

RE-THINKING

JURI LOTMAN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Anyone wishing to explore the universe of contemporary semiotics will necessarily have to reckon with the founding father of the Tartu and Moscow school of semiotics, Juri M. Lotman (1922-1993). A specialist in modern Russian literature, comparatist and philologist, impeccable archival researcher, brilliant speaker and prolific writer, Lotman laid the foundations of contemporary semiotics, inaugurating the strand of research focused on the typological study of cultures, the semiotics of culture. Lotman's original contributions are also appreciable outside the boundaries of semiotics itself, testifying to the multifaceted nature of his thought. On the occasion of the centenary of Juri Lotman's birth, *Lexia* dedicates a special issue to this internationally renowned scholar. The legacy of Juri Lotman in the 21st century and the theoretical challenge it represents for the future generations of semioticians constitute the main subject of this volume.

Contributions by Marianna Boero, Federico Camizzi, Raffaele De Luca Picione, Jacques Fontanille, Giusy Gallo, Laura Gherlone, Remo Gramigna, Cristina Greco, Kalevi Kull, Tatjana Kuzovkina, Mirko Lampis, Vanessa Leal Nunes Vieira, Massimo Leone, Sebastián Moreno Barreneche, Valentina Pisanty, Anand Raja, Pietro Restaneo, Merit Rickberg, Franciscu Sedda, Stefano Traini, Luca Vannucci, Ekaterina Velmezova, Auli Viidalepp, Ekaterina Volkova Américo, Suren Zolyan.

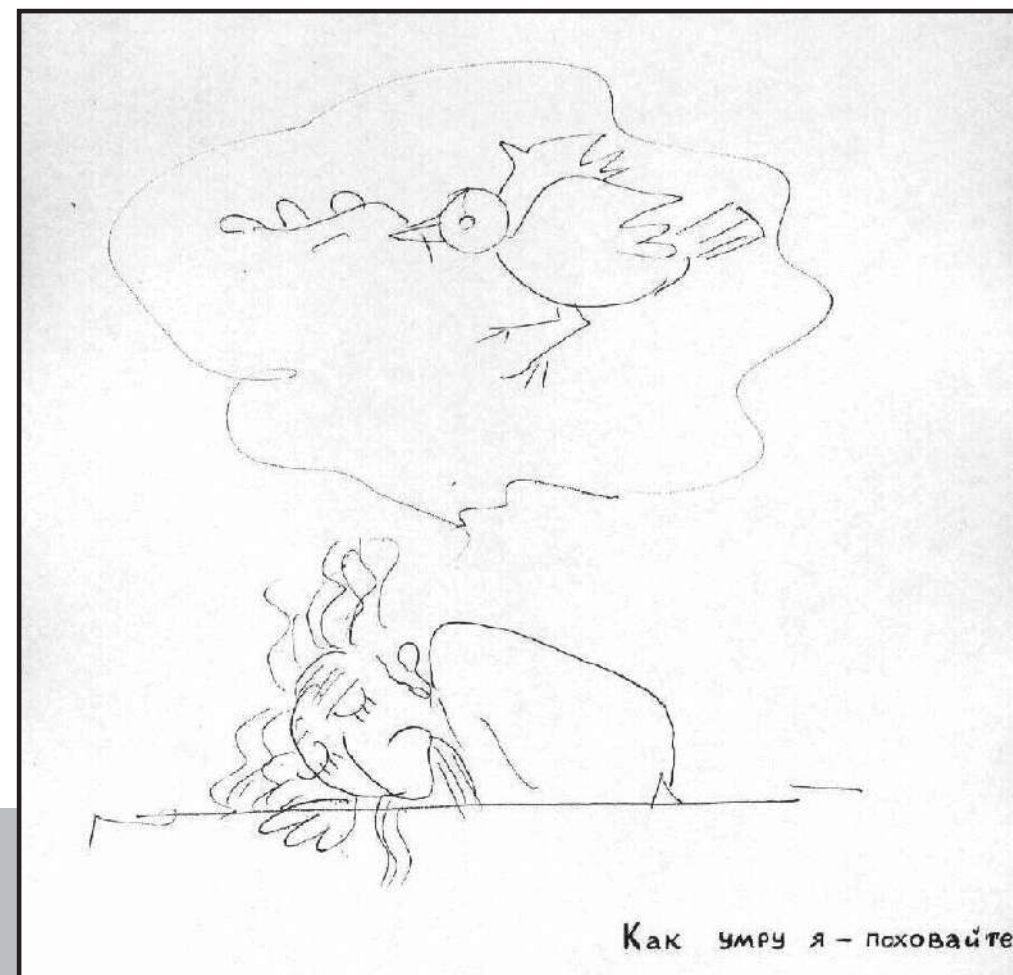


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Edited by

LAURA GHERLONE, REMO GRAMIGNA, MASSIMO LEONE



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INTRODUCTION⁽¹⁾

DI LAURA GHERLONE, REMO GRAMIGNA, MASSIMO LEONE

Dialogue with Ju. Lotman: The significance of his ideas today

This special issue of *Lexia. Rivista Internazionale di Semiotica* is devoted to the internationally renowned scholar, semiotician, literary theorist, and historian of Russian culture, Juri Mihailovic Lotman (1922-1993), on the centenary of his birth. Lotman's centenary is a unique opportunity to re-think his legacy to the twenty-first century and to contextualize his thought. It is also a chance to deepen and discuss the constellation of his ideas and to track the ramifications that his work has opened up and inspired throughout his life.

