow us to investigate how complex dynamics of memory and forgetting have been at work in different historical contexts and discursive systems, showing how erosion can affect the construction of a shared common historical narrative. Although the two semiotic systems we shall analyse are quite different – a system of legal norms codified in a law on the one hand, and two audio-visual texts on the other –, they can both be considered, in Lotman's terms, *modelling systems*, that is, specialised semiotic resources of different kinds. Though language is the primary modelling system, art, architecture, law, and other cultural institutions contribute to maintain the structural cohesion of a culture, as well as its overall self-representation and auto-communication. In particular we will consider here two different textual forms: the so-called *Ley de memoria histórica* (Law of Historical Memory) promulgated in Spain in 2007 under the government of Zapatero, and two Chilean movies, *Salvador Allende*, by Patricio Guzman (2004), and *Post Mortem*, by Pablo Larraín (2010).

Although very different textual forms, both cases show the relevance that conflict and post-conflict exhibit to test the dynamics of change within a semiosphere.

Various factors contribute to the importance of conflict and post-conflict situations in the process of memorial and cultural transformations, one being the hypothesis that conflicts and their aftermaths, as cultural phenomena, are paradoxical states of change in a system, processes of reconfiguration within a semiosphere. Conflicts are always traumatic events that affect a whole community, disrupt its cultural continuity, and therefore the identity of that community. However, when, and how, does a conflict begin, and when does it end?

A declaration of war, for example, could be seen as a catastrophic event (in the sense of René Thom Catastrophe theory: see Thom 1989), a sudden change that radically transforms the previous semiosphere, introducing new values, narratives, forms of life, etc. Considering the aspectual dimension of time, explosions are punctual events: a declaration of war, for example, is certainly a sudden change, as continuity and the normalities of life are immediately disrupted, and a new form of life takes over. More complicated is the other feature considered by Lotman, the one of unpredictability. Sometimes, what causes a war is an unforeseen event, as with the murder of Archduke Francesco Ferdinando in 1914 in Sarajevo which started World War I, although, even in this case, there were deep-rooted reasons for the deflagration of the conflict before that unpredictable event. More often, however, the beginning of a war is not unforeseen, rather it is prepared by a series of tensions and hidden micro conflicts that can even assume a continuous gradual crescendo, rather than a sudden outburst.

The beginning of a conflict might thus show both an explosive and a continuous character: the invasion of another country, as happened in the case of Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th of February 2022, is an explosive rupture of the previous state, but at the same time it was preceded by a long period of local hostilities and fighting. The border between the two modalities is more permeable and less clear cut than it could look at a first sight, at least in most of contemporary conflicts (cf. Hoskins and Ford 2022).

The end of a conflict might also show both an explosive and a continuous character, often more a continuous one, as Cynthia Enloe (1993: 252) aptly describes:

Wars – hot and cold – are like love affairs. They don't just end. They fizzle and sputter; sometimes they reignite... For a post-war era lasts as long as people affected by conflict employ that painful or exhilarating experience to assess their own current relationship and aspirations.... The morning after is always an ambiguous

moment. What just happened? Who benefited from it? It is not always crystal-clear that today, the day growing out of the morning after, is a fresh, new day.

Along the same line, the end of a dictatorship could as well present different forms of its completion: in our case-studies Spain's transition to democracy was a long and very conflictual process, without anything clear-cut, apart from the death of Franco, itself somehow a gradual event as he died after a very long illness, somewhat rumoured as an attempt to keep him alive as long as possible. In Chile the transition was certainly clearer-cut, due to the result of the popular referendum of 1988 and the victory of the 'NO' to Pinochet's military regime; however, in both cases, the transition was characterised by what we define as a process of erosion that undermined the democratic government, turning its development into a deeply contradictory and ambivalent process.

What interests us here is precisely what happens after a conflict has supposedly ended, and a new era, sanctioned, for example by democratic elections, begins, i.e. a post-conflict situation whereby the political violence that just occurred has disrupted the semiotic systems of cultural production and reproduction, leaving meaninglessness as one of its more enduring existential legacies; its sometimes very conflictual reconstruction or silencing, one of the main goals of the agents involved. It is in the post-conflict phase that it is easier to understand how conflicts lay bare the normative rules and norms, the mechanisms of a semiosphere *and* the vulnerable, incomplete, and provisional character of that normativity. As a cultural phenomenon, conflict is indeed a way in which the political organised act of violence which is war, and the management of it, are "expressed as a border condition, as the paradoxical state of possible change in a system, its reconfiguration" (Demaria and Wright 2006: 10). The aftermath of a conflict helps the understanding of how a culture works, of how individual, collective, and national identities, and the memories on which they are founded, are constantly constructed and de-constructed, recognised or mis-recognised,

transformed and used not only to define the new present, but also to either project, or block, future possible scenarios. Often, a cultural system, a semiosphere, successfully reproduces and even consolidates itself by inscribing the past conflict into its dominant practices, affecting the meanings that make up its own fabric.

These phenomena become most apparent in the immediate and dazed moment when a community is given a moment to 'pick up the pieces'. In the process of trying to rebuild and repair a given community, of attempting to understand what happened, and who the subjects are that can possibly answer this question, the tensions between cultural continuity and discontinuity make themselves felt. However, the aftermath of conflicts as events capable of lacerating the texture of social and cultural containment, disrupting the frames and shared norms which allow people to live together, can last for a very long time. Conflicts continue to erode the semiosphere, their effects buried deep in the memories of both victims and perpetrators, or exposed in museums, re-enacted through forms of commemoration supported by diverse, and often competing, politics of memory and identity.

Hence, conflicts – their regulation, their repression, and, particularly, their representation in the post-conflict phase – constitute privileged loci for cultural and semiotic analysis, whether the focus is on how conflicts challenge and rearrange pre-existing systems of cultural control, or on their modes of historicisation, which is linked closely to often competing discourses of national or ethnic identity. By introducing a Lotmanian cultural semiotics into the study of post-conflict situations the very construction of history and its temporalities is put into question, as we interrogate erosive dynamics of memory that might operate in relation to post-conflict cultures, and even more so when one concentrates – as we shall do here – on conflicts internal to one country, i.e. that take place within a single society, such as the end of a regime and its difficult aftermath of internal tensions and different contrasting memories. In such cases, we can observe a different dynamic of change, that could constitute another

model of socio-cultural development, that we have here called erosion. In other words, erosion can be either the very form of a change which is neither explosive nor gradual, and/or something that happens even after an explosive change of the semiosphere, that does not, however, erase or trans-figure the values and forms of life of the old one. In these predicaments, we do not have a gradual progression towards a new state of affairs, but rather an underlying erosion by the old system impeding the new forms of life to fully emerge. The new semiosphere has difficulties in affirming itself, as elements of the old semiosphere remain active, eroding the new values that should be favoured.

This is the case of the post-conflict situations, which we are here investigating, where the end of conflict has not automatically produced a new cultural configuration. Post-conflict cultures, in this case, are crystalised; a new semiosphere does not emerge easily as that, for example, of a full democratic state after a dictatorship. We are thus bound to witness an erosion of dynamics of democratisation which, apparently, are already active in the reconfiguration of values of the given culture, but that are still very fragile and not yet stabilised, since they are being eroded by the very permanence of the old ones. A characteristic feature of erosion is the unstable status of two co-existing systems – of different temporalities – without a clear-cut or a highly symbolic beginning. Erosion is, therefore, the form of change that is not a real transformation – neither explosive nor gradual – whose example for us is the end of the dictatorship in Spain.

2. The case of Spain and the Law of Memory

Franco's military dictatorship in Spain started in 1939 with the defeat of the Second Spanish Republic after three years of one of the most cruel and bloody civil wars of the twentieth century, where, it is calculated, over 100,000 opponents of Francoism were killed, their corpses hidden in unmarked mass graves that remained sealed for

over 60 years. Fierce Francoist repression, however, did not stop with the end of the war: mass imprisonments and executions of political opponents continued, especially in the early days after Franco took power, when the *Caudillo* needed to consolidate his power. Thousands of people disappeared in the mass violence perpetrated during that period, as a result of secret state abductions; none of the authors of these crimes was prosecuted, since acts of violence were legalised by the Law of Political Responsibility (*Ley de Responsabilidades Políticas*) issued on 13 February 1939 two months before the end of the Civil War. The law declared all those who had opposed the military coup d'état, including all government officers of the republic and all members of the republican armies, guilty of the crime of military rebellion, as well as members of the Popular Front.² The end of the Civil War did not represent a transition to a period of peace but rather the advent of a repressive and long-lasting dictatorship³ which ended only in 1975 when, after Franco's death, a democratic government was established.

The transition to democracy however was a difficult and contradictory process. Unlike in Chile or Argentina, no formal truth commissions were established to investigate the past, and no trials or changes in the army or in the public administration to substitute Francoist officials took place, neither was any removal of the many monuments and landmarks of the past regime promoted. Neither condemnation of Franco's regime nor significant reckoning with the past was to take place until the 21st century.

Post-conflict societies always face the dilemma of dealing with a traumatic past, a process which can be done with trials and tribunals, or through an imposed forgetting, depending on how much the new political society wants to underline or downplay the break from the past.

² On the Spanish Civil War see Beevor 2006 and Preston 2006.

³ Between 1939 and 1945 500,000 people were subject to proceedings on "political responsibilities" (Graham 2005: 134).

In the case of Spain, the usual dilemmas of post-conflict situations were particularly difficult, since the dictatorship was the result of a devastating civil war that divided society into two opposing parties, with one side winning over the other and remaining in power for over 35 years. With his death, Franco's state did not collapse but was reformed from the inside, which meant that Francoist officials were involved in the negotiations of democratic transition, with their vested interests in keeping the past quiet. The transition period also witnessed increased political violence and instability. Between 1975 and 1980, there were 460 politically motivated deaths. About 400 people died in right-wing and left-wing terrorist attacks. The crowning event of this period was an attempted coup led by a fraction of the Guardia Civil in 1981. Although the coup failed, it heightened the fear that any recriminations at that time could result in another bloody civil war. The terrifying ghost of violence and massacres suggested to all political parties that they 'forget' the past and look for a smooth transition in order to make possible a more ordered democratic life. The price of that choice was the removal of the two traumatic pasts of Spanish history: civil war and Fascist dictatorship.

In 1977, after the first democratic elections, the new government promulgated the Amnesty Law, a law that extended amnesty to all Francoist aides and officials. While promising the release of political prisoners, the Law had actually guaranteed a complete amnesty to everyone involved in Franco's regime. The Amnesty Law was undermined by a much more pervasive and diffuse attitude shared by all political forces, the so called *Pacto de Olvido* (Pact of Forgetting), a tacit agreement to remove the past in order to consolidate the new and fragile democracy. The expression *Pacto de Olvido*, however, is a quite misleading formulation since in the late 1970s the legacy of Francoism was still very present in the country, dotted as it was with endless monuments and symbols of the regime. Only Republican memories were silenced and confined to a marginalised existence of counter-memories. The *Pacto de Olvido* thus did not promote a generalised cultural forgetting – a mode of memorialisation based

on forgetting (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975) – but a removal of just one of the two opposing memories, preventing the development of a real “culture of transition” (Golob 2011) based on reciprocal recognition of both parties involved in the conflict. The result was that a complete and shared memorialisation process did not occur, making impossible a real elaboration of the past and resulting in an erosion process of democratic life and values.

The transition to democracy in Spain was neither explosive nor gradual. Rather than a progressive change, it was a hybrid process where the forms of the new democratic state coexisted for a long time with the same values, and often the same people, as the Francoist period, in an endless erosion that kept two different systems that coexisted for decades in an unstable balance without substitution but rather eroding each other.

Another element responsible for such an internal process of erosion can be found in the way the transition took place, that is, not motivated by a mass movement or popular reaction as had happened a short time before in Portugal, but simply because of Franco’s death, an event that did not mark any voluntary discontinuity. According to Humlebæk (2011) this is one of the main reasons why the new democratic state was born without foundational myths. Revolutions, even if pacific and bloodless, are always collective movements that create a discontinuity with the past, with their own alternative narratives often rooted in images that become national symbolic icons, as happened in Portugal with the carnations in soldiers gun barrels.

Nothing of this kind happened in Spain: no images, no mass movements, no real discontinuity. The transition happened by extinction, without creating the possibility of establishing a new model of society. Two systems of values, the old Francoist and the new democratic, thus remained in an unstable balance for a long time; the Francoist past, still alive and never fully overcome, continued to subvert democratic life, eroding its foundations.

In a similar situation an effective and productive reconciliation between the two parts once in conflict was extremely difficult,

since, as Wagner Pacifici and Heller (2012: 190) state, “reconciliation requires representational, demonstrative and performative features in its transactions”. Here we find again a post-conflict cultures perspective, once “a more robust concept of reconciliation is advanced by scholars emphasizing the roles of symbols, narratives, dramas, rituals, art, and cultural performance in temporally extended resolutions of social conflicts” (ibid.).

Only at the end of the twentieth century did some new signs began to appear, interestingly enough, in connection with an event connected to Chilean politics. The event that catalysed the contemporary debate on Spain’s past was the case of Pinochet, the Chilean dictator. The ground for the discussion had been prepared by the stability of Spain’s democracy and a new generation of politicians, who hadn’t been directly or indirectly involved in the Franco regime. The fear of another civil war had also subsided. Pinochet was arrested in 1998 in London at the request of the Spanish judiciary. Before that, Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón had heard claims against the disappearance of seven Spanish nationals in Chile under Pinochet. The case was then inflated to encompass the entirety of the Pinochet regime, and the Spanish judiciary demanded that Britain extradite Pinochet to Spain. The demand received overwhelming support from Spanish society, who organised rallies to show their approval. International newspapers were quick to point out the similarities between Pinochet and Franco. Despite the controversial reactions both at home and abroad, where the international community accused Spain of moral hypocrisy since it still hadn’t reckoned with its own dictatorship, Pinochet’s arrest succeeded, and he was extradited to Chile.

At the turning of the century another important event took place. In 2000, Emilio Silva led the initiative to exhume an unmarked grave in search of his grandfather, who died in the Civil War. The grave also contained other bodies, and what started as a private initiative quickly morphed into a collective action. Silva founded the ARHM (the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory), whose objectives include exhuming unmarked graves, undertaking

investigations about the past, and putting families in touch. There are still many unmarked mass-graves to be found today, and it is estimated that about 30,000 corpses are still hidden without proper graves or burial.

This is precisely one of the issues addressed by the Law of Historical Memory (*Ley de Memoria Historica*) approved in 2007 by the Parliament under the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Despite the popular name used to refer to the law,⁴ this is not a law about memory, that is not something that can be imposed juridically. Rather, it is a law to redress the rights of victims of both the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, neglected for over sixty years. As the first article of the law states, its main objective is the "recognition and extension of rights in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence, for reasons of politics, ideology, or for religious beliefs, during the Civil War or the dictatorship". The following two articles share the same general inspiration, declaring unjust all punishments and personal violence that took place in those periods, as well as the declaration of illegitimacy for all the courts and tribunals of the Civil War and the dictatorship.

The law can be seen as a very general and comprehensive tool for political and symbolic recognition of the victims as well as their material reparation. But at the same it aims to rewrite a collective historical memory and to provide a new shared and unitary democratic framework for the whole nation. In doing so, it also represents indirect evidence of the still problematic existence of a diffuse erosion of those democratic values and the urgency for the new political generation to arrest it and move to a more radical transition to democracy.

From this point of view, the temporality of the law is a very revealing element. It goes back to two different transitions: the end

⁴ *Ley de Memoria Historica* is not the official name of the law, which does not have a proper name, but is individuated by a number and a date. The law was more properly denominated *Ley de Reparacion*, but it was popularly known as *Ley de Memoria*.

of the Civil War in 1939 and the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975, the two historical traumas that forever marked Spanish history in the twentieth century. These two events took place respectively 68 and 32 years before the law, an extraordinarily long time for a transition, proving how this process was difficult and contradictory. The permanence over time within the same democratic society of two different and divisive memories, coexistent and conflicting at the same time, is at the basis of the law, whose *raison d'être* is indeed the absence of shared memorial processes and the need to conclude a long and unfinished transition lacking in a real moment of discontinuity and symbolic break.

The real question is if a law can really affect memorial dynamics, deeply intertwined as they are with cultural processes of erosion and denial. Juridical discourse can be seen as one of the modalities of self-description mentioned by Lotman (Lotman 1990). Apart from producing cultural homeostasis, contributing in that way to defining regularity in a given culture, juridical discourse constitutes an important element of legitimation of reality; it not only structures the existing reality, but also constructs and determines what is then perceived as reality. As a powerful form of self-description of a given culture, juridical discourse plays a central role in establishing, shaping, and modifying the value system of that culture.

It can be argued that one of the most important effects of the Spanish Law of Memory was precisely the change it tried to promote in the value frame that dominated Spanish society for over six decades, eroding its democratic values from inside. The Law changed the very way to look at the past, introducing a different semantic and symbolic reconfiguration of the traumatic events of the century and their valorisation. For the first time victims became "combatants for freedom and democracy", their engagement in defending a democratic system was recognised, as well as the responsibilities of Francoists in the Civil War and their role in the ferocious repression of those years. From the point of view of the general semiosphere of a cultural system, the most significant aspect of the Law was the

symbolic reinterpretation of the historical past: the marginalised memories of one of the parties, silenced for almost a century, were valorised as the only possible foundation for democratic life. The set of articles concerning the identification of nameless victims and the localisation and reopening of graves (Articles 11-14), and the transformation and/or destructions of Francoist symbols and monuments (Articles 15-17), can be interpreted in this light.

Historians agree that during the Civil War between 70,000 and 100,000 of Franco's opponents were killed and thrown into common graves, or left unburied (Juliá 1999; Casanova 2002). Unlike Franco's victims, those killed by the Republicans were located, exhumed, and received proper burials and monuments, the most famous of which is the Valle de los Caídos, where Franco's body was buried until not so long ago. There is here a possible parallelism with Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s, where both in Chile and Argentina the *desaparecidos* have remained as perturbing ghosts in the collective memory, salient places of that "unclaimed experience" that, according to Caruth (1996), is at the core of trauma. Forgotten and unburied bodies are another form of erosion both of their memory and of the values to which those lives were sacrificed. The politics of localising and reopening mass graves, giving burials to the dead, serves, as Verdery (1999) observed, to reconfigure a sense of community and to contribute to a shared feeling of belonging lost in the erosive processes of oblivion.⁵ In the rituals of funerals, a community can refound its own identity and coexistence on a new pact of memorialisation.⁶

⁵ In the 2021 Pedro Almodóvar film *Madres paralelas*, the last dramatic sequence is a coral scene where a whole village takes part in the reopening of a mass grave, symbolically reaffirming continuity between Civil War death and the new generation's democratic values.

⁶ It should however be noted that exhumation of corpses is a very emotional and traumatic event, implying a perturbing visual impact. Not all the relatives of the victims were willing to reopen these wounds and some preferred to renounce to the search of their family's remains and their reallocation in a proper grave.

In a similar way we can read the articles related to monuments and public symbols of Francoism, which aim to contrast what we could call the Francoist semiotisation of territory, a pervasive presence of Francoist monuments, effigies and inscriptions disseminated across the country, untouched after Franco's death despite the return to democracy. The Law imposed the destruction or modification of these symbols of the past regime, many of which were broken down in the years following the promulgation of the Law. From a semiotic point of view, the efficacy of such an action could be questioned: is it possible to completely cancel the traces of the past, or is it impossible to avoid a progressive accumulation and layering of meanings, and could this even prove to be a positive form of memorialisation?⁷ Yet, again, what is at stake for the present discussion is the concern present in the Law for the implicit erosion of democratic values to which the untouched presence of Francoist traces dispersed across Spanish testified. All the articles of the Law can indeed be seen as the need to establish a new pact of memorialisation founded on a set of shared democratic values capable of finally completing the unrealised transitions of historical traumas of both the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship.

This is not the place to discuss in depth the efficacy of a legal intervention of this kind, as well as the many contradictory and critical evaluations of the Law, both from the right- and the left-wing in Spain.⁸ A legal tool is certainly not enough to produce a deep cultural shift in a divided community, which would require more diffuse and generalised processes of transformation. However, what is more important for the present purposes is to see how erosion dynamics can for decades affect the post-conflict transition to democracy, asserting the urgency of different kinds of intervention, both formal and informal.

⁷ For a general discussion of this point see Mazzucchelli 2010 and 2017.

⁸ For a discussion of these points see Violi 2013 and 2015.

3. Post-democratic Chile and the Pact of Silence

In Chile, the movement that created a discontinuity with the past was not the one that favoured a return to democracy, which was not, indeed, an “explosion”. The moment in time that we could think of as an explosion was between when Salvador Allende came to power in 1970, and September 11, 1973, when his government was erased by the military coup d'état that marked a historical change that Chile is still struggling to fully process. What is still most remembered today, and represented in museums, visual archives and, as we shall discuss, in cinematographic texts, is not the end of Pinochet's regime but its rather explosive beginning: the military assault on *La Moneda*, the Presidential Palace in the heart of Santiago, and the figure of its then inhabitant, President Salvador Allende, who died that day. What happened on that September 11 has become the ultimate traumatic and iconic event that still haunts Chile and its divided people; the very moment in history that the two films we shall here analyse go back to scrutinise, to interrogate, to revisit. However, it is first necessary to illustrate briefly Chile's troubled post-conflict scenario, which is the aftermath of a dictatorship whose political violence, also called “state terrorism”, ravaged the country, assailing citizens who became victims deprived of all humanity.

We started from the assumption that conflicts challenge and rearrange pre-existing systems of cultural control, not only in the first explosive moments of violence but also, subsequently, when they encounter modes of memorialisation based on forgetting, as Lotman and Uspenskij (1975) discussed, remarking how one of the most acute forms of social struggle is the request for the obligatory forgetting of certain aspects of national historical experience. Our hypothesis is that we can look at Chile's post-conflict situation as a very specific case of a failed re-arrangement that resulted in a process of erosion due, however, not so much to an imposed forgetting, but to a “pact of silence” shared by all the perpetrators. This is what Aleida Assmann (2016) would call a *defensive forgetting*; that is, to

never confess, to deny all wrongdoing and justify what passed as a necessary defence against all those subversives who threatened the stability and order of the country. While in Spain the *Pacto de l'Oblivio* marked a shared and tacit agreement between all the political and social actors involved in the transition, the pact of silence, which was never made public, silenced the acts of perpetrators supported by half the Chilean population.

Salvador Allende's government ended abruptly on 11 September 1973 with the military *coup d'état* and the instauration of Pinochet's regime which, in its turn, did not end with an explosive change with a revolution or because of a war, as in the case of Argentina which lost the Falkland–Malvinas conflict against the United Kingdom, but with a plebiscite won, by very few votes, from those who had opted for democracy, with half of the country believing – as it still believes – that the regime saved Chile from the disasters of communism and that Pinochet should have remained in power.

Hence, from its beginning, the so-called democratic transition failed in the attempt to work through the trauma caused by the violent dictatorship, since the traumatic past was not recognised as such by many, turning the so-called post-conflict phase of reconciliation into a process of slow erosion of the very same democratic values that the transition should have started to restore. This process was epitomised by the Redding Commission, which was installed in 1990 by President Patricio Aylwin, of the first *Concertación* government, which was, by the way, amongst the models for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁹ The Redding Commission, amongst which were people who served under Pinochet's regime, documented the fate of 2,279 people who either disappeared or were executed. However (Klep 2012: 261), “the normative framework and the carefully crafted master narrative of the report (Redding Report) set truth-finding to work in the light of the higher goal

⁹ On the many nuances and complexities that characterised the South African TRC seen through a semiotic lens see Demaria 2006.

of ‘national reconciliation’”. It framed the period in terms of human rights violations, national reconciliation and ‘never again’ (*nunca mas*), but, also, emphasised how “legitimate differences in opinion on the causes of 11 September” (ibid.) could exist among Chileans.

Unlike what happened in South Africa, where the government chose to make a public ritual out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Chilean commission set up in 1990 mainly concentrated on the *desaparecidos*. Not only did it fail to assign individual responsibility, but it did not even denounce, loudly and clearly, any of the atrocities committed in the years of the dictatorship. Crucially, it did not mention the torture or injuries inflicted on “subversives”, terrorists or even women, the elderly, or children, stripped of subjectivity, as well as all possibility of self-representation. And it did not tackle the problem of impunity, which continued to erode the path to democratisation in Chile, as well as in many other Latin American countries. In other words, following the end of Pinochet’s control, Chilean society became rooted in a mode of reconciliation that was basically founded on the impunity of the dictatorship’s perpetrators (Canet 2019). Most notably, perpetrators were not only given immunity, but also maintained the privilege of remaining silent and never confessing, united in a “pact of silence”. This mode of ‘reconciliation’ after Pinochet’s removal was, in fact, judged by the injured part of the country as a way of denying any responsibility, the very internal conflict that the regime so violently tried to suppress throughout the dictatorship, affirming a supposed, yet nonexistent, homogenisation of political subjectivities of the nation-state. And little did the Valech Report, edited by the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, set up in August 2003 by Don Ricardo Lagos Escobar, the then president of Chile. *No hay mañana sin ayer* (there is no tomorrow without yesterday) is the name (which soon after became a slogan) given by Lagos to his *Propuesta gubernamental en materia de derechos humanos* (Governmental bill relating to human rights) thanks to which the Commission was formed (Demaria 2006). This late ‘second’ report did

acknowledge the suffering and the perpetrated tortures, giving voice to some of the victims who, however, remained anonymous. After an extensive period of fieldwork in Chile, Klep synthesises what happened as follows (Klep 2012: 259):

During my research in Santiago, people assured me that Chileans will never agree on what happened on 11 September 1973. For some people, it was the day that Chile was saved by its glorious armed forces from a civil war and a communist dictatorship. For others, it was the day that a democratically elected government and a project for a more equal society were crushed. ‘No truth commission, no criminal prosecution, no *mea culpa*, no memorial, will ever change that’, my interviewees and friends have told me time and again.

What happened in Chile is a very particular mechanism of inclusion and exclusion of cultural meaning within the same semiosphere that is neither a forgetting of the conflict and the dictatorship as a temporary inactivity in the system of meaning, nor a shift between forgetting and remembering as an inherent movement of culture. The functioning of cultural communication was directed by a culture’s model of self-description that was split between two competing, and not always so explicitly visible, ideas of the past, of what happened, and why. Those who believed that Chile was saved by its glorious armed forces from a civil war and a communist dictatorship continued to adhere to the “binary cultural systems” that ruled the dictatorship – a system that found necessary to annihilate everything that existed as it was “considered to be irremediably corrupt” (Lotman 2009: 166). Indeed, people were killed because they were labelled subversives, a reason that was enough to justify their disappearance.

There was no dialogue, no translation, or very little of it. Reality was mutilated by dividing it into self-excluding oppositions that actually resulted in giving up the wealth of information that a multi-perspective view can grasp, that is depriving the people of what can greatly influence the possibility of their *choice* (see Lotman

1990). Lotman taught us how this process also influences that of description and self-knowledge, giving the ability to “explain what has occurred” (Lotman 2009: 15). Failing that, innovation remains unnoticed, and lessons from the explosion unlearned (Torop 2009).

Hence, the cultural space of Chile was not, and still is not, a space belonging to a “common memory”, its inherent multifoldedness polarised by the existence of two very particular – to use Lotman terms – “dialects of memory” (Lotman 2019: 133); two cultural substructures and “local semantics”. These dialects of memory still undermine the country’s failed reconciliation, blocking a deeper understanding of its history, which must normally be built on a multitude of perspectives and versions, all of which are neutralised in these self-excluding oppositions.

Nevertheless, at a more grass-roots level Chilean culture has continued to produce a more nuanced or alternative memory narrative, emerging in memory sites, literature, performance, music and, most of all, documentary cinema. For scholars including, for example, Arenillas and Lazzara (2016), cinema has more effectively and vigorously rejected the binary and reductionist narrative of the democratic state’s memory discourse, seeking to further nuance and complicate this vision of history, scrutinising forgetting, guilt, and shame as cultural emotions, and questioning the cultural construction of an “enemy” (Demaria, Panico 2022). Patricio Guzman’s filmography of exile, starting with *La Batalla de Chile* (1975), is a significant example of Chile alternative memory narratives, as is Pablo Larraín’s, with his use of fiction and its many genres to interrogate his country’s past.

4. The role of cinema as an anti-erosive device

It is a cultural divided space, with very fixed internal boundaries, generating contradictory visions of past and of the future, different regimes of temporality, which Patricio Guzman and Pablo Larraín – probably the best-known contemporary Chilean directors outside

their country – investigate in and through their films; films that we consider testimonial re-generative texts able to expose the blocked trauma that kept on eroding the social body of the nation.

In their films, albeit with very different styles and within diverse genres, they keep on returning *not* to the moment of the end of the dictatorship, but to its beginning, and they do so particularly in the two works we shall discuss here: the documentary *Salvador Allende*, by Guzman (2004), through which he tries to write an intimate and subjective biography of the President, and *Post Mortem*, by Larraín (2010), a film that is a very particular fictionalisation of history, part of his Dictatorship Trilogy which also includes *Tony Manero* (2008) and *No: The Rainbow Days* (2012).

Among the attempts made by cinema to confront the history not only of Allende's death – was it really suicide, an extreme act of resistance or was he killed by the military? – *Salvador Allende* constitutes an indispensable touchstone from which emerges, at the same time, an intimate, personal but also public work of remembrance until then untried, an attempt to reverse the process of erosion; to construct a national biography in which are inscribed both the effort towards oblivion (Guzman describes it, in the documentary, as a “forgetting machine”, a “cloak of amnesia” that descended on the country) and the intense search for traces of the past that are still asking to be questioned.

Guzman is here a particular biographer who retraces the whole of Allende's life, especially the twenty years of relentless political campaigning that eventually had him elected in 1970, and the few years of his government. He does so by inscribing into the text his own subjectivity, his own point of view, his need to understand the man Allende was: “I need to know who he was” is a sentence that is repeated, almost as a declaration, several times by Guzman as the biographer and voice-over guiding us through Allende's life.

However, this is a point of view that, in its turn, opens itself up to a hermeneutic of the nation and of its conflicting past, which Allende, literally, embodies. In the case of forgetting and slow

erosion, the figure of the biographer takes on, indeed, an even more salient configuration. Following Lotman's understanding of culture as a "very complex polyglot text which is isofunctional and isomorphic to individual intellect" (Semenenko 2012: 86), the texts that deal with biography are even more challenging because they connect the individual experience of the person with more complex political and social issues (cf. Levchenko 2022: 263).

As the film unfolds, interspersing old footage, archival material dating back to Allende's youth in Valparaiso, and interviews with Allende's friends and *Unidad Popular* comrades – the party that he led and that won the election in 1970 –, and with the then US ambassador to Chile, Guzman's calm, assured voiceover recounts his own hopes and his longing for political change and social justice, as encapsulated in his previous epic documentary *La Batalla de Chile* (1975). From his rather nostalgic and openly partisan point of view, Guzman the biographer recounts what was, for at least half the population, a love story. As the images of Allende's political life unfolds, he claims: "*Era una sociedad entera en un estado amoroso*" (it was a whole society that fell in love with Allende), a society that fell in love with this doctor turned politician who wished for a revolution without violence or armed conflict, and who had to fight against the powerful propaganda campaign launched in 1960 by the CIA for Chile to be a pillar of democratic stability against communism. As the former US ambassador admits in one of the interviews in the documentary, there had been a lot of "dirty work", up to and including assassinations perpetrated in order first to prevent Allende from assuming the presidency, and then to overcome that presidency.

Hence, what *Salvador Allende* offers us is a working through trauma of a love story that would never last, that ended abruptly, and that is very seldom remembered as such. What the documentary suggests, as one of Allende's closest friend states, is that "Allende and September 11 had been a '*golpe*' to our own consciousness". A consciousness that must be restored, starting from what Allende stood

for, and how it had all been silenced, even by those who admired him, but which nevertheless later spoke of him as a “deluded man”.

Ultimately, Guzman’s film speaks of an erosion, of the very origin of this erosion, which was not only the result of imposed oblivion, but also of an oblivion that came from the rejection of hope, of a certain idea of the future that Allende sought for, a rejection sometimes persevered by the same people who imagined and sustained that very dream. However, as the soft voice of Guzman keeps on reminding us throughout the film, “the past does not pass”. We could add: the past does not change and does not set you free if you do not face it. “September 11, 1973”, Guzman reiterates in the documentary, is always present, still eroding Chile’s conscience. As it draws to a close, *Salvador Allende* shows images, static and in motion, of soldiers carrying the President’s body on a stretcher outside the palace, and finally of the ambulance that will take him to the Instituto Médico Legal in Santiago. In this documentary, memories, and documents, as well as a return to places of trauma, are the necessary tools to undertake the work *of and on* the memory of a traumatic phase of Chilean history.

Beyond a sterile opposition between ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction’, with *Post Mortem* Larraín seems to continue and to re-launch – from both a narrative and theoretical point of view – the work carried out by Guzman. *Post Mortem* begins at the point where Guzmán’s film comes to an end, its central sequence shot in the morgue where Allende’s corpse has been brought, in order to allow the spectator/viewer not only to witness the production of the autopsy report, but, also, yet again, to return to the place of trauma, and to the mechanisms that, since 1973, have produced the oblivion of the socialist adventure and acquiescence to the dictatorship. The opening frame introduces us to the chronotope of September 11 at ground level, with the camera situated under a moving tank at the moment the coup was taking place, yet without allowing us to grasp what is happening; making us viewers into, somehow, secondary witnesses. What is happening, the violence, takes place off-camera. Throughout

the whole film, we can hear the sound of violence – the shooting, the noise of passing tanks. Or we see its effects (dead bodies in the morgue); yet we never see it happening, we never witness the act of killing. Thus, from the beginning *Post Mortem* questions the relationship that haunts every image, be it still or moving. That is, the relationship between what is visible, and what is knowable, not only what we can see, but how we see it, and comprehend it.

The protagonist is Mario Cornejo, an incompetent, apparently dull, public servant. His job is to transcribe the autopsy reports pronounced aloud by the medical examiner who performs them, but he lacks the skills of a typist. On the night of the coup, he finds himself in the morgue, where the lifeless bodies of protesters and opponents of the regime are piled up in the halls and corridors, waiting to be hidden. Shortly thereafter, Mario will find himself assisting the doctor during the autopsy of Allende's corpse. The autopsy, reconstructed faithfully by Larraín, reproduces several parts of the original report, but with one substantial 'fictional' difference: the film lacks the internal analysis of the body, because first the doctor's female assistant, and then the doctor, refuse to do it, to de-sacralise the (political) body of the president. Mario also takes no action, although unlike the doctor this is not determined by a personal refusal or strenuous opposition: trivially, as the viewer knows from the beginning of the film, the protagonist lacks the competence of a typist. If the medical apparatus fails to exercise full opposition to the needs of the military, Mario does nothing more than express, succinctly with his presence and his looks, the inexorable process of physical and moral disintegration of the state and of the whole of Chilean society.

Mario's professional incompetence – which only apparently exempts him from a relationship of connivance with those responsible for the coup – ends up conditioning his ability to testify, that is, the possibility of adopting a point of view from which to escape the will of the regime, the concerted manipulation of memory and oblivion by those in power, as Paul Ricoeur (2000) would say. By

adopting not so much a cinematic point of view, but a narrative focus on this kind of inept character, obsessed by his neighbour, a cabaret dancer,¹⁰ the film de-emphasises the charged and sometimes over sentimental narrative of the president's body; or, rather, extends it to the whole social body and to the Chilean consciousness, the same consciousness that in *Salvador Allende* Guzman describes as traumatised.

While Guzmán's entire production expresses the desire to elaborate, on a shared basis, an autobiography of Chile, Larraín affirms the importance of investigating the dictatorial device and the silence that still affects the country, rendered through what some authors have defined as an "aesthetics of banality" (Harvey 2017: 540). It is, thus, that the staged reworking of President Allende's autopsy constitutes the central moment in a broader and more complex autopsy of the nation, which runs through the trilogy, a nation inhabited by living dead (the films also quotes tropes of the horror film genre). As Mark Jenkins (2012: 32) comments, "everyone appears to inhabit a city of the living dead, a place that seemingly could not get grimmer", helped also by the palette of colours utilised: "the film's washed-out colour scheme provides echoes of a zombie movie ... as the coup turns into an endless night of the living dead ... a metaphor for the intellectual stupor and stagnation that Pinochet's dictatorship brought with it" (Delgado 2017: 457).

What happened to Allende's body is like a moral journey, as every ethical aspect begins to slowly decompose throughout the film, as with the body of a zombie, deprived of all consciousness. Everyone was unwittingly involved in this decomposition as a graphic and material consequence of state and army violence. Ultimately, and almost twenty years after the end of the dictatorship, looking back to a past that still haunts the country, *Post Mortem* invites us to look

¹⁰ *Post Mortem*'s plot is more complex than how we are here illustrating, as is the role of the cabaret dancer, relevant also in exposing a gender dimension that we have no space here to analyse: see Tapia 2020.

at the moment of explosion that was September 11 as the beginning of the erosion of human rights and democratic values that characterised Pinochet's regime, as well as Chilean post-conflict culture.

5. By way of concluding

How does a state colonise a disruptive temporality into sovereign chronologies, or into oblivion? What we have been dealing with here is the construction of history and its temporalities once they are eroded from within, and by different discourses, at times more explicit, as in the case of Spain, or not so much subtler, but more ambivalent and less explicit, as in the case of Chile.

Through the Lotmanian perspective we have tried to articulate, a different kind of cultural mapping can emerge, accounting for the ways in which forms of power both regulate and repress conflicts and which the dynamics of memory can be deemed to operate in the wake of a conflict. It is a mapping rendered even more complex by the technological social acceleration we are all witnessing, and by the recent political changes in local, national and global modes of sovereignty and governmentality; by the ever increasing apparent relevance of traditions and memories, and their simultaneous forgetting; by the deep transformation of the norms and normativity that used to define a community, and whose lacerations defined a post-conflict scenario.

Post-conflict situations are always phases of transformation and of changing values, habits, political alliances, and governances within a given society. Sometimes they are explosive moments that can radically change the frameworks and the spatiotemporal organisation of the semiosphere in which they erupt. Yet, they can also be characterised by processes of erosion in which we do not witness a movement towards a transformative development, or, as Lotman says, towards a change as a gradual and continuous shift forward. They rather result in a slow crumbling of the values of a potentially creative memory, which is the result of a collective and conscious working through of

the past. Otherwise, the creative mechanism in which the past serves as a propulsive thrust to design change, is blocked.

Violence and suffering are not necessarily just temporary ruptures, but wounds in the social fabric characterised by tensions, clashes, and negotiations between different temporalities in the context of post-conflict cultures, and with respect to both the victims' and perpetrators' experiences of lived time. Moreover, what is worth investigating further is one of the paradoxes that underlines all reflection on conflict and its cultural filtering: that it belongs to a given culture and a given period, but it is simultaneously exportable, able to inform analysis that can also be used in other contexts. Without thinking of a fixed model of war or post-war, of an ontology, but rather of possible forms that migrate through different cultural manifestations, how can we still detect the forms of post-conflict?

We need to re-engage with the silences and violence residing in the notion of the 'post-conflict', exposing further the contradictions always latent, and often lying, within the term as within the spheres of former and on-going confrontation and struggle. That which is subsequent to or consequent upon, entailed in the 'post-', can only be understood in and by what is veiled by the replays, the deferrals and the slippages of the conflict and its still combative or would-be conciliatory discourses.

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III

**CONFLICT, SPACE AND
THE SEMIOSPHERE**

BORDER, CONFLICT, AND NEGOTIATION: MAYANS IN THE 17th CENTURY, A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

Israel León O'Farrill

Introduction

The Conquest of Petén Itzá in Guatemala took place on March 13, 1697, headed by Martín de Urzúa, governor of Yucatán at the time. However, prior to the conflict, several entries were verified to evangelise the region directed by Franciscan friars who, from the province of San José de Yucatán, raided to bring the Catholic faith and European ways to the population who lived in the lands of Petén and who were free of Spanish rule. In fact, such entries had, in principle, entirely religious purposes; however, the pacification of the region was also sought as it was a space of exclusion where entire communities composed of so-called “montaraces” – Mayan people who had escaped from the haciendas and the tribute – remained free and in constant contact with other communities that had not been conquered yet, such as the Itza', who ruled from the city of Tayasal in the heart of Lake Peten Itza. That territory, a huge wild border between Yucatán and Tayasal, was called "the mountain".

In the process of understanding the symbolic and discursive exchange between such dissimilar worlds (the Western/Christian world of the Franciscans and the Mesoamerican/colonial world of the Itza and other ethnic groups) we can find evidence of agreements and disagreements that will later be integrated into the current discourses of the Itza' and mestizos of the region. Of course, just as Lotman states, “The border of semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic

mechanism. The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces.” (Lotman 2005: 210)

Here, at the so-called “mountain”, numerous exchanges were made in times of ‘peace’ and some others after the conquest of the region. But it also brought confusion and misinterpretation which led to conflict and made negotiation between Mayans and Spaniards difficult. So, from the conception of religion to the government logics, mistakes were made that contributed to the armed conquest of Peten in 1697.

In this chapter I use the concept of semiosphere to establish the differences between ‘us’ and ‘others’, as involved in the process of conquest and colonisation, in a similar way to what Chávez Herrera does in this volume to explain the process of identity construction in the Basque community in what is now Spanish territory. However, I will emphasise the translating nature of the border in the semiosphere, which will facilitate negotiation or, where appropriate, conflict.

1. La Montaña

The history of the Conquest of the Americas is complex, although it has been narrated in simple terms: Hernán Cortés set foot on American soil in 1519 and conquered ‘Mexico’ in 1521. This is the version that has been told, but it is a tricky one, particularly because it doesn’t show the amazing complexity of the process that began in those moments, nor the several ‘conquests’ that took place in the following centuries. Cortés may have conquered Tenochtitlan city and, in consequence, ruled over certain domains; but the conquest and colonisation of America had barely begun. Proof of the above was that, despite several efforts, a lot of territories in the north and south of New Spain persisted unconquered. This was the case of the Petén

region in central Guatemala, the domain of the Itza' people, and its capital Tayasal, which remained sovereign until 1697.

Following this argument, all the cultures that had contact with the new order of things, tried to cope in the best possible manner with the new structures and ideas. In addition, in a very curious phenomenon they continue with their own process of assimilation and interpretation of those elements of the European worldview – just as they had before with their neighbours – and changed everything they needed to in order to continue. Lotman has a very precise idea on the way this process works:

If we look at the historical process as a time trajectory the bifurcation points are those historical moments when the tension between the opposing structural poles reaches a point of highest tension and the whole system leaves the state of equilibrium. At these moments the behavior of individuals and of the masses ceases to be automatically predictable and determinacy recedes to the background. At these moments the movement of history should be pictured not as a trajectory but as a continuum that is potentially capable of resolving itself into any number of variants. These nodal points with diminished predictability are times of revolution or other dramatic historical shifts. The choice which will be realized depends on a complex of chance circumstances, but even more on the self-awareness of the people involved. This is why at such times speech, discourse, propaganda have especially great *historical* significance. (Lotman 1990: 233, our emphasis)

As Lotman said, cultures adopted several strategies to adapt to their present, and to preserve those things that were crucial to maintain identity. The Mayan territories, especially the Yucatan Peninsula, after the Conquest went through the same process but in its own way.

The conquest of the Yucatan province took place between 1526 and 1542 in a slow and harsh course that was stained by its violent and bloody means. The Montejos, father, son and nephew, are in the

group of the most brutal conquistadors in 16th century history. They tried to establish colonial rule in Yucatan by a combination of violence and negotiation with some of the *bataboob* (Mayan chieftains) who wanted to remain lords in their own domains. In this sense, Mathew Restall states that

Origin mythology enabled Maya dynasties to appropriate the vestiges of prestige and power resulting from encounters with the peoples and/or cultures of central and southern México in pre-Conquest times – all with a view to reinforcing a nativist, autochthonous claim or local rule. This ideological principle was reinforced by the Spanish Conquest and the attempt by some elite chibalob to assert status as “noble Maya conquistadors” – Xiu, Pech, and other elites attempted to distance themselves from the Maya masses and to appropriate the Conquest as a way of inverting defeat and maintaining status. (2006: 281)

The Europeans managed to control the northern part of the Peninsula, Campeche, and the Bacalar territory, but at the south, in the Petén region, several communities small and big, were free of colonial dominion. Some had little or no contact with colonial rule; others had certain interactions, mainly commercial and labour, while some others managed to escape from the haciendas and plantations and form little and poor settlements in these territories. Life was hard and many of them eventually returned to their former employers. This region was named La Montaña (the mountain) by the Yucatan authorities even though there are no mountains in that land (Bracamonte 2001: 26). This term alludes to the feral characteristic of the territory and was a synonym for uncivilised. “The spaniards called the inhabitants of la montaña ‘montaraces (mountaniers)’, ‘bárbaros (barbarians)’ and ‘salvajes (savages)’ and they called the fugitives ‘cimarrones (maroon)’ and ‘alzados (rebels)’ because the escape was a rebellious symptom” (Bracamonte 2001: 26). The relationship that the colonial authorities established with this territory

was a particularly tense one: not only was it a feral region, but it symbolised a ‘rebel’ space, the place where the unsubmissive Mayan people fled and established a place where ‘dangerous’ ideas were encouraged and where they performed their ‘pagan rituals’. It was generally out of their reach and control. Ever since the early years of the colonial period there was news of searches conducted by the colonial authorities and frequently headed by Mayan trackers and *caciques* that were richly rewarded, not just in economic benefits, but with social status too. For example, there was a *cacique* named Pablo PaxBolon who between the years 1565 and 1612 made several incursions into the Montaña territory in search of these so-called “rebels” in order to “reduce”¹ them. After he was named Cacique of Acalan Tixchel province in 1565, he took as his own the quest to reduce those rebels and, in doing so, received the favour of the colonial authorities. In fact, in 1575 he married his (probable) daughter Catalina PaxBolon to a Spaniard named Francisco Maldonado, who a few years later tried to reduce that region².