The present volume is the pinnacle of a long-lasting interest in Lotman's work and its purpose is to explore and re-think Lotman's legacy to the twenty-first century. This project started at the end of 2020 as a convergence of interests of all three guest editors in the thought of Ju. Lotman. This has been the driving force and the inspiration behind the completion of the present work. The twenty articles, divided in four sections, that make up this special issue focus, from diverse and heterogeneous perspectives, on the significance of Lotman's ideas today. The

(1) Section 1 of this introduction was written by Remo Gramigna; section 2 by Laura Gherlone; the conclusive section by Massimo Leone.

essays have been arranged in four sections, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

In chapter 11 of his posthumous book *Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, Lotman quotes the writer Tjutčev, who once said: “It is not given to us to know in advance, how our word will be recalled...” (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010], p. 193). To be sure, the echo of Lotman’s word has been heard and it still reverberates today. Despite the difficulties that the spreading of his ideas and the translation of his work had in the beginning of his career (Eimermacher 1977; Blaim 1998; Winner 2002), today Lotman is known worldwide, and his writings are widely accessible and translated in many languages, as his ideas continue to be relevant in many fields of research.

Lotman had many qualities, but one was very remarkable, namely, a sort of intellectual strabismus, as it were, namely the ability to move with ease between diverse scholarly fields. This quality equipped him with the proclivity to cross disciplinary boundaries and to dialogue with the hard sciences. He was himself a living example of the in-betweenness: a dweller of the boundaries. The concept of the “semiosphere” is a case in point because it is a good illustration of a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue between different fields such as biogeochemistry and the humanistic disciplines. As it is well known, Lotman’s concept of “semiosphere” was inspired by Vernadsky and modelled in analogy with his notion of “biosphere”.

In the domain of semiotics, as well as in neighboring disciplines such as history, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, cognitive studies, as well as the arts, the name of Juri Lotman is often associated with a plethora of different concepts. Indeed, he was a very prolific and eclectic scholar, always future-oriented and keen to bring forth conceptual and theoretical novelty, rather than a kind of thinker who strives towards the systematization of his own ideas and the consolidation of his intellectual achievements. He was constantly “on the move”, although there are clear signs of “intertextuality” within his own works, especially in his last two books, *Culture and Explosion* and *Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Corti 1994, pp. 8-9). There are, however, some hallmarks that became Lotman’s unmistakable signature. The study of the artistic text, the typology of cultures, intercultural relations, semiosphere and dialogue,

semiotic modelling systems, texts and textuality, memory, novelty and creativity, translation and untranslatability between semiotic languages, predictability and unpredictability in cultural processes, explosion, everyday behavior, the language of the arts, to mention but a few, are some of the linchpins of Lotman's legacy⁽²⁾.

Revisiting Lotman's ideas today is not only a unique opportunity to pay a tribute to such an outstanding thinker of the 21st Century, but it takes on a very special meaning. This is so because we live in a milieu of tremendous uncertainty, fast changes, confusion, and crisis. Hence, re-thinking Lotman's ideas today is pivotal, for his critical inquiry feeds back onto the analysis of the present. Indeed, this current time, which is characterized by accelerated social, cultural, and political change — as it is witnessed by the chronicle of the last two years, with by the planetary experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current global crisis — is a good illustration of what Lotman termed as “explosion”. Lotman would define these particular moments as “critical periods when one has reached the end of old paths while new paths have yet to be determined” (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010], p. 37). For this reason, re-thinking Lotman's ideas now is pivotal. Thus, an inquiry based on the reassessment of Lotman's ideas and its application, not only is of utmost importance, but also very timely. If it is true that “the most important ideas come in moments of catastrophe” and crisis, as Vyacheslav Ivanov (1983, p. 89) wrote, let us this be the motto and the wish accompanying all those who are re-thinking Lotman's ideas in today's world. May this lead us to deepen in the least-charted waters of contemporary semiotics.

In a world that is globalized and hyper connected via digital communication, it is not surprising to see Lotman's holistic semiotic approach (Lotman M. 2002) find a proper fit. As Indrek Ibrus and Peeter Torop (2015, p. 4) pointed out, “it is Lotman's original ‘ecosystemic’ take with regard to cultural dynamics that has re-emerged now, in the era of infinitely heterogeneous, but always immediate global digital cultures, as an up-to-date and insightful contribution to cultural theory”. Today, the widespread use of digital media, the rise of the internet culture, and

(2) In order to fathom the wide range of Lotman's legacy, see the recently published collection *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Tamm, Torop 2022).

even the experience of a global epidemic, make us aware of the fact that Lotman's vision was far-sighted. Perhaps, we have not fully grasped yet, nor sufficiently capitalized on this perspective and foreseen its implications, despite the popularity that the concept of the semiosphere has gained in recent years in the study of cultures and societies.

Thematic parts

When we began reflecting on this special issue devoted to Lotman, two nodal points came to our attention. First, we wanted to explore his thought with the *image of the constellation* in mind, that is, delving into the web of interdisciplinary, historical-contextual, and (auto)biographical relations that enabled him to achieve key concepts such as those of primary/secondary modeling system [первичная/вторичная моделирующая система], memory of a culture [память о культуре], semiotic border/boundary [семиотическая граница] semiosphere [семиосфера], cultural explosion [культурный взрыв], to name a few.