These colonial efforts to reduce the Mountain region were crucial to preserving the economic order on the Peninsula. The so-called ‘rebels’ fled from their haciendas because of the exploitation and the onerous tribute that they had to deliver to the crown. In a letter addressed to the Governor of Yucatan in 1604 by the Mayan authorities of three small towns in the ‘mountain’ called Ychcún, Auataín and Ychbalché, they asked the Governor to let them stay in

¹ According to Okoshi (2018), the term reduction is composed of three ideas: “i) building an orderly space through the policy of congregation, ii) the conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity with the purpose of living in the ‘policía cristiana’ and, finally, iii) developing a language ‘simplified in its succinct rule’ to establish communication with the Mayans. In other words, its objective was to introduce the indigenous people to the ‘civilised’ world through the ‘reduced’ Mayan language and specifically to do so by imposing new European principles on land tenure and life in ‘policía cristiana’” (16).

² The information of PaxBolon and of his entries to reduce that area in those years can be consulted in the General Indias Archive (AGI) under the entry AGI, México, 138.

their own towns and be excused from giving tribute to the crown for twelve years. They also claimed to be Christians and asked for friars to teach their children Christian ways. They said that they fled to the Mountain because:

...they were very harassed by the Spanish traffickers who went to the said town and province, they treated them badly for no reason. And it also seemed to them that it was a great burden to make them pay tribute rigorously to their *encomendero* as to make them go to serve the *tanda* against their will, since they were separated and their people were many leagues from this city. For this reason they went to live in the mountains now³.

This peculiar communication accounts for the complex relationship that some mountainous Mayan communities tried to establish with the colonial authorities: on the one hand, they show their resistance to fully belonging to the colonial order and to complying with the onerous contributions demanded; on the other hand, they request religious service, perhaps to guarantee support for their demands, perhaps out of genuine religious necessity.

There are two ways of understanding this territory. On the one hand, we can say that la Montaña was a frontier between two distinctive semiospheres, Spanish and Mayan. On the other hand, we can picture that territory as an effervescent symbolic space where the semiotic exchange between both semiospheres took place. Several symbols, texts, rituals, and ways of living went from one territory to the other, from one mind to the next, so many of the traditions and

³ Petition of fled Indians to the governor for tax concessions and reporting the reasons for their flight. August 4, 1604. AGI, México, 138, f.f. 1r- 3r. In Solis and Peniche 1996: 27-28. The *tanda* was a weekly labour assigned by a judge in favour of a landlord which was a non-salaried work; *encomienda* was an economic system created by the Spanish crown in the Americas to benefit the conquistadors with the labour and personal services of an indigenous group gathered around him; in return, the *encomendero* protected and evangelised the group. *Encomiendas* were supposed to be inherited by the *encomendero's* sons, but after the New Laws instated in 1542, once the *encomendero* died, the *encomienda* expired and was replaced by the *repartimientos*.

meanings were kept, if not untouched, pretty much, in essence, the same. Of course, some of the procedures, techniques, and materials – such as machetes, axes; some seeds and fruits – travelled with this people to the Montaña. In addition, some symbols and oral memories travelled back to the colonial territories, so knowledge and meaning spread and was therefore persevered.

2. Boundary as a semiotic category

Juri Lotman states in *Universe of the Mind* that “One of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the boundary, and the boundary can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form. This space is ‘ours’, ‘my own’, it is ‘cultured’, ‘safe’, ‘harmoniously organised’, and so on. In contrast ‘their space’ is ‘other’, ‘hostile’, ‘dangerous’, ‘chaotic’” (Lotman 1990: 131). According to the latter view, boundary as a semiotic category has polysemic meanings. It alludes to the limit between us and them, those things that define one culture as different from another; thus, it has identity implications. In addition, it indicates political frontiers, as with the physical border between countries, nations, and regions (for instance, between the European Union and Asia) that are established both symbolically and physically with walls, fences, barriers, controls, and all sorts of limitations. It is frequently accompanied by several messages and symbols in printed posters and other formats that emphasise the limits. Both meanings interest me because in the la Montaña region both things mattered. Colonial authorities had a clear idea where this region had been established geographically and understood the symbolic implications that it had. The Mayan people also knew both ideas.

To Lotman’s semiosphere theory, the concept of boundary, accompanied by the concept of the periphery, is crucial because

On the periphery – and the further one goes from the center, the more noticeable this becomes – the relationship between semiotic

practice and the norms imposed on it becomes ever more strained. Texts generated in accordance with these norms hang in the air, without any real semiotic context; while organic creations, born of the actual semiotic milieu, come into conflict with the artificial norms. This is the area of semiotic dynamism. (Lotman 1990: 134)

So, in accordance with this, semiotic movement increases in this area of the semiosphere since the norms that regulate semiotic sense are created and have meaning in the nuclear part, while in contrast, in the periphery, just alongside the boundary, these norms lose meaning not just because this space is far from the core, but because it is constantly in contact with the boundaries of other semiospheres. That, as Lotman said, enables dynamism and tends to accelerate change.

According to Daniele Monticelli, “boundary can also be imagined as the multidimensional border space that Lotman calls ‘periphery’”, and I especially agree with the idea that it is “an instrument of indifferentiation between different semiotic spaces – something in between that does not belong to either of the two spaces, or belongs to both of them at the same time” (Monticelli 2020: 430). Yes, boundaries and periphery can be seen as synonyms, depending on the way we picture them in a given analysis. Having said this, I agree with Monticelli (2020: 429) when he affirms that such boundaries or peripheries will be assigned by the researcher who sees the given historical time from a distance, and that the said differentiation must start from an epistemological and research proposal.

So, in accordance with this, I established at this point that boundaries and peripheries can be symbolic or physical, or both, and that they were structured in terms of the European tradition, one that emphasises the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘known’ and the ‘unknown’, the ‘civilised’ and the ‘uncivilised’, the ‘Christian’ and the ‘pagan’. Just as Tzvetan Todorov describes as the first impression of Christopher Columbus of the inhabitants he encounters in his expeditions to the new world:

The first mention of the Indians is meaningful: “Presently they saw naked people” (11.10.1492). The event is true enough; it is nonetheless revealing that the first characteristic of these people to strike Columbus is the absence of clothes, which in their turn symbolize culture (whence Columbus’s interest in people wearing clothes, who might relate more closely to what is known of the Great Khan; he is somewhat disappointed to have found nothing but savages). (Todorov 1984: 34)

In fact, this was precisely the meaning that this boundary had for the colonial authorities, the limit between ‘us’ and ‘them’. But we must also check some other interpretations of the boundary, one or several, both symbolically and physically, that the Mayan people conceive and lived before and after colonial rule. Boundaries were conceived in at least two different ways. First, as a separation between communities; second, as a separation between the sacred place, from the point of view and belief of the community, and those places that were not. And in turn, the demarcation between both spaces. According to Frühsorge (2015), there are several uses of *stelae* (monuments with inscriptions) and other monoliths to mark sacred places. Frequently, such sculptures held within them entities and forces, sometimes deities such as spirits; sometimes these were ancestral. In consequence, these stones have tremendous importance as protection devices as well as identity objects. They separate ‘us’ from ‘them’, not just in the human, but also in the spirit, realm. *Mojones* stones (stones that are placed purposely to mark a limit or border) are a very good example, even today:

In this context the demarcation of the boundary of the community’s territory became a very important act. It is very likely that whenever a new *mojon* had to be placed, oral traditions were cited to legitimize this act. In some cases traditional rituals might have been performed, to present the boundaries as part of a divine order, as it had been done in pre-Hispanic times. (Frühsorge 2015: 179)

Of course, we need to emphasise that these stones and the places they separate are inhabited by those entities, so a ritual relationship is established from the moment they are placed there. The stones and the relationship must be maintained carefully. Frühsorge gives us some examples of this concept:

Apart from the rituals surrounding the sacred chests community boundaries are also marked and protected through short pilgrimages of religious dignitaries which usually include sacred sites on four mountains surrounding the community. These mountains symbolize both the cardinal directions in the traditional world-view and the boundaries of the sacred territory of the community. Each of these places is considered the dwelling place of a deity or protector spirit which is venerated and nourished by the members of the religious hierarchies through prayers and sacrifices. (Frühsorge 2015: 180-181).

On the other hand, Lotman in his essay “On the Metalanguage of Typological Descriptions of Culture”, explains the way some boundaries between concepts such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, in socio-cultural terms, also in terms of ethnic groups, tend to be “mythologized”. He says, for instance, that the

A nomadic people living ‘by the helmet’ (Polovtstans of the Lay of Prince Igor’s Campaign) are for ‘us’ at the same time ‘children of the devil’. They are protected by pagan gods (Slavic, but with an unorganized cult) Div, Kama, Zlja. The idols with an organized cult (Dazd’bog, Veles) belong to the ‘internal’ world and therefore are not opposed to the Christian pantheon. (Lotman 1975: 109)

So, as we can see, it is remarkable the way boundaries and their meanings tend to change and adapt to the time they are interpreted, no matter if we are talking about the pre-Columbian past or the colonial period.

3. Resistance

Indigenous resistance in general, and Mayan resistance in particular, have been widely studied, especially those moments of open conflict such as indigenous rebellions, like the one Jacinto Canek led in 1761 against colonial rule in the Yucatan peninsula; or far-reaching armed revolts such as the so-called Yucatan Caste War which kept Mayan communities on a war footing in a good part of the peninsula and northern Guatemala for more than 50 years. I refer readers to the interesting studies by Bracamonte (2001, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2010), by Bracamonte and Solís (2005), by Valverde (2002, 2007), by Mario Humberto Ruz (1998, 1999, 2019) and by León (2018a, 2020) where I give an account of the complex processes of symbolic continuity after the conquest of Petén Itza' in 1697 in the figure of the Canek, lords of the Itza', going through the rebellion of Jacinto Canek and his existence, up to the present, that is, the representation of the Canek symbol-text as a fundamental banner in resistance movements in the Mayan region of the peninsula as well as in the Peten region.

In all this research, the liminal space is present as a constant, as a fundamental place of formation and conjugation of resistance, both armed and symbolic. As Solís and Peniche keenly point out,

The Maya of Yucatan used a wide variety of forms of resistance that adapted to the circumstances and that included rebellion, conspiracies, flight, whether individual, family or group, the threat of uprising, the use of legal resources Spanish bureaucracy and the management of alliances with Spanish groups in domination. To a large extent, the Mayan resistance managed to impose strong conditions on the colonizers in Yucatan that manifested themselves throughout the colonial regime as true Mayan spaces of autonomy. (Solís and Peniche 1996: xxiv)

Of course, the resistance arises from the moment of the encounter with the other, a logical reaction based on the awareness of the

existence of that otherness. It is the construction of one's own space, in front of the other's and the firmness with which both are supported. This does not mean that the established borders do not consider negotiations; however, the quality of these negotiations will depend on understanding what the behaviour of both groups will be. It seems obvious, but in the several conquests in America the negotiation came through weapons and violence to later move on to the imposition of the European system of thought, which entails a paradigm shift. As Federico Navarrete, a Mexican Conquest historian states,

... the adoption of the Catholic religion implied a radical transformation of very diverse aspects of what today we would call indigenous culture: it included modifications in the pattern of settlement and in the forms of production, in the political and social organization, in the family structure, in the bodily and sexual behaviors and in the moral quality of the indigenous people. The idea was that the indigenous people would not only change their religion but would also adopt the way of life of European Christians. (Navarrete 2019: 19-21)

As we observe in the previous quote, the imposition of the new model not only implied a new religion or the appointment of new authorities; it was about the insertion of the Americas in a new world system centred on the Western Christian model of thought and the economic model of extraction, accumulation and trade at an international level that generated, in turn, the idea of race as a sign of the relationships of otherness that began to take shape. Anibal Quijano, a strong defender of decoloniality, places it in these terms:

America was established as the first space/time of a new pattern of power with a global vocation and, in this way and for that reason, as the first identity of modernity. Two historical processes converged and were associated in the production of said space/time and were established as the two fundamental axes of the new

pattern of power. On the one hand, the codification of the differences between the conquerors and the conquered in the idea of race, that is, a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority with respect to the others. This idea was assumed by the conquerors as the main constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest imposed. On that basis, consequently, the population of America, and of the world later, was classified in said new pattern of power. On the other hand, the articulation of all the historical forms of control of work, its resources, and its products, around capital and the world market (2019: 226).

Therefore, all structures had to change, not only those under the domain of the symbolic through religious and political thought, but also depending on the geographical space. In the complex political system that existed upon the arrival of the Europeans, the *Halach Uinic* (supreme *batab*), a kind of governor of a *cúuchcabal* (province), was contemplated by the *batab*, who in turn had a *batabil* under their control (lordship) that integrated several *cah* (village). This organisation entailed a natural dispersion of these towns, something that did not suit the interests of the Europeans during the constitution of the colony in Yucatan. Tsubasa Okoshi, specialist in colonial Mayan studies, when analysing the need to integrate the Mayans into the new towns by the Spanish authorities, stresses the importance of

... altering the physical space where the indigenous peoples lived in the Spanish style, and incorporating their towns into the road network, the Hispanic colonizers tried to create a space where the presence of civilization, the Catholic faith and humanity would stand out. For them, this very space was going to guarantee their administration over the indigenous population; Quite the opposite of this scheme, symbolized by the “mountain”, it was related to “the pagan, the rustic and the barbaric”. (Okoshi 2018: 20-21)

So, to accomplished that, many communities would be reorganised around the new settlements created by the Europeans to serve the economic and political interests of the crown. For this, and in accordance with the new laws enacted in Spain in 1552, all the communities had to be 'reduced', as we have seen.

It is evident that such movements generated discontent in the population due to the uprooting that they entailed. These forced displacements compelled the communities to abandon not only their way of life, but also their sacred places, where they communicated with their deities and ancestors. Therefore, the resistance did not wait, as we can see by the rebellion of the Maya of the eastern sector (in 1527) which was focused in Valladolid and which would not be crushed until 1547 (Okoshi 2018: 16).

According to this, resistance acquires elements of identity creation supported by the preservation of culture and its defense through armed movements or practices of daily life. Resistance is an active process in which an oppressed group seeks to have a leading role in the development of its own history, even when this is detrimental to or in line with the plan of the oppressor group. As Mario Humberto Ruz maintains, the expression of this resistance was diverse and dynamic, and so he proposes three great expressions in which it unfolded: the daily face, the brave (violent resistance), and the sacred. The foregoing responds to the fact that the Maya "live in history, create, and recreate it through their individual and collective consciousness which, by making them feel different, collaborates in the re-elaboration of their identity. His word becomes, thus, an instrument of struggle insofar as he assumes, codifying it, his own historical project" (Ruz 1998: 88).

4. Conflict and negotiation

There are numerous languages, symbols, and texts within the semiosphere that are in constant movement, translating each other and generating information. "The structure of the semiosphere is

asymmetrical. Asymmetry finds expression in the currents of internal translations with which the whole density of the semiosphere is permeated.... Asymmetry is apparent in the relationship between the centre of the semiosphere and its periphery” (Lotman 1990: 127). In this process, the culture system achieves constant change to give it continuity in the present. As we have said, the semiosphere, or if preferred, culture in general, is in contact with other semiospheres, with other cultures. It receives constant influences from them across the border, they pass into the interior of the semiosphere via the peripheries (which usually function as translation mechanisms) and are integrated in the nucleus or rejected. In this process of ‘semiotic negotiation’, the culture can assume symbols and texts from other cultures and can, in turn, share its own elements with the other.

Something fundamental derives from this process: the meta-description or self-description. As Lotman states:

The highest form and final act of a semiotic system’s structural organization is when it describes itself. This is the stage when grammars are written, customs and laws codified. When this happens, however, the system gains the advantage of greater structural organization, but loses its inner reserves of indeterminacy which provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development. (Lotman 1990: 128)

In this process of self-description affected by translation, curious things happen. Symbolic aspects that were at some point in the nuclear zone move to the periphery and some other peripheral aspects move towards the core, so that elements that might seem ordinary before the arrival of the conquest and colonisation become crucial later. In turn, exogenous elements, as we have seen, will be used by survivors to remain, translating them from their own world-view. This is a phenomenon that Lotman exemplifies as follows:

An analogy from another sphere is the activity of semiotic processes during the European Middle Ages in those areas where the

Christianization of 'barbarians' did not eradicate popular pagan cults, but merely covered them with its official mantle: we think of such areas as the inaccessible Pyrenees and Alps or the forests and swamps where the Saxons and Thuringians lived. This was the soil that later produced 'popular Christianity', heresies, and eventually the Reformation.... The upsurge of semiotic activity, which a situation like this stimulates, leads to an accelerated 'maturing' of the peripheral centres; metalanguages are born which in their turn claim to be universal metalanguages for the whole semiosphere. The history of culture provides many examples of such rivalries. And in fact the attentive historian of culture will find in each synchronic section not one system of canonized norms, but a paradigm of competing systems. (Lotman 1990: 135)

A similar process took place with the evangelisation of America in general and in that of the Mayan area. The symbols and meanings of Christianity were adapted to ancient religious practices and some, apparently untouched, were adopted by the Maya so that new religious perspectives developed. It is fair to say that negotiation brings with it significant changes, that is, the adoption of new practices, rituals and symbols that are not always different from the previous ones. This is why, for example, different deprecations are added to the previous rituals, the icons changed, and dates adapted; at the same time, dances, performances, and vernacular music were added to the Christian rituals. Therefore, negotiation should not be understood only as a concept related to political action, but with each of the activities of daily life.

On the other hand, when the change is unfavorable for the culture, or excessive, a moment of explosive change arises, which according to Lotman's *Culture and Explosion* (2009), tends to be concomitant with gradual change:

All explosive dynamic processes occur via a dynamically complex dialogue with stabilising mechanisms. We must not be deceived by the fact that in historical reality they appear to be enemies striving

for the full destruction of the other pole. Any such destruction would be fatal to culture but, luckily, it is not feasible. Even when people are strongly convinced that they are putting into practice some kind of ideal theory the practical sphere also includes within itself opposing tendencies: they may adopt abnormal forms but they cannot be destroyed (Lotman 2009: 7).

In this sense, the system withdraws and tries to retake some of its main elements to recover meaning. This does not necessarily mean that culture seeks a return to the past as it happened (since it is debatable that said past is fully understood in the present), nor does it imply that to do so, it does not resort to issues of the present. As Mario Humberto Ruz states when talking about the Mayan resistance phenomena:

Except for some movements registered in the initial moments, the documentation does not seem to point to the fact that the Mayans fought for a return to the conditions prior to the European invasion (conditions, let us remember, that were not particularly democratic), but rather to keep within 'tolerable' limits the milestones of exploitation and submission, including religious ones (Ruz 2019: 355).

Examples of the above abound. In his 1761 rebellion in the town of Cisteil, Jacinto Canek performed numerous rituals to convince his followers. As we can see in one of the documents relating to the rebellion of Canek store in the General Archive of the Indies, he made ointments with pumpkin juice to raise the dead in battle and wore the mantle and crown of the Virgin of Remedies, taken from the town chapel, to crown himself King Jacinto Uc de los Santos Chichán Moctezuma Canek. He said

that his head had been crowned with thorns, his back whipped and his lame feet where they dragged him through Pilate's house. [And] that he had suffered all this to redeem them and that he had

just come from the town of Canek, which was to the south⁴, in a strange region, and that he ate nothing of meat or butter, more than bread, eggs, chili peppers, and boiled or parboiled beans⁵.

As seen in this quotation, the Christian elements were superimposed on the pre-Hispanic, such as the concept of the man-God⁶, a complex concept that goes long into the Postclassic time among Toltec and Mayan groups, implying that the lord of some groups assumes the role of their Patronus deity in order to support the rebel's discourse in front of his community, which had already been Christianised but which conserved its own cultural elements. Mario Humberto Ruz offers us other examples:

... the Virgin Mary, who in Cozumel in 1520 faced the Mayan goddess Ixchel, could show herself two centuries later as a leader in the struggle of the Tzeltals and Tzotzils who rebelled in Chiapas in 1712 against Spanish rule. Likewise, with the passage of time, Mayan religious specialists chose to start the ancient rituals with an invocation to the Holy Trinity or to certain saints, in order to ensure the benevolence of a greater number of entities considered thaumaturgical or protectors, while Groups such as the K'iché of Suchitepéquez decided to tie up the bones of their ancestors with the Christian cross that reigned in the church. The company was to endure, and since there were no written rules for this, either in the old or in the new tradition, they would have to be inventing and recreating over and over again. (Ruz 2019: 353-355)

The foregoing is proof that the processes of conflict and negotiation are complex since they intersperse elements of change and

⁴ The Peten region, specifically Tayasal, the capital of the itza', where the Canek dynasty ruled until their conquest in 1697.

⁵ AGI, México, 3050. Declaration of Pedro Chan of Cisteil, Mérida 5 a 7 de enero de 1762, ff. 833r-853v, in Bracamonte and Solís, 2005: 198.

⁶ I refer readers to the text where I analyse this topic: León 2018b; also, Bracamonte 2004. Both texts are based on the 'man-God' concept developed by Alfredo López Austin (1998).

continuity. This does not mean that communities or their movements lose identity or authenticity. It is logical that there were exchange and translation between the different semiospheres that built the colonial history of these Mayan territories, which not only allowed the adaptation of cultures to the subsequent moments of change that they have experienced to this day, but also integrated the identity discourse, which gives them cohesion and permanence.

5. Final considerations

As we have seen, the border is a fundamental component of the symbolic system of culture, both in its symbolic aspect and in its tangible expression as geographical delimitation. Throughout this text, I have given an account of the construction of the other since the violent irruption of Europeans and the imposition of their system and world in the Mayan region and the way in which the conquered and later colonised communities managed to survive, both socially and culturally. The logical consequences of such an encounter and imposition were resistance, conflict, and negotiation in a constant sway that marked the dialogue between the Mayan communities and colonial society. Exchange, influence, acceptance, and resistance were constant in the centuries that followed European domination, aspects that survive to this day. To understand this process, I used Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere and its components: the periphery, the nucleus and, mainly, the border, a space that is a ferment of cultural changes and symbolic exchange.

The Maya and their culture have survived to date through an intricate combination of silent and armed resistance, adaptation, and negotiation that has formed the culture we find today, which preserves traditions, language, memory, and history, and which, regardless of the constant aggression of power, economic interests, scientific groups, and the constant bombardment of Western thought, keeps living through its own epistemology and worldview.

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DEMARCATING THE SELF IN BASQUE CULTURE

Eduardo Chávez Herrera

Introduction

Different descriptive accounts have been offered of the Basques. Some emphasise that they were the first inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, some emphasise the peculiarities of their DNA, and some emphasise that the Basque language is the most ancient language in Europe. These discourses, depending on the point of view of the interlocutor, can function as cultural self-descriptions or ‘hetero-descriptions’.