Second, we felt it was important to reinterpret his culturological theory with the *magnifying glass of actuality* in order to probe the unexplored insights of his thought. If, as Mihhail Lotman wrote at the conclusion of the three-book collection *Izbrannye stat'i* in honor of his father, “[a] loaded but undischarged gun is not functionally identical with an unloaded one” (Lotman M. 1993, p. 484), we hypothesized there were potential ideas that a reading “in the present tense” could bring into focus. A case in point is that of the digital sphere: a phenomenon that Lotman was not a direct witness to but which, through his relationality-shaped worldview, can be enriched today with valuable interpretations⁽³⁾.

The contributions have been organized into four thematic sections, representing an itinerary of reviews, in-depth studies, discussions, and

(3) Indeed, if we look at the concept of cyberspace — which implies the idea of a growing connection between people, machines, and the surrounding environment — we cannot but think of the relational fabric that integrally binds living and nonliving beings, that is, an image that underlies the semiosphere hypothesis (see Torop 2022) and gives us an idea of the forward-looking and powerfully intuitive gaze of the Russian scholar. For a recent exploration of this topic see Hartley, Ibrus and Ojamaa (2021); Ibrus and Ojamaa (2022); Madisson and Ventsel (2022).

re-readings, proposed by twenty-four authors from different disciplines. The special issue is opened by Jacques Fontanille's guest article entitled "The challenge of impossibility: explosion, history and arts of living". The French semiotician introduces the figure of Lotman by starting at the endpoint, that is, the "explosion": a conceptual pillar that marks the epilogue of Lotman's intellectual parabola. In addition to offering a re-contextualization in light of recent historical theories related to presentism and the so-called regimes of historicity, thus enriching the current scholarship on this topic (see Tamm and Olivier 2019; Lorusso 2019; Monticelli 2020), Fontanille defines this stage of Lotman's theory in terms of a *systematic exploration of negativity*. This perspective leads him to interpret the semiotic-cultural vision implied in the famous monograph *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 2009 [1992]) in a primarily energetic sense, seeing in the "minus sign" the propulsive force of the heterogeneity of information, of the individual-collective realization of the impossible, and ultimately of the freedom to creatively invent a future.

Part I. Genealogies

In the first of the four thematic sections Tatjana Kuzovkina, Franciscu Sedda, Ekaterina Velmezova and Kalevi Kull, Suren Zolyan, and Stefano Traini present Lotman's life, theory, and the evolution of his thought, familiarizing the reader with his big questions about life, human beings, culture, and nature.

Echoing Fontanille's remarks, Tatjana Kuzovkina devotes her article to the Lotmanian reflection on explosion and the role of people in history, that is, an issue raised insistently by Lotman in his 1989-1993 works. Through a meaningful network of references and archival sources spanning fifty years of thinking, from the wartime letters to the final monograph *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010]) —, Kuzovkina evidences the traces of Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history in Lotman's culturological vision. The article offers fresh perspectives on his theoretical and methodological hypothesis of a history-driven comparative typology of cultures and the function of the gradual/explosive processes in the lifespan of civilizations.

Franciscu Sedda, like Kuzovkina, draws on epistolary sources (specifically, the correspondence between Lotman and his friend and colleague Boris Uspensky) to highlight a perhaps less well-known and little-studied aspect of the Lotmanian theory: the creative circularity between his biographical experience and his scientific engagement. Sedda focuses on the genesis of the “semiosphere”, emphasizing that this conceptual pillar was not a mere borrowing from biology but flourished in the intimacy of Lotman’s everyday life — the art of *byt* becoming theory, so to speak. Only at a later time did he find confirmation (a scientific echo) in Vernadsky’s biosphere, in whose cosmic vision of the living the Russian semiotician glimpsed the possibility of conceptualizing a scalar correlation between text, culture, life, cosmos.

Ekaterina Velmezova and Kalevi Kull address the notion of semiotic boundary, considering the relationship between the human and the animal world. By fixing attention on Lotman’s late works (without, however, disregarding his thirty-year reflection about addresser-addressee communication), the authors notice an embryonic perspective in his theory. While admitting that animals are capable of forms of behavior and language of varying complexity, which make them an integral part of the semiosphere, Lotman excludes the nonhuman living from the horizon of unpredictability and, consequently, from the ability to generate new information. Velmezova and Kull see in this seeming paradox a research gap to continue thinking about the “semiotics of life” in Lotman, revisiting it in biosemiotic terms.

Closely related to Sedda’s reflections as well as to those of Velmezova and Kull, Suren Zolyan’s article offers a historical and epistemological reconstruction of how the concept of semiosphere developed through a ‘distant’ dialogue with Vernadsky, particularly in Lotman’s writings on the history of science addressing the difference between biosphere and noosphere. Taking into consideration the notions of self-organization and self-development — which are as fundamental in Lotman’s theory as in biology and complexity studies — Zolyan looks for possible parallels between the related issue of the “beginning of culture” and the “beginning of life”. Ultimately, the article delves into the audacious Lotmanian idea that there is no reality without semiosis.

Stefano Traini closes this section by reviving a well-known debate in Italian semiotic circles, resulting in an edited collection devoted to Lotman and Algirdas J. Greimas (Migliore 2010). While retracing and reconsidering

the distinction between synchronic and diachronic perspective in Lotman in his genealogical conversations with Formalism and Structuralism, the author states that the Russian scholar was mainly a cultural historian in whose analyses on culture(s) we cannot encounter the development of a true semi-otic method. Traini thus suggests that a cross-pollination between Lotman's culturology and Greimas's methodological approach could be a fruitful operation to think about a text-focused systematic semiotic theory.

Part II. Roots and perspectives

The second section gathers articles that, on the one hand, recall Lotman's key concepts related to the domain of information, text, and textuality and, on the other, open up perspectives that are inchoate in the Russian semiotician but able to actualize and even enlighten some core issues of our time (the digital sphere, big data, artificial intelligence, etc.).

Remo Gramigna tackles the problem of the material aspect of sign(s) and how it binds to signification in a cultural perspective, by linking this research question to the present day — that is, an age of dramatic changes in which the global society seems to be witnessing a shift from a material culture to an immaterial (technology-imbued) culture. According to the author, this issue ties in with the problem of valuable/non valuable, preservation/destruction, eternal/transitory and ultimately truthfulness/untruthfulness. Gramigna approaches his analysis by taking up the Lotmanian concept of cultural text and bringing it into active dialogue with the Russian philosopher and Indologist Alexander Piatigorsky's notion of fixation.

In her article on artificial intelligence, Giusy Gallo pins down Lotman's interest in the mechanisms/workings of the human mind, an interest that he cultivated since the 1970s and then culminated in his famous 1990 book *Universe of The Mind* (Lotman 1990)⁽⁴⁾. The conception of intellect [ИНТЕЛЛЕКТ] — understood as (interpersonal) reason [разум] rather than (individual) brain [мозг] — is perhaps one of the most futuristic horizons of Lotmanian theory (for an in-depth exploration see Semenko 2015). As Gallo

(4) The book was released only later in Russian under the title *Inside the Thinking Worlds* (Lotman 1996). For an in-depth study of this topic see Semenenko (2015).

points out, in fact, it implies a dialogical dynamic able to produce new information, whose value consists not only of novelty in itself but also in satisfactory results in terms of adequacy and response to unpredictability. This perspective can be applied to current studies in AI and social robotics.

Like the previous two authors, Auli Viidalepp too reinterprets Lotman's theory on textuality, text, and its functions within the framework of the Information Society and the person-machine relationship. Specifically, the author puts it in dialogue with current research on generative texts (that is, algorithm-driven automatic verbal texts that should appear indistinguishable to human-like text), by analyzing the case study of GPT-3. While contextualizing and understanding the computer-generated narrative plots in light of the Lotmanian metaphoric concept of text as a meaning-making monad (a self-sufficient intellectual unit with its own immanent structure), the article critically highlights the contrast between the idea of unpredictability and the mechanisms of predictability in deep learning, and specifically in statistical language models.

Mirko Lampis's article offers a review of the notion of "chance" (or contingency), expressed by Lotman through the predominant use of the Russian word *sluchainyi* [случайный]. As Caryl Emerson underlines it (2008, p. 105), this concept refers to a central characteristic of the Pushkinian Weltanschauung; it synthesizes "[l]ife's myriad events, confusions, coincidences, accidents", rendered symmetrical and coherent by the poet's quill, as if in a kaleidoscope. Lotman, who was a great scholar and follower of Pushkin, never lost sight of the role of randomness in life, art, and history, thus bequeathing — as Lampis emphasizes — an extensive examination of this conceptual horizon, so topical in the natural sciences as well as in the social sciences and humanities.

Federico Camizzi takes up the famous concept of "modeling system" to frame the manifesto phenomenon in the context of art history and criticism. Indeed, his research question aims at investigating the line of tension between a medium of expression that seems designed to set rules and codes (to "grammaticalize", in Lotmanian terms) the avant-garde movements while giving voice to a (sub)culture deliberately delinked from the past and free from any tradition, shared memory, conventions, and common sense. The author interprets the art manifesto as a self-describing device capable, on the one hand, of presenting the avant-garde as an integral and unified

semiotic organization and, on the other, of preserving the innovative features of its programmatic purpose (that is, to shape a future-oriented platform, almost “devoid of history”).

Part III. Interdisciplinary bridges

The third section of this special issue is focused on “bridges” and gathers articles that connect Lotman’s perspective with other authors, theories, and disciplines, deterritorializing his thinking and making it flourish in different contexts.

In her effort to reread Lotman through the lens of history writing, Valentina Pisanty focuses on the epistemological value of the alternative, that is, the suspension that follows the “bifurcation points” of history and potentially allows for the de-automatization of seemingly irreversible processes — in a nutshell, the tension between probable and possible, which is inherent to the flow of events. The author emphasizes the analytical complexity involved in considering historical non-facts at the methodological level. Finally, like Fontanille in his systematic exploration of negativity, Pisanty too dwells on uncertainty, a space-time full of meanings that can be a harbinger of new paths as well as conspiracy fantasies.

Laura Gherlone and Pietro Restaneo see in Lotman’s questioning of history as a science that deals with facts (i.e., an objective form of knowledge) a body of reflections able to nurture the decolonial scholarship. Starting from an exploration of the multi-perspectivist epistemology developed by the Russian semiotician through his engagement with, among others, Soviet Oriental Studies, the two authors link this theoretical approach to Lotman’s growing impatience with and challenge to the idea of a universal Western historiography. His search for untold stories, marginalized events, and the invisible figures of the past offers a point of contact and a space for dialogue with the decolonial analysis on persistent power-driven Eurocentric narratives, which are still active and performative today.