Basque culture is a small culture which has resorted to multiple resources in order to survive. This need for survival has bolstered a clear demarcation of its semiotic space between the inner and the outer, accomplished by an inherent establishment of boundaries. In this way, Basque culture, as any other culture, has striven to enact what Lotman called metalanguages of description, i.e. texts and metalanguages that determine the boundaries of culture.

The process of establishing boundaries has been complex and has produced a conflict between two main factions: one that regards itself as a people and a nation with a unique language and culture aiming at independence, and another that sees the Basque Country as integral to Spain’s development as a unitary nation-state. This faction has developed as a consequence of the evolution of elite interests, at times in conflict with Madrid and at times not. The so-called ‘Basque conflict’ was a political conflict in which several actors from the Basque National Liberation Movement sought the Basque Country’s formal independence. During this 50-year conflict, the separatist organisation Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) killed 840

people, wounded 2,500 and kidnapped 80. In opposition to ETA, who were seeking independence of the Basque Country from Spain and France, moderate nationalists pursued the goal of self-determination or the 'right to decide' (Whitfield 2015).

This chapter aims to bridge cultural semiotics and the study of deixis by arguing that the usage of deixis in Basque culture can be an instance of self-description insofar as it embodies an ideal self-model developed within Basque nationalist culture. To make this argument, I will analyse a number of examples taken from the Basque linguistic landscape as well as from everyday objects of consumption that show how deixis, well beyond the pragmatics of the primary modelling system (using Lotmanian terminology), functions as an identity marker.

This chapter is divided into five parts. In part one, I provide an overview of Basque culture by focusing on its particularities as a culture surrounded by two larger states, stressing its particular linguistic situation. In the second part of this chapter, I show the context of the 'Basque conflict' and the main discourses enacted by Basque nationalists. The third part accounts for the theoretical approach of this chapter by examining the notion of self-description, as developed by Juri M. Lotman. In the fourth part, the notion of deixis in language is discussed, as well as concrete aspects of deixis in the Basque language. I analyse some examples from the Basque linguistic landscape that show the functioning of spatial, symbolic and homeland deixis in Basque culture. Finally, the discussion is outlined and the conclusions of the chapter are provided.

1. Basque culture

Basque culture is a small culture in the midst of two former colonial European states: Spain and France. The Spanish side, which is usually referred as Hegoalde in Basque ('southern side'), is divided into two autonomous communities: Navarre (Nafarroa), which is

historically considered part of the larger Basque Country, and the Basque autonomous community (Euskadi), which is formed by the provinces of Gipuzkoa, Araba and Bizkaia. Yet, Navarre's geographical proximity to the central Spanish territory moves it away from its denominated Basque identity.

The French side (Iparralde, 'northern side') is formed by the provinces of Behe Nafarroa (Low Navarre), Xiberoa and Lapurdi. These territories altogether compose a collective symbolic entity known as Euskal Herria (literally, the 'Country of Euskera').

Basque is probably the oldest language spoken in Europe and itself makes up one of the three European linguistic families, alongside the Indo-European and the Finno-Ugric families. It is an isolated language with no known relationship to any other existing language. Along with other languages spoken in Spain, such as Galician, Catalan and Aranese, Basque was banned by Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975). The Franco regime's aggressive Spanish-only language policy created a climate of repression for speakers of other languages and resulted in a significant decrease in native speakers.

In France, Basque holds the status of a regional language, as in the case of other languages spoken in this country, such as Occitan, Breton, Catalan or Corsican. Consequently, the use of Basque is not promoted by the French government, and it is barely used as a teaching medium in public schools. Apart from some regional media allocating a few spaces to Basque-language news, there are no government-oriented policies encouraging the use of regional languages in France whatsoever.

For several years diglossia was considered the main sociolinguistic phenomenon in the Basque Country. For Schiffman "diglossic language situations are ... described as consisting of two (or more) varieties that coexist in a speech community; the domains of linguistic behaviour are parcelled out in a kind of complementary distribution" (Schiffman 1997: 205). However, recent developments in the revitalisation of Basque have contributed to a process of moving

away from diglossia. A diglossic situation took place between Spanish and Basque (and French in the northern Basque Country). Yet, linguistic normalisation (Leonet, Cenoz, Gorter 2017), which aimed to extend the use of Basque to formal and informal registers, as well as to all functions of society (in oral and written interactions), has been successful. Therefore, Basque can now be used in all sectors (media, institutions, businesses and so forth), and it is a language of instruction for study at all levels.

A small culture, with a small language, has put much effort into developing different strategies to foster its own survival and demarcate itself from others. Accordingly, Basque culture has generated multiple self-descriptions in the form of discourses about an ‘ideal Basque nation’, discourses that are primarily grounded on nationalist components.

2. The ‘Basque conflict’

The so-called ‘Basque conflict’ dominated the Basque and Spanish political arena for over 50 years and had both political and military dimensions for all the actors involved. Prior to the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, the conflict between the Spanish government and the Basque National Liberation Movement was the last armed conflict in Europe.

As the main aim of this paper is to explicate how a self-model in Basque culture is constructed, I conceptualise Basque nationalism as a semiosphere, distinguishing different sub-spheres according to its boundaries. This semiosphere is located within the Basque political semiosphere, which is simultaneously located within the general Basque semiosphere.

There were three main actors involved in the Basque conflict, which have to do with the notion of personality in the semiosphere. As Lotman (2000: 138) writes, “the boundary of the personality is a semiotic boundary”. Personality is thus identified in this semiotic space with a collectivity, and the space where a codification system

is a simple person could, in some other system, be a space where several semiotic subjects are in conflict.

The most relevant subject in the Basque conflict is Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, ETA, (Basqueland and Freedom). ETA was the main Basque National Liberation Movement organisation (MLNV in Spanish). Originally founded in 1959 by students who were for a time affiliated with the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV), it evolved from a group promoting traditional Basque culture into a paramilitary group whose main aim was to gain independence for what they called the Greater Basque Country from a Marxist–Leninist perspective. As such, it began in 1952 as a student discussion group at Deusto University in Bilbao, an offshoot of the EAJ-PNV's youth group EGIN ('to do'), originally called EKIN ('to do' or 'to take action'). After a short-lived attempt to join forces with the EAJ-PNV, EKIN branched off and, on July 31, 1959 the group reconstituted itself as ETA. ETA thus emerged as a new organisation that became the vanguard of an alternative nationalism to that embodied by the EAJ-PNV (Zabalo 2008).

ETA's first terrorist actions were conducted in 1963 and continued for almost 50 years; the last one was an attempted execution on April 9, 2011. ETA's early years were characterised by lengthy ideological discussions, numerous splits, as well as a gradual escalation of sabotage, propaganda and armed action before the group claimed its first victim in 1968. Even though Spanish security forces came down hard on ETA from the very beginning, the group drew legitimacy from the severity of Franco's response. Furthermore, the group's popularity was boosted by the assassination of Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, Franco's prime minister, in 1973. In fact, ETA was the most audacious force in opposition to the Franco regime.

On October 20, 2011, ETA announced the definitive cessation of its armed activity, concluding a 43-year armed campaign that sought the independence of the Basque Country. Finally, ETA put an end to its political activity on May 2, 2018, in a political event held in Bayonne, France.

Figure 1.



The Basque conflict went beyond the notion of a political conflict insofar as it put to the fore the existing cultural conflict between border cultures: Basque and Spanish/French cultures.

A second political actor in this conflict is found in the political organisations that are ideologically akin to Basque nationalism. They comprise several left-wing organisations that have often been pigeonholed as part of the *ezker abertzalea* ('nationalist left'). Amongst the groups that are typically considered members of this independence movement, there is the Euskal Herria Bildu ('Gathering the Basque Country') political coalition, the Ernai ('Alert') nationalist youth organisation, the Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak (LAB; 'Nationalist Workers Committees') labour union, and the association of political prisoners' family members Etxerat ('Back Home').

The third political actor of this conflict is linked to Basque nationalist parties that share similar goals to those of ETA, namely independence, but openly reject the use of violence. These parties are Eusko Alkartasuna ('Basque Unity'), Aralar (within the EH Bildu coalition until its dissolution in 2017) and, in the French Basque country, Abertzaleen Batasuna ('Patriot's Unity'). Moreover, there

are a number of left-wing parties, such as Ezker Batua ('United Left') as well as some sectors of the ruling Basque Nationalist Party that also support self-determination but do not really favour independence from Spain.

3. Self-description

The notion of self-description, as Salupere (2015) and Madisson (2016) have pointed out, was borrowed by Lotman from cybernetics and from his contacts with cyberneticians. Self-description, or "self-modelling texts" (*avtomodeliruiushchie teksty*) (Lotman 1998: 90), is a notion that was present in Lotman's work from the 1970s, the earliest text being published in 1971 (Lotman (1998) [1971]; Lotman, Uspenskij (1978) [1971]; Lotman (1979); Lotman, Uspenskij 1984 [1977]; Lotman (2005) [1984]). He was still writing about self-description in his final writings (Lotman 1990; Lotman 1998 [1993]; Lotman 2009 [1992]).

In this manner, Lotman observed that in the core of the semiospheres, some sections aspiring to self-description are prone to become rigid, inflexible and self-regulating. For him, the self-description stage is "a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere" (Lotman 1990: 128). Moreover, self-description can be structured either as a set of norms (grammar) or as a group of exemplary texts (Lotman 1998: 88). As Madisson (2016) maintains, self-description is a means to link different levels of the semiosphere.

Not only are self-descriptions regarded as the most complex manifestation of a culture's organisation, they are also based on autocommunication, another semiospherical process which implies dialogue with oneself (Lotman 2000). Human beings are also connected with the same mechanisms, since in order to determine their identities, they need to describe themselves (be they persons, cultures or institutions). Hence, the main function of self-descriptive processes is the unification and fixation of cultural boundaries.

In Lotman's approach, the most universal feature of human cultures is precisely this need for self-description. In fact, every culture has its own specific means for doing this, that is to say, its languages of description. These descriptive languages facilitate cultural communication by contributing to the preservation of cultural experience and to the modelisation of cultural memory. Lotman and Uspenskij (1978) locate the concept of self-description on the meta-level of culture; that is, it is a culture's "ideal self-portrait" (Lotman 2000: 129) expressed in normative texts: grammars, chronicles, textbooks, critical works, etc. This has to do with the fact that such texts tend to describe the norm and ignore cultural 'aberrations'; in this self-description, culture is presented as more organised, systemic and logical than it really is. Consequently, the main goal of the typological description of cultures is to create "a grammar of cultural languages" (Lotman 1977: 216) that can be used to offer comparative studies of cultural phenomena and to simultaneously uncover normative discourses and ideologies.

Lotman notes that the individual – the 'own' – can emerge in two ways: 1) through differentiation of some whole into autonomous elements, or 2) through the integration of independent elements into a whole of a higher order (Lotman 1990: 32). While he regards the latter as more characteristic to culture, in view of self-bounding (culture's differentiation of itself from non-culture or alien culture, or the world or humanity in general), we can see both processes at work in cultural self-modelling (Salupere 2022).

Lotman (1998) distinguished three types of self-descriptions, or cultural self-model: 1) models whose main aim is maximum similarity to the existing culture; 2) models that differ from current cultural practices and may have even been conceived to change those practices; 3) models that exist and function as an ideal cultural self-consciousness, but separately from culture itself and without being oriented towards it (Lotman 1998: 91). The development of one self-model represents, to Lotman, the creativity level of a culture.

In this paper, I will be referring to the second type of self-model, that is to say an idealised self-model that emerged within Basque nationalist culture.

3.1. SELF-DESCRIPTION IN BASQUE NATIONALIST CULTURE

Self-description provides centralisation and hierarchisation to the semiosphere insofar as one of its languages or structures occupies the centre and starts to function as a metalanguage. In this manner, one of these metalanguages shifts towards an idealised position (Lotman 2000). Within the Basque nationalist semiosphere it is possible to trace back the origins of Basque nationalism to the end of the nineteenth century, when the politician and writer Sabino Arana founded the Basque Nationalist Party. Arana succeeded in constructing a traditionalist political movement by enacting an extremely effective discourse characterised by three main distinctive features: 1) frenzied opposition to socialism, 2) deeply rooted Catholic values, and 3) an essentialist and racial conceptualisation of an imaginary Basque nation in which Basques were depicted as victims suffering under the yoke of the Spanish crown and government (Douglass 2004).

Alonso Aldama (2008) maintains that the efficacy of Basque nationalist discourse lies in the ‘bricolage’ process it carries out – bricolage is understood here in Lévi-Strauss’ sense (Lévi-Strauss 1962) of drawing on multiple available bits and pieces of pre-constructed discourses. These discourses are in a continuous process of reconstruction with the main aim of perpetuating themselves.

Thereby, Basque nationalism resorted to several historical episodes in order to enact a self-descriptive model that aims to convey an ideal imagination of a motherland: the Basque people as the first inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula (Caro Baroja 1971), the presumed independence of Basques in Roman times (Apodaka Ostaiakoetxea 2018), the unknown origin of the Basque language (Urla 2012), the existence of the Kingdom of Navarre, or the existence of

fueros, ancient legal and administrative agreements that governed each of the Basque territories prior to their incorporation into the Spanish crown. These *fueros* were idealised by a great part of the Basque population in the nineteenth century and were openly glorified in traditional literature (de Pablo 2015). They came to an end in 1876 after the Second Carlist War (the Carlistas were an absolutist and conservative faction agglutinating a considerable part of discontent with the situation provoked by industrialisation and the state's growing centralism), and today form the basis for the modern autonomic system of the Basque Autonomous Community.

In this way, Basque nationalism in the first part of the twentieth century enacted a cultural self-model based on the concept of this racial conceptualisation of a Basque nation, whose aim was to demarcate the boundaries of the interior and exterior. Nonetheless, this conception of nation was problematic, since it entailed membership validation through racial or ethnic features (Zabalo 2008), something that became impossible to prove due to the large waves of immigrants from other parts of Spain to the Basque Country. In addition, the use of race by the Nazi regime delegitimised its use as a key concept within Basque nationalism.

This is how language superseded race as the essential element of the Basque nation. Language contributed to the unification of the Basque cultural space. Conceptualising language as the main component of Basque nationalism was accomplished through a wide-ranging movement for the recovery of the language (which was banned by Franco's dictatorship) through clandestine schools, in which classes for children and adults were taught in Basque. Under the dictatorship's policies, Basque names in civil registries and other official documents had to be translated into Spanish, new-born children could not be given Basque names and all the inscriptions in Basque were removed from public spaces (Järlehed 2020).

Basque nationalism thus rejected the older racial and religious groundings that the Basque Nationalist Party had provided to Basque identity. This process was carried out by a new movement led by

younger generations, which would give rise to left-wing nationalism (de Pablo 2015). The main representative of this process was ETA. As a matter of fact, ETA's political platform, formed at their first assembly in Bayonne, France, in 1962, called for historical regenerationism, viewing Basque history as a process of nation-building. ETA then established language revival as one of the main fronts of the struggle towards national liberation. ETA argued for a treatment of Basque identity grounded on language. As Urla (2012) argues, by putting to the fore the Basque language as the main component of Basqueness, ETA was giving an indexical treatment insofar as language directly becomes associated with identity. It becomes, in fact, its main identity marker. This was in clear opposition to the one maintained by the Basque Nationalist Party, which was defined in terms of ethnicity (Wieviorka 2004).

The discourse of language as the key element of Basqueness became the metalanguage of this semiotic space inasmuch as it strived to extend its norms over the whole space. It actually evolved into the official discourse after the 1982 linguistic normalisation law (Art. 10.1) and the successful process of revitalisation of the language which began in the 1980s (Järlehed 2015). As Lotman points out: “whether we have in mind language, politics, or culture, the mechanism is the same: one part of the semiosphere ... in the process of self-description creates its own grammar ... then it strives to extend these norms over the whole semiosphere” (Lotman 2000: 128).

After the dissolution of ETA (a process that started in late 2011, as shown above), a series of discourses based on ‘sentiment’ – i.e. the sentiment of feeling Basque – has been floating around this nationalist semiotic space. Such discourses have been stirred by the Basque government itself promoting aggressive campaigns designed to attract massive tourism to the Basque Country, as well as a process of nation branding (Järlehed 2020) in which the government invests large amounts of money in order to design new logos, slogans and a corporate image for the Basque region. The core of these discourses on ‘sentiment’ is based on the stimulation of stereotypes

and national representations of the Basque Country as new aspects of identity, especially in representations related to eating, drinking and travelling around the national territory (Leizaola 2006). These discourses flow across the Basque semiotic space and are expressed through deixis, a discursive, exophorical reference resource that can be treated as an instance of self-description. This is the subject of the next section, in which I will review the concept of deixis.

4. Deixis

Deixis is an essential act in human semiosis, insofar as deictic acts are reflected in language through the demonstrative pronouns ‘this’, ‘that’, as well as the demonstrative adverbs ‘here’, ‘there’ or ‘now’. Such deictics are the core elements that create the referential dimension in communication. They were called indexical symbols by Jakobson (1981), using Peircean terms, i.e. legisigns, or general types, stipulating a rule of use *vis-à-vis* the uttered deictic in question in an indexical act of reference (cf. Nakassis 2020). Like all indexical signs, deictics are in some real (or implied) contiguity or co-presence with the semiotic objects to which they point (CP 2.306). Deictics are often accompanied by pointing gestures (indexes) of different types, performed with fingers, hands, arms, body postures and so forth.

Deixis can be considered a special kind of grammatical property, located in the grammatical categories of person, tense, place and so forth. Levinson (2004: 8) argues that deixis is the study of deictic or indexical expressions in language, and to him, deixis can be unfolded in three main categories. The first is personal deixis, as in the case of the personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘they’. The second is deictic adverbs such as ‘here’ and ‘there’; these may be the most direct and most universal examples of spatial deixis (Diessel 1999: 38). In English, the deictic ‘here’ denotes a region including the speaker and ‘there’ a distal region more remote from the speaker. The third category is temporal deixis, indicated by such phrases as ‘now’, ‘today’ and ‘yesterday’.

Levinson (1982), following Lyons (1977) and Filmore (1977), added two other deictic categories. These are social deixis which covers the encoding of social distinctions that are relative to participant-roles, and discourse deixis, involving the encoding of reference to chunks of the unfolding discourse in which the utterance is located. Some deictic usage examples are ‘What did *you* say?’, ‘*this* city stinks’, ‘*that’s* a beautiful view’, ‘Hello, is Harry *there*?’

As a matter of fact, deixis has been a popular research object with several linguists: Jakobson (1981), Silverstein (1976), Levinson (2004) and Brandt (2016), although few researchers, with the notable exceptions of Fillmore (1982), Levinson (1983) and Nakassis (2020), have focused on the symbolic usage of deixis. The symbolic usage of deixis implies the establishment of a relationship by the speaker between the deictic centre and a subjective element, as in the case of a culture, a country or a set of customs (Puy Ciriza 2008). Levinson (1983) argues that in order to be interpreted, this deixis requires only knowledge of basic space and time parameters of the speech event. However, it sometimes entails the participant role and discourse and social parameters.

This chapter will examine spatial deixis in Basque as well as the symbolic usages of deixis in Basque culture. Spatial deixis is thus related to the denotation of spatial regions in relation to the speakers in the speech act. Grundy (2000: 28) adds that there are three degrees of proximity that are by no means uncommon, with some speech distinguishing proximity to the speaker and addressee. These degrees of proximity are: ‘here’ (proximity), ‘there’ (medial) and ‘over there’ (distal).

Lastly, an interesting construct regarding deixis is that of homeland deixis, which works as “reminders of the homeland, making our national identity unforgettable” (Billig 1995: 93). The deixis of homeland not only refers to the speakers and hearers, or the positions they are standing in, but it also evokes a whole context that goes beyond the interlocutors’ individual locations. This form of deixis thus “helps to make the homeland homely” (Billig 1995: 108)

and 'our fatherland', or 'this country' becomes the national place of 'us'. These utterances simultaneously demarcate their spatial boundaries as their context, as well as renewing a recognisable context. Hence, the homeland is presented as the context of utterance.

This form of deixis is embedded in the fabric of the linguistic landscape in the Basque Country, as I will show in the next section. Prior to that, I will present how deixis functions in the Basque language.

4.1. DEIXIS IN BASQUE

There are three spatial deictics in Basque: proximal *hau(r)/hon-* 'this', mesial *hori* 'that' (just there) and distal *hura/ha-* 'that' (over yonder). The first demonstrative indicates proximity to the speaker, the second marks proximity to the addressee and the third indicates remoteness from both, although sometimes from the speaker solely. Moreover, there are three basic place adverbs: *hemen/hon-* 'here', *hor* 'there' and *han* 'over there', which correspond to the previous demonstratives (Hualde, Ortiz de Urbina 2003).

Basque is an agglutinative language with the noun case-markers suffixed to the end of the noun phrase. That is to say, in noun phrases containing a single noun only, the last word of the phrase carries the case and number inflection (marked by suffixes). In this manner, the relational suffix *-ko* can be added to any of the three basic place adverbs mentioned above: *hemengo*, *horko*, *hango*, *honako*, etc. The forms *hemengotar* 'native of this place', *horkotar* 'native of that place', *hangotar* 'native of that place' are formed with the derivational suffix *-tar*.

Another demonstrative relevant here is the deictic *bera* (working as the intensive pronoun for the third person) 'he himself', 'she herself', 'it itself'. So, the pronoun *bera* with local suffixes produces intensive place adverbs: *bertan* 'in this/that very place' (locative case), *bertara* (allative case) and *bertatik* (ablative case). These forms can be used either alone or following the other place adverbs:

hemen bertan, *hementxe bertan* ‘right here’, ‘in this very place’, *hor bertan* ‘right there’, *hemendik bertatik* ‘from right here’, ‘from this very place’ (Hualde, Ortiz de Urbina 2003). By adding the locative suffix *-ko* we get ‘bertako’, which stands for ‘him- her- itself from here’. I will provide some examples of the use of this deictic below. I will now illustrate how deixis conveys a self-cultural model of the Basque nationalist culture in the linguistic landscape of the Basque Country.

5. Deixis as self-description in Basque culture

In this section I will draw on different examples of space and symbolic deixis in the Basque linguistic landscape that illustrate how self-description (as an idealised model of Basqueness) is deeply embedded in the everyday use of deictics. Furthermore, they illustrate how deixis carries political subjectivity. The term ‘linguistic landscape’ is understood here as “written languages in the public space” (Gorter, Aiestaran, Cenoz 2012: 209).

Self-description can take place at different levels of the semiosphere as a device to fix boundaries. Specifically, different boundaries are demarcated between Basqueness and non-Basqueness by dint of deixis.

The first instance of boundary demarcation takes place through place deixis, and it concerns the proximal deictic ‘here’ both in Basque (*hemen*) and Spanish (*aquí*). The three examples below display a discursive organisation between the deictic centre and a symbolic element aiming to convey the advantages of consuming locally produced articles.

This image presents a local cola-flavoured fizzy drink. The bilingual sign above the bottles reads *Hemengoa izatea ona da/ Es bueno que sea de aquí* and displays two place deictics: *hemengoa* and *de aquí* (‘from here’). Note that the sign is flanked by two images: on the left a bottle and a glass of cider standing behind three cider casks. Cider is a local alcoholic drink made from apples and

Figure 2.¹

Figure 3.

consumed in traditional cider houses between January and May. On the right a Basque flag (*ikurriña*) provides an additional sense of Basqueness.