Speaking of “bridges”, Sebastián Moreno Barreneche too suggests a connection between Lotman’s notion of semiosphere and Michael Freedén’s conception of ideology. After a historical introduction on the relationship between language studies and ideology studies, the author

focuses on Freeden's morphological approach, paying special attention to "the four Ps of ideology" (proximity, priority, permeability, and proportionality). This framework allows Moreno Barreneche to comparatively identify some Lotmanian echoes, in particular through topological categories of analysis (border, center, periphery, inside-outside dynamics, etc.), while offering fresh perspectives on populism studies.

Raffaele Picione's article covers the topic of border/boundary [граница] from a psychoanalytical perspective, thus contributing to an active research area in Lotmanian studies. Indeed, the Russian semiotician's interest in the spatial dimension of culture led him to focus on the semiotic function of the "binary division" to the point of making it explicit in his 1984 essay "On the semiosphere" (see also Lotman 1990, pp. 131-42). The examination of this concept leads Picione to argue that, while considering some irreducible differences and distances, the Lotmanian viewpoint and the psychoanalytic approach converge in assigning to the notion of "border" a whole range of functions and operations (distinction, differentiation, separation, framing, protection, mediation, transformation, regulation), which are key to study the processes of meaning-making.

Education science represents an incipient field of inquiry within the Lotmanian scientific legacy. In this perspective, Merit Rickberg inaugurates a potentially fruitful dialogue by cross-fertilizing learning studies, complex thinking theory, and Lotman's reflections on dynamic cultural processes, where the concept of "creativity" is central. Once again, the horizon of unpredictability proves to be one of the most productive and far-sighted ideas of the Russian semiotician. The article not only contributes to rethinking Lotman in the 21st century but also provides a theoretical framework to support programmatic roadmaps such as the Education 2030 Agenda in the face of a post-Covid 19 world.

Part IV. Lotman in context

The last of the four thematic sections contains articles that contextualize Lotman's thought through case studies on specific cultural milieus, showing the versatility and the "adaptability" of the heuristic tools offered by his semiotics of culture.

Marianna Boero and Cristina Greco propose a comparative analysis of the representation of women in advertising taking into consideration Italy and Saudi Arabia. In this article, Lotman's theorization of explosion (in particular, the distinction between gradual and accelerated development) offers an insightful framework to think about the cultural transformation of the "gaze on the female figure", and decode the why and how of different speeds of change, grasp the link between novelty and tradition, and interpret in a socio-semiotic perspective the holistic relationship among various social factors (feminist movement, changes in the system of women's rights, existing models and trends, emerging and consolidated values, etc.).

As other empirical studies have already shown, key notions related to semiosphere theory (border/boundary, translation filter, binary system such as Center vs. periphery, chaos vs. order, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, etc.) are particularly fruitful in geopolitical inquiries (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017). Anand Raja contributes to this scholarship, offering a reflection on the Indian electoral ecosystem. The author focuses on the figure of the Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi, trying to cast light on his discursive arrangements and strategies and the construction of a "traction" between collaborative consensus and hegemony. The author emphasizes the role of collective emotions and feelings as one of the major drivers for the strengthening of this semiosphere.

Encouraged by Lotman's writings on urban space as a meaningful textual fabric, Ekaterina Volkova Américo and Vanessa Leal Nunes Vieira analyze the city of Rio de Janeiro through an extensive body of sources in Brazilian literature (Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, João Rio, Olegário Marianno, Noel Rosa, Nelson Rodrigues, Clarice Lispector, Rubens Figueiredo, Martha Batalha). This study is not only an opportunity to identify oppositional tensions and the "other's gaze" as it shapes the physiognomy of the city (just think about the presence/persistence of the colonizing perspective) but also to grasp its transformative, always in-progress character. As Lotman (2005 [1993], pp. 84–85) would say about (the eternity of) St. Petersburg, the city "is a living organism. [...] only what changes remains. Those who do not change leave no trace"⁽⁵⁾.

(5) "это живой организм. [...] чтобы остаться, надо измениться. Тот, кто не меняется, тот и не остается".

Luca Vannucci's ecocritical article on artistic representations of the Anthropocene closes the special issue devoted to Lotman, shifting the perspective from culturally localized case studies (Italy, Saudi Arabia, India, Brazil) to the global sphere. Taking inspiration from the Lotmanian idea that each individual text is a mirror of the entire culture and its mechanisms of self-description, self-consciousness and ultimately self-awareness, the author argues that contemporary art can detect a universe of discourse that talks about an end that is real but still perceived as distant. This agency of the visual semiosphere could make tangible a catastrophe before it happens and so encourage the search for alternative realities. It is worth mentioning that, when there was still no talk of Anthropocene, the Russian scholar had sensed that there was need for a both new and ancient way of thinking and living [интеллигентность], based on non-aggressive, non-hierarchical, and polyvocal relationality (Lotman 2005, pp. 478–479). Especially in Lotman's late works, culture becomes a term to express the communication-driven mutual and circular relationship of the human being with the universe that hosts and in-forms him/her, and that involves concepts such as dialogue, creativity, development of consciousness, tolerance, but also vulnerability and destruction (it is not surprising that Lotman speaks on several occasions of the weak, fragile, marginalized, defenseless, humiliated, despised subject).

Conclusions

Quickly scrolling through the titles of the articles in this collection, and taking a bird's-eye view of them, as has been done in this brief introductory text, confirms the impression that has emerged throughout 2022, a year marked by initiatives dedicated to Lotman and his legacy. On the one hand, there seems to be no object or aspect of current research that cannot be connected in some way to the work of the great Russian thinker and, what is more important, that cannot be nourished and enlivened by it. On the other hand, it seems equally evident that this feeling is heightened in this historical phase that many perceive as a watershed, fraught with dramatic tensions, marked by the pandemic and the threats of a global war, and thus open to an uncertain, darkly hued future. If Lotman were a navigational

instrument, it would not be a nautical chart, with its precise gnomonic projections, capable of rendering exhaustively, albeit in the abstract, the vastness of the oceans and the conditions of their navigability. Among the great semioticians of history, Umberto Eco is surely the one who would be most represented by this instrument, by a majestic and triumphant oceanic chart, deploying its Mercator projections to illustrate all the recesses of the planet. But Lotman would also not be an astrolabe, tracing the complexity of the celestial sphere back to the two dimensions of the text, as might be, metaphorically, the case with Greimas, with his rotating network of concepts all tightly woven to capture the subtleties of a portion of meaning. On the other hand, neither would Lotman be a dreamy astral chart, looking to the stars and their movement to draw the ultimate destinies of human thought, as Peirce's philosophical semiotics can be interpreted, in a sense. Neither nautical chart nor astrolabe nor astral chart, Lotman is essentially an azimuthal circle: through the multiplication (or repetition) of angles, by successive shifts of the two telescopes over the reference points whose angular distance is to be known, he determines a multiple of the angle sought. And indeed, Lotman's semiotics or theory of culture does exactly that: he fixes certain landmarks by extrapolating them from the observed historical or cultural reality, then hyperbolically multiplies them through the abstraction of metalanguage, and transforms them into azimuths, from the Arabic *توسمات* "as-sumūt," "that which signifies directions." This is why Lotman's thought so fascinates especially in an age such as ours, where the directions in which to look seem to multiply to the point of dizziness, and the changes accelerate causing vertigo, and the points of reference all become relative to one another, to such an extent that we are all left with the impression of a magma with no solid footholds. Lotman has bequeathed us an azimuthal metalanguage, which does not cartograph meaning as Eco did, which does not measure it as Greimas did, which does not evoke it as Peirce did, but suggests an essentially topological machine to multiply and enhance the points of observation in order to indicate a possible direction of the gaze even in the confusion, in the acceleration, in the congeries, in the apparent elusiveness of meaning in motion. We will continue to navigate with Lotman for many more years, especially through stormy waters.

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ARTICOLO INVITATO / GUEST ARTICLE

LE DÉFI DE L'IMPOSSIBILITÉ : EXPLOSION, HISTOIRE & ARTS DE VIVRE⁽¹⁾

DI JACQUES FONTANILLE⁽²⁾

ENGLISH TITLE: The challenge of impossibility: Explosion, history, and arts of living

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: La sfida dell'impossibilità: esplosione, storia e arti del vivere

ABSTRACT: To update today the Lotmanian conception of culture and history, it seems necessary to revisit the way Lotman characterizes “the explosion”. Under what conditions can events appear “explosive”? Is it a property of events, or an effect of their analysis? Is it a perspective effect? Of analysis scale? Of a specific temporal regime? Furthermore, the Lotmanian reflection on explosion is also presented as a kind of exploration of negativity, in the vocabulary of description: the *indeterminate*, the *unpredictable*, etc., just as in the emblematic roles of the explosion: the fool and the crazy, the cheater and the eccentric, etc. From this quest for “explosive” negativity emerges the freedom to choose, to go beyond the impossible, and to reconfigure it into a work of art. History of the present time, under the regime of the explosion, would ultimately be history of the *art of living*.

KEYWORDS: art of living; explosion; negativity; temporal regime; tensive semiotics

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1. Préambule temporel

1.1. Une aporie : l'histoire de l'explosion au présent

Pour envisager une histoire et une typologie culturelle du temps présent, en se référant à Lotman et à son ouvrage *L'explosion et la culture* (2004 [1992]), il n'est peut-être pas inutile de revenir sur la manière dont Lotman caractérise ce qu'il appelle " l'explosion ", notamment eu égard aux *régimes temporels* (Fontanille 2005 ; Bertrand et Fontanille 2006) de ce qui fait événement dans la culture. En effet, dans sa réflexion sur l'explosion, Lotman ne cesse de rappeler et de montrer que le régime temporel que l'on pourrait qualifier d'" explosif " ne peut se concevoir sans son rapport avec un autre régime temporel, celui du moyen et du long terme, celui des régularités et des explications causales. Le second est tout particulièrement illustré à ses yeux par le travail de l'historien, qui remet en perspective ce qui peut paraître explosif, et qui trouve ainsi, rétroactivement, des continuités explicatives entre le passé, le présent et le futur. L'un et l'autre sont réciproquement indispensables à leur mutuelle compréhension, même si, et surtout s'ils semblent incompatibles ou antagonistes. On devrait donc en déduire, d'un côté, qu'il serait littéralement impossible de faire l'*histoire de l'explosion* culturelle, pour des raisons d'incompatibilité entre les régimes temporels respectifs de l'*histoire* et de l'*explosion*, mais que, d'un autre côté, le travail historique sur le présent (sans explosion) serait indissociable d'un développement explosif concurrent, parallèle ou concomitant. Notons en passant que Lotman désigne explicitement le type de pratique, le type de discours et même le métier de celui qui produit un récit continu, prévisible et régulier des événements, c'est l'historien, alors qu'il est moins explicite, parallèlement, sur le responsable du récit " à explosions ". Est-ce l'acteur impliqué dans l'événement ? Est-ce un témoin générique ? Est-ce le sémioticien (le sémioticien *vs* l'historien) ?