Figure 3 displays the rear of a vehicle belonging to a local courier company from the French Basque Country called *Hemengo Erlea* ('The Bee from Here'). The deictic *hemengo* ('from here') is accompanied by the company's logo, a depiction of an efficient, swift messenger embodied by a smiling bee carrying a parcel and wearing a Basque beret (*txapela*). This *txapela* is usually worn by senior male citizens in the Basque Country, and has traditionally been regarded as an icon of the Basque 'grandfatherly' figure. Actually, Figure 1 above displays the image of an ETA militant wearing a *txapela* and holding a machine gun. In Figure 1 as in Figure 3, the beret functions as a sign strengthening a sense of Basque identity.

The set of images above display different everyday products of consumption. First of all, on dairy products, which would normally display the legend '100% local', or 'locally made', the sign has been adapted for the Basque market, reading '100% *hemen egina* ('100 per cent made here'). Once more, the deictic *hemen* ('here') is used to reinforce the Basqueness of this local product.

¹ All the pictures displaying deictics used in this paper have been taken by the author.



Figure 4.

The second image shows a pack of free-range eggs exhibiting a bilingual word game. The phrase in Spanish contains the term *de aquí* ('from here') plus the chicken's onomatopoeia *kikiriki*. The Basque version of this word game shows the intensive pronoun *bera* plus the locative suffix *-ko* and the chicken's onomatopoeia *kokoroko*. Nonetheless, the sign in Basque carries a different meaning. That is to say that rather than using the spatial deictic, the producers decided to use the term *bertako*. *Bertako* is a term constructed from the third person pronoun *bera* plus the local suffix *-ko* that gives rise to an intensive place adverb term that stands for 'local', or 'native'. Yet the term *bertako* has an additional meaning, 'traditional', so this brand is selling 'traditional' eggs! This 'traditional' character, however, highlights the difference between a sense of locality and tradition since Basque eggs are endowed with an additional symbolic meaning.

Figure 5 exhibits a sign from a local bakery promoting a dessert usually filled with pastry cream or black cherry. This dessert was originally made in the French Basque region of Lapurdi. Not only does the deictic phrase *el de aquí* ('the one from here') complement the sign displaying the name of this dessert (*pastel vasco*, 'Basque cake'), but it also highlights its local origin. Yet, the second



Figure 5.

image shows a sign with the legend *Pastel Vasco* “*Bertakoa*” (The ‘traditional’ Basque cake). So, rather than using a spatial deictic, the image on the right announces a ‘traditional’ dessert. Extra wording on the upper left of the right image, reading *Basque Essence*, functions as an additional marker of Basque identity.

In these examples, place deixis thus demarcates the distance for audiences by conveying a sense of locality, proximity and authenticity.

I will now focus on symbolic deixis that is used alongside idyllic representations of the Basque Country. This usage is related to the natural location of the Basque Country, surrounded both by the shoreline of the Bay of Biscay and by mountainous topography that is regularly depicted in different media through representations of magnificent nature and wondrous landscapes.

Symbolic deixis is present in these examples through the consistent use of the first plural person possessive pronouns in Basque



Figure 6.

and Spanish to demarcate the space of the ego perspective of culture; that is, to differentiate what is *gure/nuestro* ('ours') from the other.

This image was also taken in a supermarket and displays several cans of local beer on a shelf below the bilingual sign saying *gure lurra/nuestra tierra* ('our land'). Different elements in this image are to be appreciated. On the right side, there are locally produced groceries (tomatoes, *piquillo* peppers, salt, as well as the popular *idiazabal* cheese plus a bottle of *txakoli*, a sparkling, dry white wine produced in the regions of Gipuzkoa and Biscay on the Spanish side of the Basque Country). Basque gastronomy, as pointed out by Lacy and Douglass (2002), is well-known in the world and is considered a salient element in the re-creation of the Basque identity. Another significant element in Figure 5 is the bucolic landscape: green mountains and half-timbered farmhouses lie behind the groceries, as well as an *ikurriña* on the right side of the image, fluttering alongside a group of dancers performing traditional dances. These elements

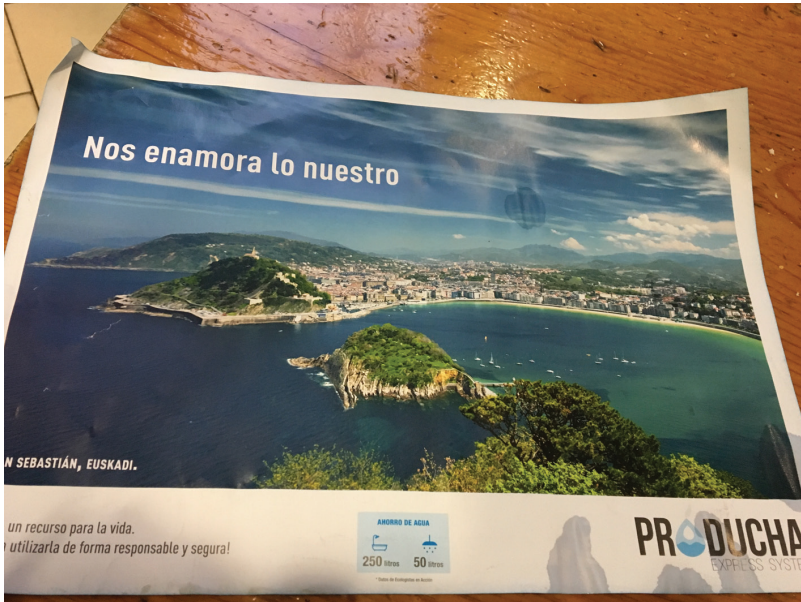


Figure 7.

together contribute to strengthening the sense of belonging and authenticity. The use of the possessive deictic *gure/nuestra* in this image is based on the assumption of the Basque nation as a single community and appeals to people's subjective feelings of belonging to Basque culture.

Figure 7 depicts a flyer from a company selling shower equipment. The company's business consists in restyling old bathtubs and converting them into showers as a way to save water and money. Interestingly, this flyer portrays a panoramic view of the town of Donostia-San Sebastián in the Spanish Basque Country. The Spanish language sign *Nos enamora lo nuestro* can be translated into English roughly as 'we fall in love with our own (land)'. Both examples show an open intention to establish a link between the nation and a single Basque community through the representation of culture and land: *nuestra cultura* ('our culture') and *nuestra tierra* ('our land') in opposition to their land/their culture. This reference lies behind the



Figure 8.

meaning of the phrase *lo nuestro*. Even though Basque is at the centre of Basque identity, it is necessary to say that language suffered a retreat during the dictatorship. As Cenoz (2009) argues, further factors that might have influenced the decline of Basque were increased mobility of the population as well as a quick industrialisation of the Basque Country, attracting immigrants from other parts of Spain. In this manner, Spanish and French remain the dominant languages across the Basque Country. Hence, most public displays and signs are bilingual.

Something similar to Figure 7 happens in Figure 8, an advertisement by the formerly Basque-owned telecommunications company Euskaltel. This image displays an invitation to follow the company's Instagram account and the chance to participate in a raffle to win a mobile phone. In order to take part in this contest, users need to perform the following steps: 1) take a picture of one of 'our beautiful landscapes', and 2) post the picture by using the hashtag #WeLoveGureLurra ('We love our land') and tagging the company's account.

This image presents the usage of two deictics. In step one 'our' points to a concrete reference, 'beautiful landscapes', whereas step two makes symbolic reference to the natural beauties of the Basque Country so that local audiences can show their love by participating in the raffle.

6. Discussion and conclusions

According to Lotman (1998), a culture's capacity to produce a self-description is not a product of its semiotic activity; rather, it is a necessary condition of the possibility for meaning.

The analysis of these deictics in Basque and Spanish reveals that deictic usage in Basque culture is an effective discursive device conceived to demarcate the culture by separating it from an outer space that is understood as foreign and alien. My main suggestion here is that deixis embodies different ways of constructing boundaries in the larger Basque semiosphere, and therefore also foregrounds the existing cultural conflict between nationalist Basque culture and the Spanish and French larger cultures.

There are three dimensions of deixis to be accounted for. The first instance concerns spatial or place deixis (Levinson 1983), mainly through the use of the proximal deictic 'here', both in Basque (*hemen*) and Spanish (*aquí*). These deictics, as it were, point to a concrete reference: the location in which speakers are standing, or the Basque Country as a geographical space and point of reference. The examples analysed show a discursive organisation between the deictic centre (the proximal deictics *hemen/aquí*) and an element highlighting the local origin and characteristics of different products: groceries, dairy products and a local courier company.

The second instance concerns symbolic deixis. The case here is different, since the symbolic use of these deictics implies the establishment of a relationship between the audience and subjective elements of Basque culture. The meaning of the deictics *hemen/aquí* are dependent on the cultural context of the Basque Country as an

‘imagined’ nation, including multiple discourses about Basqueness. The symbolic dimension is reinforced through the juxtaposition of images displaying national symbols: cider culture in the Basque Country, fluttering Basque flags (*ikurriña*), or traditional berets (*txapela*), all of which convey a sense of locality and closeness to the audience. The producers are thus appealing to nationalist sentiment and so emphasise the local origins and the Basqueness of their products.

The set of images in Figure 4 shows an internal displacement from the spatial dimension towards the symbolic dimension of deixis. This process occurs by means of word games and a process of labelling. Recall the bilingual word game in Basque and Spanish using different deictics that attempt to convey the same meaning. In Basque, the third person intensive pronoun *bera* carries the local suffix *-ko* to give rise to an intensive place adverb (*bertako*), standing for ‘local’, ‘native’ or ‘traditional’. While the spatial dimension of these deictics, once more, stresses the local origin of the announced products, the symbolic dimension goes beyond this sense of locality by pointing to a context related to tradition. In this manner, free-range eggs and pastries are not only local but become ‘traditional’ inasmuch as the producers draw attention to the authenticity component.

Now, with regard to the last three examples, it is possible to see the link between personal deictics and the natural environment of the Basque Country. Deixis embodies a personal self-description of Basqueness through the use of the possessive deictics *gure* and *nuestro/a*. The symbolic function of these demonstratives lies in the fact that they are intended to construct a link between a single and homogeneous Basque community by appealing to subjective feelings regarding belonging in Basque culture. The use of such deictics is associated with stereotypical images of the Basque Country as a land of food and drink in which Basque cuisine is regarded as one of the main tourist attractions (Järlehed 2020). In this case, food and drink are also juxtaposed with further images of wondrous landscapes, providing a sense of cultural commodification.

Lastly, the third instance is the use of homeland deixis: these deictics carry further meanings, including the two main discourses composing the self-description of Basque nationalist culture: a) the discourse of Basque language as the chief element of Basque identity and b) a discourse of 'sentiment' which conveys the stimulation of stereotypes and national representations of the Basque Country as a wondrous land for eating and drinking. The deictics *aquí* and *hemen* go beyond the individual locations of the audiences and are not indicated as a particular 'here'. Instead, they make reference to an imagined space conceived of as a 'motherland'. As a matter of fact, Sabino Arana, one of the forerunners of Basque nationalism, coined several Basque words that have become part of common usage today, as in the case of *euzkadi* ('the nation'), *askatasuna* ('freedom') and even the term for motherland, *aberri* (Urla 2012).

The other deictics *gure*, *nuestro/a* and in particular *bertakoa* are also markers of self-description that invoke the motherland as a national space in which traditional, folk and rural values converge and model the Basque cultural space (Alonso Aldama 2008). In this manner, Basque culture makes models of its own culture in opposition to other cultures (mainly French and Spanish). In this model, the home Basque culture is in conflict with these other cultures which are regarded as non-traditional by the nationalist culture, that is to say, foreign, invading entities that subjugate the Basque people.

Basque culture draws on self-descriptions as occurring through deixis and conveyed in the objects of everyday life that show links between landscapes, scenarios and national symbols, which basically represent shared experiences. In addition, the cultural conflict between border cultures is underlined by emphasising components relating to origins, continuity and tradition, with, behind these terms, a link with nationalist discourses (the long-term Basque conflict) as well as linguistic ideologies that constitute the self-description of this Basque semiotic space.

Given the possibilities of the cultural self-models described by Lotman, it is possible to address deixis as an instance of self-

description insofar as it is a representative example of how cultures demarcate their own cultural and symbolic spaces. In the case of this particular culture, it takes place by dint of a pragmatic resource that is deeply embedded in the consciousness of culture. Thus, deixis is also part of cultural memory.

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SEMIOTIC FLATTENING: THE RIFT OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE SEMIOSPHERE

Nicola Zengiaro

Every year, we are told that it is the hottest since the first weather recording stations were set up; sea levels keep on rising; the coastline is increasingly threatened by spring storms; as for the ocean, every new study finds it more acidic than before. This is what the press calls living in the era of an “ecological crisis.” Alas, talking about a “crisis” would be just another way of reassuring ourselves, saying that “this too will pass,” the crisis “will soon be behind us.” If only it were just a crisis! If only it had been just a crisis! The experts tells us we should be talking instead about a “mutation”: we were used to one world; we are now tipping, mutating, into another. As for the adjective “ecological,” we use that word for reassurance as well, all too often, as a way of distancing ourselves from the troubles with which we’re threatened: “Ah, if you’re talking about ecological questions, fine! They don’t really concern us, of course.” We behave just like people in the twentieth century when they talked about “the environment,” using that term to designate the beings of nature considered from afar, through the shelter of bay windows. (Latour 2017: 7-8)

Introduction

In the field of biosemiotics, since the 1960s, many authors have shown that it is possible to investigate from a semiotic point of view the emergence of meaning between a given organism and its environment. In this sense, in recent decades, such research has turned its attention to increasingly complex ecological domains, trying to

show how different semioses coexist in the maintenance of an ecosystem. The purpose of this work is to show that these human and non-human forms of semioses exist properly in relation to a continuous process of circular communication and conflict. Especially, from Juri Lotman's notion of semiosphere, the notion of ecosemiosphere has been proposed by Tartu ecosemiotologist Timo Maran (2021), integrating a new methodology of analysis regarding the conflicts that emerge in the environment from cultural resources. The idea is to show how the ecological crisis is related to the semiotics of conflict. The goal is to investigate how ecological catastrophe retroactively shows the difficulty in the management and integration of non-human semiosis by human culture. From different case studies, it will theorise that the asymmetry found in the conflicts between heterogeneous semioses, necessary for the maintenance and organisation of the semiosphere, is actually leading to the realisation of a possibly irremediable rift for our species and others.

To challenge the concept of ecosemiosphere, we will use the city as a case study by showing the conflicts that always exist in different regimes of semiosis. The city, according to Lotman (1985), is a complex semiotic, culture-generating mechanism. The production of culture, as an engine of heterogeneity, functions because it presents itself as a container of texts and codes that have been formed in different ways. The different levels and languages within the city, however, are not only those that emerge between different ethnicities, social groups, people, and material structures, but also include non-human forms of life in shaping the city's diversity. Indeed, it is increasingly evident that the ecological crisis is affecting every culture and form of living on this planet. Moreover, such crises set in motion increasingly complex forms of conflict, from biodiversity loss to climate refugees, from ocean acidification to increasingly hierarchical national economic relations, showing how dwelling in a space is being coordinated by semiotic conflicts. These semiotic conflicts will be analysed and defined as 'semiotic flattening', understood as the footprint of human presence that inhibits the expression

of other forms of semiosis in space. From this perspective, the city as a space of coexistence manifests a possible, but not always achievable, recodification of urban relations and semiotic translations. In an attempt to analyse such relations, biosemiotic and ecosemiotic discourse will be approached from a materialist perspective, which allows for the intersection of the hybrid entities that make up the city understood as an ecosystem that holds within itself different forms of semiosis. The methodology of analysis offered will make use of complexity theories applied to Lotmanian semiotics, moving through the more recent methodological applications of ecosemiotics, which deals precisely with investigating the relationships between different species in a given environment. This branch explores both sign processes as responsible for ecological phenomena (Maran, Kull 2014) and the role of environmental perception and conceptual categorisation in the design, construction and transformation of environmental structures.

1. Ecological crisis and the idyllic view of nature

We can start with an initial question to understand the central issue: why talk about the ecological crisis instead of the climate crisis? Or why not talk about climate change instead of the crisis? The ecological crisis and its associated problems in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres are, in part, the product of ignorance and, therefore, knowledge of our global dilemma is a prerequisite for addressing it. To clarify terms, an ecological crisis is a situation that occurs when the environment of a species or population undergoes critical changes that destabilise its continuity. As Australian philosopher Val Plumwood has pointed out: "...the problem is not primarily about more knowledge or technology; it is about developing an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it, and is able to make good decisions about how we live and impact on the non-human world" (Plumwood 2002: 3). What Plumwood has tried to show through her

analyses of the ecological and cultural change directing our time is that the ecological crisis needs a new culture in order to be understood, and also to be mitigated. For this reason, the ecological crisis is connected to the semiotic vision.

Plumwood (2002: 67) argues that we need to find “a matter of balance, harmony, and reconcilability among an organism’s identities, faculties and ends, a harmony that has regard to the kind of being it is”. The method for dissolving the issues posed by the ecological crisis thus requires socially and ecologically healthy decisions, leading to a recognition of the subjectivities that often pass under the threshold of our attention, showing the contextuality of all knowledge and the need to care for these dynamics and the different subjectivities that make up our society. However, despite the important reflections made by Plumwood, things are not so simple, as the balance we need to safeguard the planet, other species and ourselves is based on a series of necessary conflicts that occur in nature and maintain a certain kind of structural order. This idyllic view of nature, that it can find its own balance, can be reconsidered by a deeper analysis offered by Lotman, whose complexity reveals the interwoven dynamics between culture and nature. In fact, according to Lotman (1985), the communicative space between different regions of the semiosphere are determined by irregularity, which is a principle of organisation. Interaction between different levels is one of the elements underlying dynamic processes within a system. Nevertheless, the irregularity is bridged by a continuous mixing of levels, in which hierarchies give way to dynamic processes of diffusion of new information. Novelty, as well as the organisation of a system, comes precisely from its heterogeneity of structures and substructures. As we shall see, however, the ecological crisis places us in front of a situation in which asymmetry can be fully realised in such a way as to split or annihilate part of the semiosphere.

Nature, or what we very problematically call “Nature”, is nothing more than a romantic representation of ever-present conflicts

that maintain a kind of balance that for all practical purposes does not exist. What Nature preserves is a kind of interlocking of disparate elements that in a complex as much as blind way overlap life, growth, and death, with food, partners, shelter, and offspring. Nature as we have always thought of it is nothing more than an idyllic idea according to which it is a source of value where the positive elements widely outweigh the negative. This view has often been defended by the ecologist and environmental ethics position (Horta 2010). The bucolic idea that happiness in nature compensates for suffering turns out to be crucial in the political and ethical attitudes of our society. Just think also of the narratives constructed regarding the representation of Wild Nature in audiovisual narratives and media (Yogi 2019).

Representation, fraudulent or not, is a very resilient discursive practice in society and culture. However, the issue of ecological crisis also poses the question related to animal welfare and the relationship we have with wilderness in its complexity. In order to deal with an analysis of the conflicts between different forms of semiosis that belong to a given time and space, we must stop believing in both nature and society, counteracting injunctions, resisting the temptation to act as ventriloquists for non-human life forms (Haraway 1992). It is from these assumptions that we have a political and semiotic responsibility in trying to rethink new forms of relationship and solidarity with the practice of ecosystem analysis. These are inescapable themes of our time, nevertheless, and so precisely for reasons of restriction of the field of analysis we will deal with the relationship of the human with other living things in the space of the city. The city will be rethought as an ecosystem that can tell us about the conflicts of the ecological crisis, starting from the idea that every space is co-inhabited and co-constituted by humans, soil, and other organisms, trying to avoid any romanticism (Hecht, Cockburn 1989). For this reason, we are interested in testing the ecosemiosphere as a possibility for analysing the relationships between actants, defined as collective entities acting in a structured and structuring field of action,

in order to re-articulate a different understanding of the ecological crisis and the representation of our relationship with nature and other living things.¹

2. Complexity and semiotics in Lotman

In any discipline when we talk about problems related to the complexity of an object, we must refer to the possibility of framing that object through parameters and methodologies. As the mechanical scientist Juri Engelbrecht (2021) stated, in the case of a complex physical system, the interactions between the various constituent parts are described by physical laws and can certainly be measured at least with a certain degree of accuracy, within the limits of our methodologies and knowledge. However, try to analyse the situation of a complex social system is much more complicated because the interactions are based on “accepted rules, traditions, language, and governance, on economic and environmental conditions, and certainly on values. In addition, an important question in social systems is how its members interpret social problems” (ibid.: 83). Even when investigating the ecological crisis, there is a need, indeed, to interweave physical and social systems, but the analysis of these two layers often requires different measures and interpretations. In investigating complex social structures, we need to keep in mind that the regularities we encounter are very fluid and characterised by multiplicity; therefore, to describe them we need to research the patterns that can handle such variability and dynamics. But at the same time, we must affirm that the rapid change of ecosystems also drives us to seek new descriptions for an environment that is also

¹ Moreover, we know that every effect of articulation is not an innocent practice. However, such a perspective, which re-articulates actants in a given ecosystem, allows us to guarantee that they are never defined once and for all, precisely because every ecosystem is perpetually changing. This involves re-articulating knowledge production practices and world-building practices by taking into account this semiotic space that we call Earth.

constantly changing. Overcoming the opposition between nature and culture is one of the starting points for ecosemiotic analysis. Nature, in fact, is by no means so rigid as not to admit readjustments and innovations, nor is culture so noble and creative as to exclude the presence of certain constants, structural laws and regulatory conditions. The ecological issue proposes to us a new vision of semiotic analysis and its application, especially when we ask what kind of new knowledge and results semiotics can offer with respect to the contemporary crisis.

In this sense, can semiotics investigate such a complex object as the ecological crisis? Can it tell us something new about this phenomenon? One of the problems of scientific approaches, for example, is that they fail to account for a necessary methodological multidisciplinary, whose analyses require a broad complex of knowledge, as opposed to the dominant hyperspecialism. The problem, as pointed out by Lotman himself ([1984] 2005: 206), arises when “heuristic expediency (the convenience of analysis) comes to be accepted as the ontological character of the object, which is assigned to it by the structure derived from the simple and clearly outlined atomistic elements, in accordance with their complexity. The complex object is thus reduced to the totality of the simple”. Our knowledge and ecological mutation have a relationship that is based on long-term measurements, but also on models that offer the only way to approach phenomena whose complexity exceeds our capacity for analysis.² In this search for the complexity of ecological crisis and semiotic conflicts, we will use the Lotmanian view of the part–whole relationship, the natural emergence of semiotic processes and the openness of these semiotic systems (Gherlone 2013; Rickberg 2022, 2022a).

² Latour (2017: 257) tells us that one way to approach these phenomena may be through fiction, whose great capacity is to anticipate a possible future. However, I believe that this medium has been very useful so far, but will not be useful for the near future for one simple reason: dystopian fictions have already come true and the present has already realised the fictions that came from a world on alert. That is why the mark of our present is ecopessimism.

His interests in nonlinear dynamics and the complexity paradigm help us intersect the issue of ecological crisis with social dynamics. The complexity thinking approach (Richardson, Cilliers 2001) leads us to contemplate the limits of our knowledge on the one hand, and on the other our ability to understand the phenomena in which we are immersed.

Starting from complexity paradigms, we can mention three fundamental characteristics of complex thinking as outlined by Edgar Morin (2008):

- (i) Dialogic: our ability to associate two terms at the same complementary and antagonistic level and through this maintain duality at the heart of unity. For example, order and disorder appear to be enemies that eliminate each other, but at the same time they are collaborators and produce organisation and complexity.
- (ii) Organisational recursion: the need to break with linear ideas of cause and effect and focus on the recursiveness of the processes of self-constitution, self-organisation and self-reproduction which are simultaneously products and producers.
- (iii) The holographic principle: not only is the part in the whole, but likewise the whole is in the part. We need to overtake reductionism which sees only the parts and also holism which sees only the whole, replacing them with the understanding of a necessary and mutual continuity between part-whole.

These principles, as semiotic research has recently pointed out (Hartley, Ibrus, Ojamaa 2020; Gherlone 2013, 2013a; Kull, Maran 2022; Rickberg 2023), are also found in Lotman's thought. His focus on the interdependence and unity of opposing forces in semiotic systems, understanding of the multidirectionality of communicative processes, and ability to understand the paradoxicality of semiotic systems, where each part is also a whole and where the whole functions as a part (Lotman [1978] 2019), leads us to the reconsideration

of complex objects through a layered analysis that connects various parts of the system under consideration.

As Kobus Marais (2019) has pointed out, the complexity perspective is inherently ecological, because it is possible to see the interrelationships of our reality as emerging from the physical realm. The capacity of complex thinking is to function as a platform for translating different areas of knowledge. The same can be said of semiotics as a tool for investigating the quality of relationships and the ability of complex systems to bring forth meaning in their relationship to the world. Describing cultural-ecological systems in a unified semiotic framework serves to analyse the semiotic factors that contribute to some of the ecological problems and lead to misunderstanding of conflicts between humans and other species, as well as, further, to provide semiotic solutions to mitigate these problems.³

3. From semiosphere to ecosemiosphere

Lotman uses the notion of semiosphere to denote the heterogeneous and diverse domain of human cultural sign structures and processes. Edna Andrews (2003) points out four properties that determine the semiosphere:⁴

- 1) Heterogeneity: the languages of the semiosphere embrace two extremes that include mutual translatability or complete mutual untranslatability.

³ The same narrative processes inherent in our relationship with ecosystems allow us to express a value-laden analysis regarding local and global knowledge, and the collective social imagination. Just think of the authors of deep ecology as they have been able to narrate the human relationship with nature. It is not a matter of vivifying complex objects in the environment, but of contemplating the interpretative and transformative dynamics that arise from non-human agency. Interesting and recent work from an anthropological perspective has been done in (Cruikshank 2005).

⁴ There are certainly more characteristics reported by the author, however, we will only consider four (the “fundamental concepts”) of them to offer an analogy with the ecosemiosphere drawn by Maran (2021).

- 2) Asymmetry: multi-level asymmetry occurs in terms of internal translations, centre vs periphery, and metalinguistic structures.
- 3) Boundness: the primary mechanism of semiotic individuation is the creation of boundaries.
- 4) Binariness: every culture is based on the binary distinction between inner and outer space.

As is well known, several biosemioticians have attempted to redefine the semiosphere, trying to identify it with the biosphere (Alexandrov 2000). However, even in Lotman there are some passages where it seems that the boundaries of the semiosphere can somehow encompass different living organisms. That uncertainty about the definition of boundaries by Lotman (1990, 2009), especially about its extent, came from the fact that everything is included in the semiosphere that comes into contact with human semiotic activity. And this, at the time of the ecological crisis and the issue of the anthropisation of the planet, becomes very interesting. The issue of anthropogenesis calls into question the limits of the semiosphere, where it could contemplate human agency in the sole area of culture. Today the exponential mixing of culture and nature extends human activity to the chemical composition of the elements that make up the Earth (Nail 2021).

This allowed for a rethinking of a kind of identification between the semiosphere and the biosphere. Multiple reformulations have taken place from this broadening of the edges of the semiosphere to the living. Concepts such as semiobiosphere (Petrilli & Ponzio 2015), ecosemiotic sphere (Maran 2023), ecosemiosphere (Siewers 2011, 2014), ecosphere (Kull 2005; Patten 2001), vivoscape (Farina & James 2021), and semiosis of life (Kohn 2013) have been proposed for this reason. As Maran (2021: 520) continues:

The need for such a concept seemingly derives from many common ideas or sources, or the need to: (1) broaden the conceptual space of ecosemiotics to cover semiosis at the ecosystem level, (2) describe interspecies semiotic and communication networks

via a unified term, (3) include the semiotic potential and value of material processes and natural resources into semiotic study, and (4) cover both the biosemiosis and anthroposemiosis of the given area or research topic.

In rethinking Lotman's semiosphere, through the methodologies of ecology and complex systems (Leone 2018), it is possible to extend the principles that determined its characteristics in an attempt to include other living things. In fact, the idea is to rethink the semiosphere as a communicative sphere of the living in a broad sense. In such complexity, then, there is a need to rethink the margins of the semiosphere in a continuous superposition of *umwelten* (Kull 1998; Lotman 2002).

Similarly, with the same features that have delineated the semiosphere in its theoretical development, we can see them applied to notions of the *ecosemiosphere* (Maran 2021). Therefore, it is not so much a matter of noticing their differences or similarities, but of seeing whether a new theoretical model is formally possible. Such modelling should address the handling of the understanding of complexity in a given ecosystem through a semiotic reading. This involves the actualisation of non-human instances that complexify the structural planes of the communicative sphere. The *ecosemiosphere* traced by Maran (2021), in analogy to the semiosphere characteristics described above, is presented as follows:

- 1) **Heterogeneity:** the *ecosemiosphere* is more heterogeneous and compartmentalised because some *umwelten* overlap while others are mediated by the shared physical environment (for example, resources), and are determined by the structural organisation of the ecosystem. Languages (sign systems) remain fragmented and locally regulated, although they can be integrated through interspecies communication, ecological codes, and human symbolic communication.
- 2) **Asymmetry:** is given by the continuous attribution of meanings among species (prey, host, resource, competitor). Each species is in semiotic relationships with its inhabitants, and

semiotic attribution exceeds semiotic outgoing activity asymmetrically. Moreover, there is no centre and periphery, but multiple centres arising from the physical and biotic structure of the ecosystem (for example, key species), forming hetero-hierarchies.

- 3) Boundness: a distinction between inside and outside is not possible due to the nonexistence of a common perspective, and shared identity is not there due to the immense variety of sign systems and codes. The boundary is given by conditions of material and physical constraints, while the identity of the ecosemiosphere is given by the iconic and indexical semiosis of plants and animals.
- 4) Binariness: the ecosemiosphere is not characterised by external binary boundaries because they are transmissible to matter and energy flows, species migrations, habits, and human cultural codes. Identities are built around internal boundaries, discontinuities, and asymmetries.

What we are interested in doing now is to outline how conflicts between different human and non-human semioses play out through the gaze of the ecosemiosphere. In particular, the theme of the city connects as we shall see to the relationship we have with other living things, and from a semiotic point of view this relationship is determined by a misreading and misinterpretation of non-human semioses. This is because the coexistence and relationship between humans and animals is not harmonious, but also often remains misunderstood, latent or ignored. In fact, non-human semioses within the city indicate a kind of removal that emphasises the unrecognisability of the existence of certain life forms as well as their identity. From a semiotic perspective, in fact, discursive configurations emerge showing fields of evaluation and relations that, on the one hand, express the removal from the cultural sphere of the non-human and, on the other hand, show a selection mechanism in which culture decides in this way which semiotic competencies to take into account and which not (Zengiaro 2022). It is human

society this makes invisible those life forms that coexist in the city. Plants and animals are indeterminate living beings because they are part of what has generally been called “Nature”. However, the notion of “Nature”, as we have already pointed out, is a constructed object.

The introduction to complex thinking made at the beginning will be useful for us to understand that there is an intricate connection between the semiotic relations of non-humans and human health, economics, and politics. We will start from the conflict situated in cultures that are mainly located in a blurred boundary between culture and nature, such as African villages, until we show that this fuzziness with the ecological crisis also extends to Western cities without limits or boundaries, without centres or peripheries.

4. Ecosystemic assemblages: the case study of vultures

An investigation (Otieno et al. 2011) into the relationship between vulture poisoning and human health found the complex layers that exist between non-human animals, ecosystems, and society. A crisis is taking place in eastern and southern Africa regarding the health of the human population that is linked to the lives of vultures. Seven of eleven African vulture species are endangered due to a number of complex interspecific factors that are themselves linked to the ecological crisis. Vultures are not the direct targets, but indirectly, over the past 50 years, they increasingly becoming extinct (Botha et al. 2015). In fact, human–animal conflicts are among the most serious threats to the survival of many species, including our own.

Because of the ecological crisis, which has made weather patterns unpredictable, many of Africa’s nomadic populations have become more sedentary, relying on livestock and crops for their survival. However, given the ever-massive illegal hunting of animals, prey is diminishing and predators who cannot find food are preying on the livestock of the nearest populations. Trying to protect the livestock, people poison the carcasses with a pesticide called Carbofuran to kill the predators that feed on them. However, the

unintended victims are vultures since the carcass of one lion that has died from poisoning can feed hundreds of vultures. But this has an impact on human health. In which way?

Past research regarding the ecological importance of vultures showed that the same had happened in another country, linking pharmaceutical technological dynamics to ecological dynamics and influencing the health of farm and wild animals (Green et al. 2004). In India in the 1980s 99% of vultures became extinct because of an anti-inflammatory drug, Diclofenac, given to cattle (Oaks et al. 2004). When cattle die and cannot be used for food (because they are sacred according to religion in some regions), the carcasses are eaten by vultures. Diclofenac, it was discovered, causes kidney failure in vultures and so it was banned in 2006 (Johnson et al. 2006). However, this caused a proliferation of the stray dogs that then became the main coprophages, breeding massively and causing many deaths from rabies in the city. Without vultures, large numbers of animal carcasses were left to rot, posing a serious risk to human health, precisely because the soil becomes filled with infectious germs contributing to a massive proliferation of parasites.⁵ The wild dog population in India has led to more than 47,000 deaths from rabies, with an economic cost of \$34 billion (Prakash et al. 2003).

Thus, vultures in Africa and India have been discovered to play an essential role as nature's scavengers, quickly recycling animal carcasses and not allowing bacteria and disease to develop (they can strip a zebra in half an hour). This also allows groundwater and livestock to remain uncontaminated. It is the vultures' stomach acid that allows this purification of bacteria and elimination of deadly diseases such as anthrax and rabies. These are processes that involve semiotic interpretation at a time when we not only fail to understand species-specific need as well as the functionality of a certain

⁵ In addition, decomposing carcasses release greenhouse gases that pollute the air. It has been estimated that Africa's 140 million vultures prevent the emission of 60 million tons of carbon dioxide per year, an amount comparable to North Korea's emissions.

species for an ecosystem, but also because we fail to interpret the connection between various life forms and society.⁶

What these two case studies show is that when we have to analyse an ecological phenomenon, we need to weave the various relationships between humans and non-humans, following the nodes that connect the various forms of life in a given environment. In this specific case, we have non-human and human agencies intertwining, from drugs to vulture deaths, from cow sacredness to citizen deaths, from climate change to natural predator poisoning. Urban environments show a critical and conflicting aspect of coexistence between humans and other species. The term ‘blight’, indicating urban decay, shows how cities function like living organisms that with their cycles evolve, crack, and perish. Consequently, it is necessary to better understand this environment and how to manage it with a more complex vision.

4.1. A MATERIAL SEMIOTICS: SYNECDOCHE AND FRACTALS

One thing that is not always contemplated in this perspective is properly handling ecological complexity from a horizontal and rhizomatic point of view. Starting from Lotman’s notion of semiosphere, and moving through Maran’s ecosemiosphere, it is possible to understand semiotic phenomena that extend beyond the realm of mere biology and thus biosemiotics. The interesting thing is that to understand phenomena such as those of ecological crisis and conflicts between heterogeneous semioses, there is a need to refer to complex objects that are often neither completely biological nor

⁶ Morton himself, quite provocatively, equates the human species with vultures: “The model analogy in a way would be a carrion animal. I once described myself in an interview as a ‘spokes-vulture’ for ecological awareness. We were talking about death and being eaten by vultures. And then about that kids movie where the vultures are the chorus and sit around commenting on all the main activity. And it’s apropos because, anthropologically, we are carrion animals, aren’t we? I mean, we don’t just hunt game. Humans are scavengers as much as anything” (Morton 2021: 88).

completely social. We refer to phenomena related to climate, ocean acidification, land desertification, and loss of biodiversity, but also to climate migration, economic crisis, the politics of extractivism, the spread and management of pathogenic events, etc. These phenomena can no longer be thought of separately, nor are they distinct from the human and non-human, cultural and natural semiotic spheres (Grzybek 1994). The ecological crisis forces us to think complexly about communicative structures that fit within the organisation of our reality, but which must also be contemplated with respect to non-human realities.

This coincides with the need to rethink non-human forms of semiosis, where they are part of the semiosphere in all respects, in which they are actants affecting the social sphere and culture.

Rather, the result is that we cannot talk about meaning content without considering the organism in its environmental context. If material structures are often a precondition of sign processes, then these material structures and sign processes should be studied within the same framework. A common interest between biosemiotics and material ecocriticism could be identifying environmental objects with semiotic potential for living organisms and studying how these objects function in multispecies environments, as well as how they trigger semiotic processes and narrative sequences in human culture. (Maran 2014: 146)

The issue related to the semiosis of complex, nonbiological events has been addressed on different occasions (Zengiaro 2020, 2022a, 2023). However, the field of biosemiotics still struggles to understand that living systems are for all intents and purposes related to structures that are not biological and living, although this is not to say that they do not have a form of agency or processes of semiosis related to the sphere of the living. One author who had understood the sedimented structure of these semiotic phenomena is John Deely, who reinterprets Jesper Hoffmeyer's (2008, 2015) term "semiotic scaffolding", that is, a complex multi-level relational structure that allows

for greater responsiveness to the multiplicity of signs in the environment giving rise to *semiotic freedom* (Wheeler 2006). This is a structure that enables evolution, allowing the creation of habits that help the organism interface with the world (Kull 2015). According to Deely (2015), in fact, the inorganic and complex structure that makes up much of the ecosystem within which living things are found (think of the atmosphere as well as the soil), activates semiotic processes that participate in the semiosis of living things but originate from what living things are not; it is a condition of possibility for all semiosis of living things.

Reinterpreting framework as a semiotic scaffold that holds up the relations of organisms, this scaffold becomes the principle of semiosis that extends into living systems but originates from other forms of nature. Similarly, the ecosystem composed of living and nonliving parts forms a scaffold, a relational semiotic network between the various layers of complexity, something like the principle of synecdoche. A continuous synecdoche,⁷ similar to a fractal but corresponding to an embedding of different and coexisting, layered yet hybrid layers. In fact, each layer enters into a relationship with the previous one which serves as the basis for configuring it. This is the conservative part of the interaction,⁸ which is indispensable for further acts of semiosis and interpretation to emerge. It is in this heterogeneous process of continuous complexity, in the combination of chance and constraint in a series of iteration patterns, that novelty in nature and the acquisition of habits

⁷ The image of a principle of continuous synecdoche was suggested to me by my colleague Niccolò Monti, to whom I am grateful for perceiving the depth of what I was trying to express.

⁸ Manuel DeLanda (2000) offered a very similar overview in narrating the layering that organisms maintain of their previous inorganic stage (bones, shells, armour, etc.). And this structure, which marks a continuity between life and nonlife, can be shown in every existing substratum, from the smallest of living things to cities, from the natural to the social, with no possibility of defining a separation between the various levels in nature.

emerge.⁹ An ecosystem is a functional and complex unit that intersects living organisms and nonliving substances in a continuous exchange of materials and energy, resulting in a circularity of semiotic conflicts. These exchanges bring semiotic value to our analysis because there is a need for a semiotic and communicative interface to relate two or more natural elements.

Ecological complexity, in fact, shows us a kind of multiplicity of thresholds that do not separate, but connect, just like the interfaces necessary for continuous communication. The interface is a semiotic perspective precisely because it functions as a continuous translation process between differential layers (Thom 1972; Sarti, Citti, Piotrowski 2022). Indeed, semiotic processes, even at the ecosystem level in general, exist for organisms that must interpret them correctly to use resources. And these resources actively modify the organism because they have retroactive effects (von Uexküll 1982). In this sense, the environment is also an active operator in meaning-making processes. This perspective blurs ideological binaries with respect to what we consider an ecosystem: life and matter, living and nonliving, nature and culture intertwine along the boundaries of an eternal conflict between semioses.

5. Conflicts in the city: semiotic flattening and semiotic pollution

Conflict as we have always thought of it is presented through this semiotic flattening in a very different way. We think of conflict in cities broadly according to this imagery (fig. 1).

However, there are many other layered forms of conflict. Conflict also occurs between humans and other life forms. The unrestrained control of animal and plant life leads to deleterious effects on the city and coexistence in a given existential space. The conflict

⁹ Deacon (2011) himself addresses similar topics in a very different way from how I am tracing them. However, I will not hide the fact that many of the themes intersect, even though the methodologies and objectives present themselves differently.



Figure 1. Southern Popular Resistance fighters react as one of their tanks fires at a Houthi position during fighting in Yemen's southern city of Aden on May 7, 2015.

between urban forms and plant agencies, as well as between cultural systems and animal life forms, makes clear the need for another perspective on the conflict that does not flatten the semiosis of others. When we refer to conflicts between semioses we will do so in relation to “semiotic agency”, that is, the ability to make use of signs in one’s environment.¹⁰ This also implies the ability to be affected by the environment in a way that depends on environmental events, including the actions of those who cohabit in the same space (including humans). To speak of non-human semiotics is not to refer metaphorically to some purely biological process of survival of organisms in their environment. “Living creatures are self-referential, they have a history, they react selectively to their surroundings and they participate in the evolutionary incorporation of the present in the future” (Hoffmeyer 1996: 51).

¹⁰ Based on the idea that signs seem to be at the core of biological functions such as heredity, metabolism, memory, perception, locomotion, instinct and cognition. (Sharov, Tønnessen 2021)

Thus, we have semiosis conflict whenever our interpretative processes of another living being's species-specific capabilities or qualities impose themselves on their expression.¹¹ Whenever human activity interferes with the evolutionary history of other species, it irreversibly alters its direction. Conflicts we can also identify in everyday events involving other species: when a horse faints from fatigue in the city centre (fig. 2), carrying tourists for a fee along crowded streets, when climbing plants crack the city's historical monuments and the municipality has to intervene to eradicate them, a forest is bulldozed to make a parking lot, an intensive livestock farm is opened in the suburbs.¹² Interspecies conflict and planning to control the non-human elements in the city aims to dominate them, turning them into a mere background and flattening their differences and forms of semiosis. Indeed, the symbolic, anthropomorphic, infantilising or stylised interpretation of other life forms also re-presents this conflict.

We can call "semiotic flattening" what underlies, but at the same time occurs as an effect of, semiotic conflict. This notion addresses the flattening of others' *umwelt* based on a compression by the agency of other actors in a shared space.¹³ It refers to the modifica-

¹¹ The example of animals in a zoo is paradigmatic, where they cannot express their species-specific qualities. Consider the pioneering work for example by Heini Hediger in the relationship between animal subjectivity and environmental space.

¹² It should be noted that for the field of biosemiotics and ecosemiotics, within which we are moving, plant semiosis is accepted at the theoretical level by most authors (Kull 2000). Thus, when we talk about plant semiosis or phytosemiotics we refer to a specific theory, that of Martin Krampen (1981, 1992, 2001). However, the question of whether there is real communication from plant life, on the other hand, is of secondary interest to us since here we are trying to show that when species-specific features of a given environmental phenomenon are not well understood, there is semiotic conflict. In this sense, it is not that the grass communicates something to us, but at the same time if we fail to interpret and thus ensure a continuity in vital qualities and evolutionary directionality we will have a conflict between different life forms in a given space of coexistence. This existential space which can be the city, the countryside, a street, a corner, or a square, is saturated with meaning and relational processes of a meaningful kind for different species.

¹³ Some authors (Sedda 2012; and I am especially thinking about the important work presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) in chapter 14 "1440: The Smooth and the

tion of the surrounding world of a certain organism based on the disproportionate design of a consonant environment for a single species, the human species in this case.¹⁴ It also defines the necessary footsteps of life forms in a given terrain, which leave the mark of their passage which is on the one hand absorbed and, on the other hand, reused by the forms of nature in the reappropriation of space. Moreover, it relates to the trace, as the generation of the mark in the territory and history of the Earth, in the memory of living things and in the inscription of certain values in space (Violi 2014). In short, semiotic flattening refers to the human footprint, and its pressure on a territory, whether it is the sign of an iconic, indexical or symbolic trace (Mazzucchelli 2015). To what extent does footprint disruption create a different regime of meaning in the environment? As necessary as deleterious, the passage of the human into another territory activates traces of discursive conformation, the semiotic nature of which attests to a cultural and at the same time coevolutionary directionality with other living things.

Indeed, cities, as the place where multiple *umwelten* adapt, are also the space in which many others are crushed and dominated, whose existential expressions are deprived of the species-specific expression they are supposed to have. Human and non-human semiotic relations are thus not seen as the structuring dynamic of the ecosystem-city, and the species that inhabit it are not seen as part

Striated") have somehow spoken of the flattening of the semiosphere as if it were an accordion. Here, on the contrary, we are drawing a genuine image of the flattening of the semiophere as a forcing of semiotic relations in each environment. The flattening is not so much to be understood as a stretching (extending and contracting), but rather as a shaping of intersemiotic processes given by the forces expressed by the other semiospheres. The image is that of one sphere compressing the other, whose boundaries adapt so as not to implode or be absorbed. The theory presented here uses this concept to show the possible fracture of non-human semiospheres, where flattening can lead to annihilation (see the next chapter, by Merit Maran, in this volume).

¹⁴ Not only the human footprint imposes itself on space. Each life form occupies a space by constituting continuity and discontinuity with other life. The present time, as a trace of the ecological crisis, shows us the massive colonisation of other life forms and space by the human species.



Figure 2. A horse collapses from heat in the centre of Rome, 13/06/2013. *Il Sole 24Ore*. Photo taken from journalist twitter page @fedemello.

of the local biodiversity. The gap between this perception and reality affects the way we think about and manage other life forms.