Le problème est d'ordre méthodologique : sous quelles conditions les événements peuvent-ils apparaître " explosifs " (ou pas) ? Chez Lotman, il est bien difficile de s'assurer si ce caractère explosif peut être une propriété des événements eux-mêmes, ou bien s'il résulte seulement d'un contraste avec une approche continuiste, causale et explicative, en un mot : historique. On pourrait donc être tenté, de ce fait même, d'y voir un effet de la manière dont on appréhende les événements et dont on en rend compte.

Serait-ce un effet de l'analyse elle-même, d'un effet de perspective ? D'un effet d'échelle ? L'effet d'une position de témoin direct ? On pourrait à cet égard se fonder sur la distinction entre deux régimes temporels élémentaires, celui de l'*existence* et celui de l'*expérience* (Fontanille 2004). Le travail de l'historien porterait sur le régime temporel *existentiel*, et l'histoire du présent serait dans ce cas une *chronique*, alors que le phénomène de l'explosion n'apparaîtrait que sous le régime temporel *expérientiel*, et l'histoire du présent appartiendrait alors à un genre qui est encore à découvrir : c'est l'objet de cette étude.

1.2. Deux régimes temporels : celui de l'existence et celui de l'expérience

De nombreuses présentations du temps (notamment celles des présocratiques, d'Augustin et d'Heidegger) en font le sous-produit d'un *débrayage ontologique*, le passage de l'être à l'*existence spatio-temporelle* : l'être ne connaît ni le temps ni l'espace, alors que l'*existence* se déploie dans l'un et l'autre. Selon les auteurs l'opération est décrite comme : chute de l'éternité (Augustin), échéance ontologique (Heidegger), aliénation à la deïxis (Husserl), condamnation au changement (Parménide), et le temps est alors à la fois l'un des effets mythiques de la perte de l'être et une dimension autonome qui fournit une explication au changement. Le régime temporel de l'*existence* consiste alors à articuler le temps, à partir de la coupure d'un présent, autour duquel sont réparties toutes les autres positions temporelles : il sera donc pour cela qualifié de "distensif", et cette *distension* repose sur la projection d'un moment existentiel de référence (le présent).

L'autre régime temporel neutralise ces distensions, en se plaçant sur la dimension de l'*expérience*. En immersion dans l'expérience, les processus se déploient dans la *constance* et la *transition* (Jullien 2012 [2001]), sans ruptures ni pertes : la *constance* est une propriété du changement lui-même, au sein de notre *expérience* intime, dont le présent est en déplacement continu, sans effet distensif, sans effet de répartition de positions temporelles. Le temps de l'expérience reposant sur l'*immédiateté de la relation au monde*, son présent n'est pas de l'ordre de la coupure et du moment de référence, mais précisément de l'ordre la *présence vécue et fluente*, de la présence

immédiate au monde sensible. L'une des propriétés majeures de la *présence vécue* est de fluctuer sous l'effet et le contrôle des tensions entre intensité et extension des perceptions et des impressions : sous cette condition, la présence (donc le présent de l'expérience) peut se condenser ou s'étirer, voire s'étaler infiniment, être brutalement éclatante ou vaguement diffuse : sous ce point de vue, la présence dans l'expérience pourrait donc être *explosive* (éclatante, imprévisible), comme l'une des variétés du régime temporel expérientiel.

Si la condition pour qu'un événement soit "explosif" est celle d'un régime temporel spécifique, celui de l'expérience, alors qu'advient-il du "présent", dont on chercherait ici à faire la typologie culturelle ? Ou plus précisément, de quel présent veut-on faire la typologie culturelle ? Celui, *sécant et distentif*, de l'existence (sous forme de *chronique*) ou celui, *vécu, fluide et transitionnel*, de l'expérience (sous une forme à découvrir) ? A la lumière des deux régimes temporels évoqués plus haut, on voit bien que les deux types de présents renvoient à deux modes d'appréhension des événements : si, pour appréhender un événement comme "explosif", il faut se situer exclusivement dans le présent de cet événement, et ne pas le situer par rapport aux autres positions temporelles (notamment le passé), alors nous serions conduits à choisir le présent de la présence et de l'expérience. Pourtant, comment pourrait-on accommoder cette condition avec l'affirmation de Lotman selon laquelle, avec l'explosion, le passé s'engouffre dans un futur imprévisible, sans prévenir et directement, et serait alors insaisissable au présent ? Le "présentisme" de l'explosion serait-il compatible avec l'idée de Lotman selon laquelle l'événement explosif est dérivé sur une ligne "hors temps", atemporelle ?