The conflict between non-human semioses in the ecological crisis also belongs to complex events such as viruses, fires, pollution, and floods. What Roland Posner (2000) called “semiotic pollution”, that is, the activity of a species in the environment that changes its qualities to the point that it begins to disturb the semiotic processes of other species. Unlike semiotic flattening, which focuses on the *umwelt* or subjective world and the world of experience of living things, this is more directed toward relationships between individuals or between species, more complex conflicts such as pollution, bad weather, viruses, and heat refer to a conflict between culture and nature that never ceases to present its effects even more pervasively.

Semiotic conflicts are also conflicts of interpretation of the future, in which people’s bodies become protests that interrupt “semiotic pollution” (fig. 3), where semiotic expressions that are about to be flattened reclaim their space, manifesting them elsewhere and thereby creating new regimes of meaning. The dilemma of what to



Figure 3. Roadblock by the Ultima Generazione movement carried out in Rome, 26/04/2023. <https://ultima-generazione.com/comunicati/2023/04/26/doppio-blocco-stradale-gra-roma/>

do in the face of such a complex object as the ecological crisis brings with it continuous semantic conflicts that extend generationally with different intensities. Conflicts of interpretation, non-human politics, reassessment of other forms of life, semantics of the future as a species, the need for a new narrative; these are all forms of a continuous conflict between human and non-human semioses. The dilemmas we are observing in the public management of the ecological crisis represent new forms of conflict (Low 2008), the forces of which come from non-human semiotic processes. The truth about what is happening to the ecosystem, a fundamental semiotic problem, becomes the only narrative needed in the ecological crisis.

6. The rift in the semiosphere and the age of asymmetry

Society today feels that the complex of discursive and material relations that sustains it has entered a crisis in the Anthropocene (Zengiaro 2022b). Crisis should be taken in its etymological sense of 'act of separation'. The great unifying narrative we witnessed in

overcoming nature–culture and human–nature dualism is now perceived as something alienating, as a threat. The human, thought of as a geological force, frightens, intimidates, alarms, and on the other hand de-emphasises and ideologically distributes the causes and consequences of the actions of the human species (LeCain 2015; Chakrabarty 2021). The reasons for today's crises are increasingly complex, and these, from the perspective of ecosemiotics, depend on the conflict between different semiosis regimes. However, the ecological crisis presents itself as a threat with an unpredictable and totalising nature that drives towards a rift or a dangerous asymmetry. If for Lotman conflict and asymmetry are necessary in the semiosphere, what is happening with the ecological crisis is that this asymmetry is so radical as to bring about the annihilation of any possible semiosphere.

In contrast to the image of the semiosphere as regulated by self-balancing conflicts, the risk of the ecological crisis is that it may permanently destabilise the semiosphere of culture. The end of the cultural semiosphere is meant to indicate that if we really consider the ecosemiosphere outside of metaphor, we must assert that after catastrophic events that could occur during the ecological crisis, multiple forms of life will survive. Therefore, a certain type of semiosphere will collapse, specifically that of the human species. Bacteria, viruses, fungi, small animals, and some plants will continue to exist regardless of the collapse of the human dimension (Bridle 2018). This implies that if other life forms hold semiotic processes, the ecosemiosphere will continue to exist while the semiosphere as we have always understood it will collapse. Just like a biological body, society and culture can die and not be reborn. What will happen is the end of the human world, not the world in general. In fact, the question of crisis as a rift gives us precisely the example of a rupture that fits between nature and culture once again, but within this breach we find one great process of coexistence and survival. Just think how much our fate is connected with the other animal and plant life forms that condition earth's dynamics. The non-human, which has

always been present in social space, is in this sense recognised in an era of asymmetry. It is no longer merely a calculable and predictable object of knowledge,¹⁵ but rather presents itself in an immeasurable form (Ambrosini, Zampieri, Zengiaro 2023).

The complexity of the climate crisis and the vagueness in the analysis of such object lead to a high degree of uncertainty dragging with it on the one hand new forces that attempt to decipher such nebulosity, and on the other widespread affective waves (insecurity, fear, suspicion, etc.). These fuel discursive plots steeped in elements of fiction (speaking of ancient but still living traumas), in which invisible enemies haunt society, time and space. The polluted air is presented through an atmosphere of danger; the tension and conflict coming from a non-human agency cause retroactive semicide.

6.1. SEMIOCIDES AS A DEVICE TO FLATTEN THE SIGNSCAPE

Introduced by Ivar Puura in 2002, this term refers to two principles: (1) every living being is connected to its environment by semiotic relations that accumulate over time; (2) being human means being aware of our continuity in time, which entails the ability to predict the future, manipulate temporal phenomena, and provide narratives about time. The first unites us with other animals, since all biological organisms rely on natural sign relations and semiotic information from the environment. The second refers to a peculiarity of the human species, opening up a world of imagination, but also imposing the ethical responsibility not to abuse one's semiotic abilities (Maran 2013: 147). According to Puura (2013: 152) semicide is "a situation in which signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else's malevolence or carelessness,

¹⁵ My idea, exactly opposite to Morton's, but also mirroring it, is to show that the misunderstanding of non-humans has led to such asymmetry that permanently alters the semiosphere. Morton (2013: 172), on the other hand, argues that the age of asymmetry is a time and space within which the human and non-human dimensions face each other equally, perhaps in a view too romantic for my taste.

thereby stealing a part of the former's identity". Indeed, every relationship is an encounter between one's own semiotic sphere and another semiotic sphere. This encounter can be fatal and lead to the end of the semiosphere in a conflict between semioses. However, we can, according to Puura, classify these relations according to: i) attitude, whether one's semiotic sphere is aggressive or neutral toward the other, or whether it supports it; ii) the level of activity, whether it is passive or active toward the other; (iii) intentionality, whether the relationship is conscious and intentional or not. Semiocide, for example, can occur in a situation where one's own semiotic sphere is actively aggressive toward the other semiotic sphere, leading to the impoverishment and histories of the latter.¹⁶ "The concept of semiocide would provide ecosemiotics with a good tool for analyzing conflictive relations between different species and human groups which are mediated by the environment" (Maran 2022: 202).

The notion of semiocide helps us to understand the dynamics that link the various elements of a given environment, dynamics that belong to semiotic and meaning-making processes. In fact, if we investigate from an ecosemiotic perspective the conflicting dynamics in the city as if it were an ecosystem we can detect all the importance that the various non-human semioses have in the composition of a balanced or unbalanced structural plan. The ecosemiotic view gives us the tools, then, to detect the common history that connects us to other living things, showing how it is possible to talk about interspecies and intraspecies communication related to the sharing of a common existential space. It is actually about offering a broader overview

¹⁶ Puura speaks of sign destruction, although such a concept in semiotics is very problematic (Mazzucchelli 2017). However, it would be worth investigating whether the extinction of a certain species that is a sign relevant to an individual can be eliminated with time from its *umwelt* and subsequent recognisability throughout the phylogeny. In other words, it would be interesting to investigate whether the sign, i.e., the perceptual mark of a given environmental element, when it is extinguished ceases to be a sign in the phylogenetic history that belongs to the condition of recognisability in the operational marks of the animal in question. Is it possible to erase a mark in the animal *umwelt*?

than the notion of semiosis, reintegrating the ecological question as an essential part of this semiotic logic. So, it is about investigating a kind of ‘semiotics of the environment’ through the ecosemiotic methodology. By semiotics of the environment we mean an activity of reading, interpreting and understanding life and nonlife forms in the maintenance of the biosphere. Fundamentally, this ecosemiotic approach can offer a new education in coexistence that is lacking in the humanities today. Semiotics can reinterpret the relationships we have with other living things in different ecological systems, such as the city, the forest, the sea; but also anything that can be interpreted as an ecological text such as highways, bridges, gardens, landfills.

Every living creature, being part of a greater whole, carries in itself memories of billions of years of evolution and embodies its own long and largely still unknown story of origin. By wholesale replacement of primeval nature with artificial environments, it is not only nature in the biological sense that is lost. At the hands of humans, millions of stories with billions of relations and variations perish. The rich signscape of nature is replaced by something much poorer. It is not an exaggeration to call this process semioicide. (Puura 2012: 152)

Material destruction can be part of semioicide against biological species and indigenous cultures. Puura points out that today the phenomenon of semioicide is widespread both in human culture and society and in the relations between culture and nature. Unfortunately, semiotics seems to have overlooked what Maran (2013) calls “the dark side of semiotic relations”. These semiotic conflicts, which lead to the impoverishment or a flattening of the ‘signscape’ of other living things, retroactively affect culture, the city, and any future environment. It is a rift of memory, of the history of interspecies relations, that erodes the future.

Ecosemiotics then detects this dark side of semiosis, which divides and erodes others’ semiosis, irreversibly destabilising the ecosystem. By showing this side, which lies beneath the relations

between humans and non-humans, it is possible somehow to turn these relations toward new and unexpected interpretations. Indeed, by reading the ecosystem as a text, it is possible to offer a new and renewed view of our relationship with it. This requires us to review once again how to interpret these semiotic conflicts.

Using modeling and umwelt analysis, humans can contribute to this process by creating meaningful structures and resources for other species. Examples of such semiotic engagements could be growing different vegetation layers in gardens and parks, preferring natural soils and mulches, creating water bodies and open flyways, preserving wooden debris and fallen leaves, etc. All these activities raise the possibility that nonhuman species find meaningful engagements in our proximity. (Maran 2021: 527)

Conclusion

In conclusion, as Maran (2013: 149) rightly points out:

Since the ability to remember our past and to project our being into the future makes us so eager to preserve our existence over time, semiotics can teach us that we can thrive only in our relations with what is other and different. It is indeed a profound semiotic insight that to have a future, any semiotic sphere needs a realm (objects, partners of dialogue, context) that remains (partially) outside it and that it does not fully perceive, understand or control.

Uncontrolling human otherness, highlighted by Gilles Clément's (2004) *Third Landscape Theory*, can be a start to collaborating with other forms of semiosis and life. The idea is to maintain an ecosemiosphere far from the point of no return and to try to heal the rifts.¹⁷ The traces marking this destabilisation are obvious, under

¹⁷ After all, nothing new is being asserted here. The art of "staying with the trouble" has already been addressed excellently by Donna Haraway (2016). However, there is a need to give rise to a symbolic activity that on the one hand highlights the rifts, embel-

the eyes, the roots, and the paws of all the inhabitants of the planet. And it is certainly not up to us to find a solution, for the reins of this world are not in our hands. On the contrary, in trying to manage these semiotic conflicts we have even done too much. Now it is time to give nature the space to take back its own places, resignifying the planet to make it habitable again. Is abandonment, then, the ultimate form of post-human ethics (Flynn 2021) to survive in the rubble of this planet? Probably the answer, far more complex than how we have outlined it (if there is an answer at all), lies neither in abandonment nor in a caring relationship with other life forms.

Perhaps designing liminal spaces that allow for the expression of non-human semiotic processes could be a line of flight (*ligne de fuite*).¹⁸ We can somehow use ecosemiotics to re-establish coexistence between various forms of semiosis in a balanced way, mitigating conflict. If we think about it carefully, conflict mitigation is crucial in both linguistics and ecology, as well as in the ecosemiotic perspective, to promote peaceful and sustainable coexistence between forms of semiosis. In linguistics, as Bruce Fraser (1980) states, the use of mitigation techniques such as modal verbs and conditional clauses reduces tension and facilitates respectful communication. In ecology, innovative strategies such as beehive fences to mitigate conflict between elephants and farmers demonstrate the effectiveness of an approach that promotes coexistence between humans and wildlife. Research on this topic has highlighted the importance of shifting from a conflictual view to one of coexistence by developing strategies that promote tolerance and the integration of wild animals into human landscapes through eco- or biotranslation principles.

“Through even mild human impact on the natural environment, it is possible to create novel ecofields that other species can

lishing them and adding value, and on the other hand brings the pieces together by enhancing the new ribs. It is basically a kind of ‘semiokintsugi’.

¹⁸ Although as Ingold (2010) rightly noted there is no outside, there is nothing other than the planet in its habitability. Therefore, the line of escape is nothing but a reassembly of a different relationship in the same plane of immanence.

recognize and use. The corresponding semiotic process could perhaps be named *semiotic facilitation*. Finding and using such new potentials to mitigate environmental conflicts could be one aim of ecosemiotics” (Maran 2022: 203). This is the great strength of ecosemiotics, that of being able to *reassemble the ecological* for a new science of coexistence.

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IV

**THREE LOTMAN ESSAYS
FROM THE BEGINNING
OF THE 1990S**

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE NEW

Merit Maran

This edited volume has introduced Juri Lotman's theoretical understanding of conflict from various perspectives and has given new insights into how his academic legacy can contribute to making sense of the semiotic nature of the phenomenon of conflict in our contemporary world. To conclude this book, we wanted to give the last word to Lotman himself. In this section, we publish three texts from the beginning of the 1990s, in which Juri Lotman speaks to broader non-academic audiences. All three have been translated by Professor Brian James Baer and made available in English for the first time.

The first text, "We Are Alive Because We Are All Different", was published in one of the biggest Soviet newspapers, *Izvestiia*, on the 24th of February 1990. The article was actually a transcription of Lotman's talk on a TV show broadcast on Soviet Central Television, titled "Thoughts on Eternal Things: Sunday Moral Sermon"¹, in which Lotman reflected on the function and necessity of difference and diversity in culture. The second text, "We Will Survive If We Are Wise", is an article published in the first issue of the Estonian newspaper *Vestnik Tartu* (Tartu Messenger) on the 4th of January 1992. The central pathos of this written contemplation is a call for forgiveness, vigour and wisdom in times of great uncertainty. The third text, "We Need Everything: There Is Nothing Superfluous in the World..." was first published in the newspaper *Estonia* on the 13th of February 1993. The section on Lotman in this newspaper

¹ "Thoughts on eternal things. Sunday moral sermon" (Мысли о вечном. Воскресная нравственная проповедь) was a television show which aired on the main channel of the Soviet Central Television called the 1st Programme since 1989.

was divided into two parts: the first part, which we are publishing here, was published under the column “Major Plan” and presented as a monologue in which Lotman contemplated the phenomenon of conflict, collision and difference in culture from various angles. The second part, titled “The Speaker’s Mirror”, was an interview with the journalist Eteri Kekelidze, a former student of Lotman’s and a graduate of the Department of Russian Philology at the University of Tartu.

All three texts can be read as Lotman’s response to the social turmoil that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the years of Perestroika and the period of the fall of the Soviet Union, it became possible for Lotman, for the first time, to share freely without self-censorship his views on the issues concerning contemporary society and the many conflicts that were unravelling within nations that for decades had existed under the shared title of the ‘Soviet people’. Observing with worried attention the growing violence, hostilities and the all-encompassing atmosphere of mistrust, Lotman saw it as the responsibility of humanities scholars to serve as the voice of consciousness and memory. In one of his earlier interviews, Lotman summed up the role of the humanities in the following way:

The humanities exist to provide mankind with a continuous ethical memory, without which it is unthinkable, without which it cannot survive.... Knowledge in the humanities is organically connected with conscience. An engineer indifferent to aesthetic problems may be flawless from the professional point of view. A physicist indifferent to ethics is a socially dangerous phenomenon but professionally acceptable. A humanities scholar alien to moral and ethical problems is professionally unfit. And if the astronomer faces the Universe, the humanities scholar faces the History of Mankind, with its main question being the meaning of life. (Lotman 2003 [1975]: 230)

In the 1990s, Lotman often took upon himself the task of addressing the conscience of society. He published many shorter popular articles in newspapers and journals calling for the continuation of dialogue in society, the protection of democratic values, the appreciation of diversity and the necessity for forgiveness. In the following texts Lotman's theoretical insights into the dynamics of culture interweave with his ethical-moral outlook on the world and reveal Lotman not only as a scholar but also as a great humanist.

WE ARE ALIVE BECAUSE WE ARE ALL DIFFERENT¹

Juri Lotman

What do I see as the meaning of this broadcast? We rarely get together with one another. We do not have a culture of regular interaction. And, despite the enormous technological opportunities offered by various forms of media, we have in fact become used to living inside ourselves.

We need to develop a common language – that's the first thing. Finding a common language with people who think like you is easy – true, today there are few people who think the same, but it isn't hard. But we must learn to speak with people who think in an entirely different way. We need to learn to value other people for being different, without demanding that they be like us. In fact, if we were all the same, identical, we simply wouldn't have survived as biological entities. We are alive because we are all different.

Human society is based on the differences among people, on the fact that no one individual possesses even a fraction of the truth, but together we forge a path toward the truth. If we were made according to the best recipes, we would have died out long ago. We must learn to value the otherness in other people and grant them the right to be different.

We've become used to the old, fundamentally democratic formula, but a formula from the eighteenth century: the rights of the majority. The majority, certainly, has rights, but each of us is part of some minority: a minority of the sick, and of those sick with a certain illness; a minority of those in love, and of those unhappily

¹ Originally published as: Мы живем потому, что мы разные. – *Известия*, 24/12/1990. The translation here is from Ю. М. Лотман, *Воспитание души*. Санкт-Петербург: Искусство-СПБ 2003: 282–285. Translated by Brian James Baer.

in love; a minority of the bald, the one-eyed, the blind, the unfortunate. Each of us is necessarily part of a minority, otherwise we would not be individuals, we would not be human beings, we would not be needed by anyone, and, first and foremost, we would not be needed by ourselves.

We do not have a culture that values other people. We want everyone to be like us so that it's easier to communicate with them. Great – so a person is like me and it will be easy to communicate, but why would I need to communicate with a person who is the same as me? I don't need that person. The minimal difference given by nature is sexual difference. Imagine how good it would be if we were all of the same sex – there would be no lovers' quarrels, no one would shoot themselves or hang themselves. There would be no need to make men's and women's clothing. We would not be needed by anyone.

And so, first and foremost, we must respect other people and allow them to be different. This does not mean that the other person will be anti-social. That person will be the most sociable; pedagogical experience shows that the less people respect the boundaries between them, the less sociable they will be. A society is not a regiment of soldiers; it is an orchestra in which each instrument carries its own melody. Imagine a large orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note – who needs such an orchestra? The wonderful unity of an orchestra is comprised of different voices. We have been raised to have little patience for other people; we want it to be easy for us to communicate. But consider the Russian saying: Simplicity is worse than thievery. We need to respect individuality not suppress it, beginning in elementary school. Already in school people are made equal. I don't want to overemphasise the other side – both sameness and difference are necessary, and life itself provides us with examples. Language is strictly individual. And where is language most fully expressed? In poetry. Poetry is normal language that is individual for everyone and different for everyone.

It would be a profound error to conclude from this that we must first provide people with the necessary material conditions because,

without them, people cannot live, and art – well, art is for those who already have enough to eat. But humankind over the course of its long and very sad history has never had enough to eat. There was never such a time. And yet, humans have always created works of art, and it was not the weak, good-for-nothing people who were singled out to do this, but the most talented, the best, the most brilliant. And this is necessary because this is what creates the norm. This is the norm of life. Otherwise life itself would not exist.

If we think of art not as a priority, but as something simple that can be decreed, that can be subjected to rules not entirely comprehensible to us – then this will be the best of our limited thinking. This only shows that we have not yet matured. Inside, we are to a significant degree like children who find themselves in a museum or in a very sophisticated laboratory and look at the expensive instruments and think: That's a poorly made hammer. Each of us is an instrument, the value of which we cannot yet grasp, and therefore we need to leave some assurance of growth in the hope that we will become smarter.

The primary characteristic of stupid people is that they think they're smart, while the primary characteristic of smart people is that they understand the limitations of their intelligence. We must understand the limitations of our intelligence. And we must understand that creativity is essential to humans – without it, there is no bread. The idea that bread comes first and then creativity is a common error. There will be no bread without creativity.

So, this means, first, people are different but also the same. Like language. Second, creativity. From this follows another quality – patience.

There are several ways to determine whether people are cultured or uncultured. But there is one practical way – when people confront something they don't understand, they may either become interested in it or they may get angry. A cultured person will become interested, while an uncultured person will get angry, irritated. Pay attention to your reaction in the following situation: You enter a

room and there are people sitting there speaking in a language you don't understand. What do you feel? Curiosity about what they're talking about... Or fear: they're plotting against me, they understand one another, but I don't understand them – and so I must arm myself. This second reaction is that of an uncultured person. That person reads a great poet and doesn't grasp the greatness of the poet. And that person gets angry at the poet and call poetry a deception, a way for the poet to inflate himself and to feed himself without working. Or if that person encounters an idea that is too difficult to understand: “Why can't I understand this – am I some kind of idiot?” An intelligent person will say: “Yes, I'm an idiot. And I need to study more.” While the stupid person will say: “No, I'm smart. And I'm being tricked...” A stupid person is generally fearful. Lomonosov proposed the timeless formula: “fearful ignoramuses.”² Ignorant people are fearful, suspicious; the entire world seems to be conspiring against them. And they're especially afraid of people they don't understand, people who don't resemble them in some way, who for some reason play the violin... And who the hell knows what they're playing on that violin?

Remember the passage from Saltykov-Shchedrin where an informer reports that the master's son has locked himself in his home and sits alone reading books³. He then denounces him as unreliable. When the informer is told that he receives no guests, the informer replies: “Well, maybe he's spreading sedition among himself?” There you have it, spreading sedition among himself because we have such a fear of individuality, we are afraid of someone who is not like us: And what if he really is “spreading” sedition?

² The formula “fearful ignoramuses” (in Russian: “пугливые невежды”) appeared in Mikhail Lomonosov's unfinished heroic poem “Peter the Great” published first in 1761. – Eds.

³ Lotman is referring here to a short story by Russian writer Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin titled “Столп” (“The Pillar”) published in a collection of his writings titled “Благонамеренные речи” (“Well-Meant Speeches”) in 1876. – Eds.

And so, another essential thing is patience. Intelligence. Education. And patience in the following sense: patience not only for those who are right, intelligent and educated. But for everyone. Everyone. Even for those who think differently, even when we think they're wrong, even when it seems to us that the way they think is harmful. But this is an important thing – patience for ideas, not for actions. There is an ancient rule: Keep your hands to yourself. A person has the right to any thought, and telling people their thought is incorrect means depriving them of the thought. But there are moral, ethical laws that are understood by all people. A person does not have the right to kill. One does not have the right to promote murder. And the greater the opportunities for murder, the stronger those laws must be enforced. The only thing that can save us is the complete prohibition of harmful behaviour, the complete prohibition of murder. There can be no justified murder. That is a lie. There cannot be murder for a good cause. That is a lie. We have already lived through that period.

We are people. We are in the same boat, all of us together – the good, the bad, the righteous, the sinful, and people of different ethnicities and different faiths – we are all sailing on the same boat. And we can either stay afloat or sink. We will all sink together. And on that ship arguments are essential, discussions are needed, as well as freedom of speech. But murder is prohibited! Bloodshed is prohibited, because then all of us will drown.

WE WILL SURVIVE IF WE ARE WISE¹

Juri Lotman

What can I wish the readers of the *Vestnik Tartu* in this first issue of 1992, the first issue of the newspaper under this title?

On television, the radio and in the newspapers, there is a lot of discussion about the new year, and that discussion is dominated by what I would call restrained pessimism. I would like to express some restrained optimism. I would propose that, as the saying goes, “the dream is terrifying, but God is merciful”, and that the difficulties that await us are, perhaps, not as terrifying as they seem.

Why do I think so? As a young man, I spent the entire war at the front as an artilleryman. And I know that when you find yourself thirty kilometres from the continuous roar of the front line – it's very scary. But when you advance to a distance of ten or even eight kilometres, it's not as scary. It turns out, the shells don't land in a row: they fall hither and thither; some overshoot their mark, while others undershoot it... The main thing for avoiding fear is to confront it head on. Very often we experience fear beforehand; we see things in a much worse light than they really are – and we lose heart. We must look fear in the eye, and we'll see that it's not that scary. And so, the first thing I wish for all of you is a cheerful disposition.

During a very difficult moment in his life, following the death of Anton Delvig², his only close friend from the lycée (the other two were in exile in Siberia) Alexander Pushkin wrote the following to Pyotr Pletnev: “But life is still rich. We make new acquaintances, and

¹ Originally published as: Мы выживем, если будем мудрыми. – *Вестник Тарту*, 04/01/1992. The translation here is from Ю. М. Лотман, *Воспитание души*. Санкт-Петербург: Искусство–СПБ 2003: 296–297. Translated by Brian James Baer.

² Anton Delvig (1798–1831) was a Russian poet and journalist who studied at the Imperial Lyceum in Tsarskoye Selo near St Petersburg together with Alexander Pushkin and other offspring of the nobility of the Russian Empire. – Eds.

those acquaintances become friends. We'll become old and crotchety, and our wives will become old and crotchety, but our children will be nice young people. Our sons will begin to party, our daughters will become sentimental, and we'll like it."³

To retain a cheerful disposition in difficult times, you have to be a big person. Pushkin, as always, took the right path: the best way to maintain a cheerful disposition is to comfort someone else. You cannot maintain a cheerful disposition in solitude. You cannot save yourself in solitude. And so, the second thing I wish for you is sociability.

The planet on which we all live is not large. But in the past, it seemed enormous. During my youth, it seemed endless. Now we see that it is small. So, we cannot separate ourselves from the Armenians, from the events taking place in the Caucasus and throughout the world. We're all in the same boat: we either drown together or survive together. No one can be saved in solitude. The only way to save ourselves is to be cheerful and help our neighbours.

In Estonia, I believe, the fate of everyone – of Estonians and of Russians – will largely depend on the degree to which we learn to understand one another. We don't need to sort through our grievances – we've all accumulated plenty of grievances, since the time of Adam. We need to learn to forgive and to help one another. If we try to track down the first grievance, we'll never find it, but the search will become a school of hate, and all of us will drown. And so, when we're treated unjustly – which is, of course, insulting – we must remember that we too have been unjust. We need to forgive grievances, not count them. We need to be smart.

We will survive if we're not just smart but wise. We are no longer children who have been playing war for how many millennia; we're not living in the Stone Age. Perhaps, the age of wars is finally

³ A. Pushkin's letter to Russian poet and literary critic Pyotr Pletnev dated 22/07/1831 (see A. С. Пушкин, *Полное собрание сочинений в десяти томах: Том 10*. Москва-Ленинград: Издательство Академии Наук СССР 1951: 368). – Eds.

coming to an end. But let it not come to pass as in the Ukrainian proverb: “By the time the sun rises, the dew will have eaten our eyes.”⁴ Let's not let the dew burn our eyes. Remember how the author put it in *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*: “And the princes began to say about what is small: This is big. And the indecent came from all sides bringing victories to the Russian land.”⁵ Wars happen when people begin to say that what is small is big. And so, I wish you all wisdom and patience.

And there's one more thing I would like to wish you. Each of us can give a bit of warmth to someone else. As it says in the Gospel: “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). To love abstractly is easy, but to love your neighbour is hard. Each of us has the capacity to make the life of two or three people a little easier – or perhaps a little harder. And so, I wish that you might make the life of at least those near you a little easier, for when we make someone else's life easier, we make our own easier too.

If I were to lock myself away and count the number of times I've been offended, by whom and when, this would embitter my life, and the world around me would appear unjust. But that's not right. I must count not those who are guilty before me but those before whom I am guilty. We are all guilty of offending someone: those close to us, our relatives, our neighbours. We constantly – at times unwittingly – do harm. And so, I wish for you to be patient and forgiving.

I wish all of you in the new year love, without which life is impossible. I wish you health, as health is very important. But health also depends on a cheerful disposition. You know the saying “Sadness cannot protect you from misfortune”.⁶ There's no need to be sad.

⁴ Ukrainian proverb in the original text: “Покі сонце зійде, роса очі виїсть”. – Eds.

⁵ “The Lay of the Igor's Campaign” (in Russian: “Слово о полку Игореве”) is an anonymous epic poem written in Old East Slavic (see Памятники литературы Древней Руси. XII век. Москва: Художественная литература 1980: 379). – Eds.

⁶ Saying in the original text: “На печального и вошь лезет”. A direct translation of this saying would be “Even a lice will crawl on a man who is sorrowful”. – Eds.

We're not living through a blockade or a war. It all depends on which end you count from. If you start counting from the ideal, then there's a lot we're lacking. But if you start counting from the other end, we have a lot to lose. May God grant that we do not lose but keep what we have. And may God let us be of use to someone, comfort someone, lend someone a hand.

Only that will save us – all of us together and each of us individually.

“WE NEED EVERYTHING: THERE IS NOTHING SUPERFLUOUS IN THE WORLD ...”¹

Juri Lotman

The Space of Meaning²

We live in a space of dynamic processes, but the dynamics are of different kinds.³ There are some dynamic processes that repeat with such discernible periodicity that they are obvious. There are other processes that repeat so rarely that for us they appear, for all practical purposes, unrelated. There are still others that it cannot be determined to be closed, possessing only some degree of periodicity or fundamentally unrelated. We assume that some processes are in principle unrelated, but we cannot in fact confirm that as it would require enormous stretches of time that would be difficult for us to correlate.

For the historian, however, this isn't so important as we study processes that are relatively reoccurring. But this too is relative as every process presents itself to us both in its empirical reality, in specific events, and in some ideal model. We can say that the process “winter–summer” is recurring. At the same time, however, we know from empirical experience that winter does not repeat winter, and summer does not repeat summer. What repeats is that which we designate with the words “winter” and “summer”. In general, the

¹ Originally published as: “Нам все необходимо. Лишнего в мире нет...” – *Эстония*, 13/02/1993. The translation here is from Ю. М. Лотман, *Воспитание души*. Санкт-Петербург: Искусство–СПБ 2003: 287–293. Translated by Brian James Baer.

² The division of the sub-chapters and the corresponding headings of Lotman's monologue belong to the journalist Eteri Kekelidze, who gave her permission to retain the same structure and titles for the purposes of this current publication. – Eds.

³ We have omitted the first paragraph of the text published in the newspaper, where Lotman comments on some of his publication plans as a response to the introduction made by the journalist E. Kekelidze and instead start our publication from the second paragraph where Lotman begins his monologue. – Eds.

question of the appearance of an object always arises when we are just beginning to comprehend, to describe, that is, to translate it into another language. We can translate that object, for example, into the language of mathematics or into any other language we choose. Science is also a process of translation into a specific language. But there is a difference between describing one and the same process from different points of view corresponding to different languages (let's say, the language of mathematics, philosophy or art). Something that may appear essential or recurring when described in one language may not appear at all in another, creating a complex picture. We find ourselves in the space of languages. But it is very important to emphasise that this is not a space from which we cannot extract ourselves. We cannot say that we are fated to be slaves of our language.

When we are dealing with historical objects (and, of course, with biological objects as well), we encounter a curious thing. We imagine a certain world that consists of that which occurs within it, which we will call the object, and of the language used by those who see the object and speak of it. Therefore, we can say that we have a reality that exists beyond language and a reality that has been translated into language. This is a generally accepted point of view.

One of the fundamental positions of the Tartu School is the concept that the world cannot have a single language and that reality is not described by a single language. The minimum is many languages. One may even assume that the number of languages is open. For example, let's say we are interacting with someone who speaks a language we do not know. As a result, that person makes various gestures to communicate. Could we understand that person if we couldn't see their gestures? Or if we saw only a snapshot of a gesture, as in a photograph? Maybe yes and maybe no. To understand it is necessary to have some idea of what is significant in a gesture and what is not, what carries meaning and what does not. But that's not all. The combination of gestures can have a completely different meaning, and to understand everything, we must know several

languages. In reality, we make use of many languages, an entire bundle of languages.

Semiotic concepts have been derived for quite some time from the notion that there is a speaker, a listener and a language of communication. The Tartu School fundamentally altered this notion. A system containing a single language may serve as a theoretical model, but it cannot exist in reality. What for so long seemed an effect of nature's abundance, her extravagance – she has endowed every individual with a different appearance, a different fate, different languages – has turned out to be a necessity. Incidentally, the idea of nature's extravagance also produced theories regarding the necessity of creating a world that was rational, profitable, and based strictly on economics – one that would be more “convenient” for us. The advocates of this position proposed, for example, that it would be better for humankind to switch to artificial languages. We can indeed switch to artificial languages and translate a great deal with their help. A great deal, but not everything...

For example, there is a rare case of a proven theorem in the Humanities – proven by the Tartu and Moscow semiotic schools – that poetry cannot be written in an artificial language. Excuse the pun, but it's true: you cannot produce art in an artificial language.

When we were laying the foundations of this concept – and that was over three decades ago – one could find determined, mostly mathematical and technological minds that declared art to be something superfluous, without which we could get along just fine. Art was a kind of sauce, the left hand in a piece for piano, that which plays along, but that is unnecessary in our cruel world with its intense struggle for survival. But this is an error.

One of the basic principles that distinguishes the Tartu School of Semiotics from many other schools of thought derives from the notion that nothing is superfluous. Everything that might be referred to as superfluous is an enormous assortment of variable reserves. Let us return to the gesture – there are languages in which the gesture is a kind of symbol, where, relatively speaking, a wave of the left hand

does not mean the same thing as a wave of the right, but there are also systems in which gestures complement words. That is to say, we find ourselves not in the situation of “you – me – and one language between us”, but in the situation of “I – you – and many languages”. At least two – mine and yours. In a working system there are many languages.

The linguistic space that connects us is an open space. It can expand or contract; it can translate certain things into the status of a language – with the required structure, into which I insert something and you receive that something. But it can happen that I insert something, and you don't take away anything. This is an optional addition, that something acquires meaning, but it may not. That is to say, there exists the space of meaning. Therefore, the particularity of the Tartu–Moscow School lies in the fact that it studies the space of meaning as something alive and dynamic.

Why is Natalia Nikolaevna⁴ Different from Pushkin?

Some of the many languages that exist can be almost completely translated into others, while others do not lend themselves to translation. The sphere of translatability of one language into another is relatively vast, but there are also spheres of total untranslatability. Between them there exist certain relationships, intersections, and fluctuations. It is here that the space of art is located. For example, such distinct phenomena as poetry and ballet appear to be not translatable into another language. Try to retell a ballet performance in words or a poem in prose. The harder a translation between languages is, the longer the translation ends up being, and in the end, there will remain a reserve of untranslatability.

Some cyberneticist believed that our ideal was total translatability, and so they were inclined to dismiss the sphere of untranslatability.

⁴ Natalia Nikolayevna Pushkina (1812–1863, birth name Goncharova) was the wife of Alexander Pushkin from 1831 until the tragic death of the poet in 1837 in a duel. – Eds.

But this sphere occupies an enormous place. How many times has each of us been ready to say to someone else: “You don’t understand me. How sad that even you, a close friend, do not understand me. We are saying the same words, but there is a blank wall between us.” And at the same time, we may completely understand one another without speaking, in silence. We find ourselves in a kind of space that is to a certain degree personally tragic. In general, dynamics, movement and development are something tragic for an individual. Dynamic movement is contradictory – it is incompatible with us; it does not fit within us. On the other hand, we do not possess it entirely; it surrounds us. It is a conflictual situation. It is tragic and painful, but it has another side as well.

Here is an example that I always introduce in my lectures. We are all different. Each of us has different memories: I was somewhere, and you weren’t; you saw something, but I only heard about it. We have different genders, different appearances, different personalities; we struggle to understand one another, and we don’t always succeed – far from it.

This is painful, difficult, tragic. But imagine that we’re bowling balls, that I’m a bowling ball and you’re a bowling ball, and so is everyone else... But not even bowling balls because each of them has individual characteristics whereas geometric models of bowling balls are absolutely identical. If we were built like geometric models of bowling balls, we would all have the same memories – Pushkin, Dantès⁵, Natalia Nikolaevna, and you and me... Anything Pushkin would say – I would instantly understand...

How wonderful! How nice to live like that! But... why would we need one another? What use would Natalia Nikolaevna be to Pushkin if she understood him so well? Moreover, wouldn’t she then be a man and the same age as him? And wouldn’t she have written the same poems as he did – why on earth would he need her? He could

⁵ Georges-Charles d’Anthès was a French military officer and politician who fatally wounded Pushkin in a duel in 1837. – Eds.

have gotten along fine without her. We need *an other* [our emphasis]. Someone who understands us as well as someone who does not.

It is precisely this collision of comprehension and incomprehension, this tragic struggle that creates the endless necessity of one person for another. Romeo and Juliette need each other because they are tragically separated. If they weren't, imagine what they'd say: "Hi, shall we go for a walk?" They would have taken a walk and parted – there would be no necessity, no love, no misfortune, no tragedy... It wouldn't be our terrible world. But this is the only world we have to live in. And, as paradoxical as it may seem, its terrible side contains the mechanism of our happiness. We need incomprehension as much as we need comprehension. We need otherness as much as we need sameness. We need that without which we cannot exist as much as we need that without which we can survive and that which can survive without us. We need constant tension, the shift from the comprehensible to the incomprehensible, from the brilliant to the insignificant... We need a vast, diverse, multilingual world. Multilingualism is the very essence of things.

There are no superfluous languages. We may assume that the number of languages is limited – not in general but for our physio-historical reality... But suddenly there arose a time when the language of cinema had a lot to say to everyone. We rushed to the cinema, and what the films were saying to us could not have been said by anyone or anything else. At that time, relatively speaking, classical ballet moved into another sphere more limited in its impact. There are historical periods when, for example, people died for poetry, and there are other times when the majority treated poetry with indifference: What can you get from poetry? The space of meaning is mobile and dynamic.

A Fence or Window?

Russian culture is located at an extraordinarily complex point of confluence between comprehension and incomprehension. This is a culture that, on the one hand, is on a border and has always thought of itself as a border. For example, when one of the Kyivan princes in the pre-Christian era began to invade the Balkans, he moved his capital there and announced something paradoxical: “This is the centre of my land.”⁶ His mother wrote him from Kyiv: “You will go after a foreign land and lose your own.” This was essentially the situation of Peter the Great, who also built the capital of his land beyond its borders. And he would probably have agreed with the ancient Kyivan prince who uttered these strange words about a foreign land: “This is the centre of my land.” This is because his land was for him beyond the borders of his land. This is what Dostoevsky called pan-humanism: moving the centre to beyond the borders.

Another point of view is that of a culture that locates its centre somewhere in the middle. In history there are always rules and exceptions insofar as history is dynamic. But one can trace two types of state and city and two types of culture. There are states whose capitals are located on the border, sometimes even beyond the border, like that of the Kyivan prince who considered Constantinople to be his capital. Or like that of Peter I who, essentially, moved Russia beyond the country’s borders, creating an extraordinarily complex and to this day tense situation.

When I say “Russia”, I do not have in mind the current borders of the Russian state, all of which the historian understands to be fleeting. The concept of “the space of Russian culture” is more or less understood. Throughout the history of Russia there have been periods when the centre was moved to the middle in an attempt to close it off, as in pre-Petrine Rus. In the poem *Song of the Merchant*

⁶ Lotman is referring to Svyatoslav I who reigned as Prince of Kyivan Rus from 945-972.

Kalashnikov, Lermontov gives his merchant a wonderful phrase, one that perfectly expresses the spirit of pre-Petrine Rus: “We need a high fence so as not to see our “malevolent neighbours”.⁷ The concept of one's neighbour as an enemy, from which one must be fenced off, with barbed wire, is typical of closed systems. One popular writer, wishing to underscore his loyalty, wrote the following timeless formula in one of the many official forms he had to fill out: “I have no relatives abroad and I do not know any foreign languages.” To understand one's neighbour not as an enemy requires a different psychology, one that places oneself not on the other side of a fence but at an open window.

The image of a “window onto Europe” became the symbol of an entire cultural epoch, and not only in Russia. Such an understanding was characteristic of Italian cities during the Renaissance and for other cultures that aspire to be open – to the outside. Open systems are dynamic. But history does not give grades. It doesn't say: This is beneficial but that is not. Which system is better is a pointless argument, as is the argument about who is better, the right or the left, or who is more necessary, men or women. It is clear that a system must possess diversity. But diversity is a very inharmonious thing.

We are now approaching an extraordinarily important historical moment. We are now creating out of myriad human structures, apparently, some kind of unified structure. Will we succeed in creating it or not? And what unified means – that too is not clear... Something unified is created through the interconnection of different elements, and not through the repeated quantitative increase in the same thing. That which is created through the repeated quantitative increase of the same will fall apart. Although historians should not concern themselves with predictions, if I might allow myself one, I would draw attention to an interesting moment. A large historical

⁷ See the poem “Песня про царя Ивана Васильевича, молодого опричника и удалого купца Калашникова” in М. Ю. Лермонтов. *Собрание сочинений в четырех томах, Том 2: Поэмы 1828–1841*. СПб.: Издательство Пушкинского Дома 2014: 354. – Eds.

structure, let's say, on the territory of the former Soviet Union, is falling apart. When it began to fall apart, many of those who had helped the historical wind scatter the pieces pronounced: "We will never again come together. We are too different. Moreover, we are enemies. Indeed, it may seem to the right eye that it doesn't need the left one. Alright, let's go our separate ways." But then who is there to connect with? It turns out, it's not so simple to say: "Now we'll connect with Spain." This is a process that contains a great deal of unpredictability. And unpredictability is not only a weakness; it is also a strength.

Connecting the predictable and the unpredictable creates a complex game, which is life, from which we can draw another conclusion: predicting the result of the game is impossible. We cannot lose sight of the possibility of a tragic outcome. We are always in danger of slipping from a position in which we need one another into disaster. There is always the possibility that we will perish. And the history of humankind is the history of those cultures that perish and of those that perish and are reborn... Of course, the price for this is always paid in human lives, in tragedies and catastrophes.

History in general is not a profession for the faint of heart. For the serious historian, history is, if not an exclusively sad profession, then at least an agonising and stressful one. At the same time, our hope lies in this. You must understand that, where there is no danger, there can be no hope. Where there is no tragedy, there can be no happiness. Where there is no division, where there is not the threat of general destruction, there can be no hope of unification. Humankind is always gambling with this. We are gambling on the edge, on the edge of the fall of Florence or of the fall of Rome. What are you doing? Are you crazy? You're destroying Rome! Yes, it turns out, Rome was being destroyed, but something totally new arose in its place, something that would not have been if Rome had not fallen. It is the same with us today... But it is also possible for something to perish without anything new arising in its place. Especially in a world where technological development is advancing so fast, perhaps

faster than our intellectual capacity to make use of the possibilities that are being generated. Do we have the strength to resist? Goethe said: "In limitations he first shows himself the master".⁸ What did Goethe mean? Mastery is the highest degree of genius. Genius possesses enormous self-restraint. And in the face of such an enormous volume of unpredictability, the mechanism of self-restraint must be activated. But what if that mechanism should fall into the hands of a censor, or simply a fool, or a kind individual with limited intellect... Self-restraint is a very complex process, and it is also complex in the sense that it may activate unpredictable mechanisms, triggering the introduction of regulating languages, resulting in the translation of the process into predictable spheres. And when we talk about gambling on the edge, we are talking about how the ship on which we all are sailing operates, rejoicing in the possibility that this ship might sink, forgetting that we all are on board...

A Reservoir of Errors

One ancient philosopher born in Greek-held territory bought something at a stand in Athens. And the seller asked him: "Are you a foreigner? You speak Greek too correctly." Here, "too correctly" means not like a native. Native is that collection of possible errors and variants that denotes that a language is alive. For something to be alive, it needs a reservoir of errors, variants, repetitions and deviations; only then will those complex, agonising processes, like, let's say, love, emerge. One cannot love an abstraction, although we know of legends about someone falling in love with a statue as some kind of ideal.

On the other hand, anticipating a statue coming to life represents the transformation of the abstract into life, of the correct into the not correct.

⁸ A line from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "Natur und Kunst" (Nature and Art) written in 1800.

In this complex world in which we find ourselves and which we are now studying, there is another complexity: we are studying the world from the inside – which would obviously seem to deprive us of the possibility of research. Indeed, one cannot study a system when one is inside the system. But there are many of us involved in this, so it is possible to imagine points of view outside the system – the point of view of a child, a woman, a man, a neighbour, a poet, a cyberneticist, an ancient Greek, or someone of another nationality. We are always looking at the world and we can always construct points of view that are located in the world and that look at us. And this happens especially in the field of art. Art, therefore, is by no means an amusement for those who have leisure time and don't need to work.

We find ourselves constantly in a state of tension between uniformity and diversity, coming together and splitting apart, between the tragedy of separation and the pointlessness of uniting. Within this dynamic, complex and living organism, art represents a kind of boiling cauldron, which models a great deal and offers possibilities that life cannot provide. In cinema we can say: “Stop, rewind.” We can carry out experiments in art. Life doesn't give us the opportunity to experiment.

Therefore, what we are talking about on the one hand, is like an abstract science, and on the other, comes into contact with specific spheres of reality. It can be comprehended in the space of historiography and in the broader space that we call – somewhat vaguely and often with different understandings – the semiotics of culture. This is partly what the books we are discussing are dedicated to, or rather, they are investigating cultural problems from that angle. That was the intention, of course, whether or not it was realised...

As a historian I know that books do not die. In this Bulgakov was right: “Manuscripts do not burn”.⁹ They possess amazing resilience.

⁹ A famous quote from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* originally published in 1967, see M. A. Булгаков, *Собрание сочинений в пяти томах*. Том 5. Москва: Художественная литература 1990: 278. – Eds.

If only such power could be directed at destroying tanks, they would have been turned into dust long ago. There are certain mechanisms of self-restoration and, of course, mechanisms of annihilation. Over the course of our lives the mechanisms of annihilation have been far more active. But over the course of human history or, more broadly, the history of life, of even more broadly, the history of the universe, resilience appears stronger.

What do our paltry fifty-eighty years of life have to do with these centuries-old patterns? There is something. Because we, over the course of our short lives, are included in a much longer memory. Today the word “memory” has been debased, but it is one of the greatest concepts. And it would be useful to show that this so-called “Memory” in fact contains everything except memory.¹⁰ The repetition of what has occurred is not memory, even less so is the bad repetition of bad occurrences.

¹⁰ As has been pointed out by the editors of “Воспитание души” where this text was reprinted in 2003 (see p. 293), Lotman refers here to the nationalist organisation “Память” (‘Memory’), which was active in Russia at the turn of the 1980s-1990s and represented Neo-fascist, anti-Semitic and monarchist worldviews.

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