On rencontre chez François Hartog (2003) une réflexion sur les régimes d'historicité qui pose le même problème. Hartog défend l'idée qu'à la période contemporaine, le régime qui domine est le "présentisme". Le *présentisme* affirme que la seule réalité à laquelle nous puissions accéder est celle du présent ; seuls les événements présents existent positivement, et par conséquent, les autres positions temporelles ne sont que des simulacres. Pour Hartog, le présentisme est un *régime d'historicité* où le présent absorbe et neutralise les représentations du passé et du futur (Santini 2010). Selon lui, l'histoire devrait reposer sur deux principes temporels : (i) la *coupure* (c'est le présent), et (ii) la *succession* (passé

et futur), de part et d'autre de la coupure, dispositif qui relève explicitement, nous l'avons vu, du régime temporel existentiel. À l'ère contemporaine (depuis la chute du mur de Berlin), selon Hartog, l'absorption du temps dans le seul présent, dilaté par ce qu'il absorbe, neutralise la coupure et la succession⁽³⁾. Le présentisme semble étirer le présent, perdre en partie sa fonction de coupure et de référence positionnelle, mais il n'est pas parfaitement clair que l'on ait ici quitté le régime temporel que nous avons qualifié d'existentiel. En outre, le pseudo-présent de l'explosion, chez Lotman, serait même le contraire du présentisme selon Hartog : dans le champ de présence où on fait l'expérience de l'explosion, une brutale déviation nous place sur une ligne de fuite et d'imprévisibilité dont on ne peut rendre compte que sous forme conjecturale. Manifestement, le régime temporel propre à l'explosion ne fait pas bon ménage avec les régimes d'historicité, du moins ceux qui sont pratiqués et théorisés aujourd'hui par les historiens.

1.3. *Un exemple : l'ère de la post-vérité est-elle explosive ?*

Puisqu'il est question de typologie culturelle du temps présent, prenons un exemple contemporain, celui de la post-vérité. *Post-vérité* est d'abord le nom d'un malaise concernant l'absence de fiabilité des informations diffusées par les médias de masse et par les politiques. Insidieusement malade depuis un certain temps (une durée indéfinie), l'information officielle se verrait aujourd'hui publiquement reconnue comme *post-vérité*, parce qu'on pourrait enfin lui donner le nom d'une pathologie sémiotique. Le phénomène est alors présenté dans les médias comme "explosif", presque dans les mêmes termes que Lotman, c'est-à-dire comme une irruption épidémique, en 2016-2017, qui aurait infecté le monde entier, dont les développements seraient imprévisibles, et dont les conséquences politiques, sociales et scientifiques échapperaient aussi à toutes les tentatives de prévision. Les deux événements majeurs qui produisaient cette explosion mondiale étaient le Brexit, en Europe, et l'élection de Donald Trump, aux USA.

(3) Hartog distingue deux autres régimes, qui respectent la coupure : (i) celui où le passé régissait le présent et le futur (avant la Révolution Française), et (ii) celui de l'époque moderne où le futur était la clé d'interprétation du présent et du passé.

Pourtant, les premières manifestations de cette maladie de la vérité avaient déjà été fortement signalées une dizaine d'années auparavant : le nom même de cette pathologie explosive, *post-truth*, était alors inventé par Ralph Keyes (2004) pour caractériser une société où la différence entre le vrai et le faux n'a plus aucune valeur. L'ouvrage éponyme de Keyes détaille les différents symptômes de cette maladie sémiotique qui éclate selon lui au début du XXI^{ème} siècle : le mensonge éhonté, la contrefaçon délibérée, le mépris affiché des faits et des meilleures manières de les établir, le complotisme échevelé, etc. C'est une institution linguistique, le dictionnaire Collins, qui sacralise ensuite l'autre nom de cette explosion pathologique, *fake-news*, qui figure désormais, à partir de 2017, sous la définition suivante : "*false, often sensational, information dissiminated under the guise of news reporting*". En communiquant sur l'introduction de ce terme dans le dictionnaire, Collins précise qu'en deux ans (2015-2017) son usage a augmenté de 365% ! Nous voilà face à une explosion, un fait culturel bouleversant, doté d'un vecteur d'imprévisibilité proliférante, les "*fake news*". A noter : l'explosion est maintenant bien circonscrite, c'est celle de l'usage de son nom (+365%).

Ralph Keyes dénonce la "flamboyante subjectivité" qui caractérise selon lui l'époque contemporaine, et notamment en raison du mélange des genres (fiction, documentaire, témoignage, etc.). Il évoque longuement les années 90 et 2000, où plusieurs publications d'articles frauduleux ont été dénoncées : des reporters de guerre, des envoyés spéciaux les avaient rédigés comme des témoignages personnels sans jamais se déplacer sur le terrain. Il met également en cause le *storytelling* des politiques, notamment Clinton ou Bush, qui serait responsable de bien des distorsions de la vérité, dans tous les domaines. A l'évidence, Reyes sort alors de son rôle de "témoin de l'explosion", et commence à se faire l'"historien du présent élargi". Pour cela, il étire ce présent, il procède par une rétrospective à court terme (une quinzaine d'années).

Mais il limite cet élargissement du présent, et ne l'étire pas jusqu'à, par exemple, prendre en compte les mensonges d'Etat et la propagande tout aussi éhontée des médias américains pendant la période de la guerre froide, des guérillas et des coups d'Etat en Amérique Latine, ainsi que pendant la guerre du Vietnam, auxquels Edward Herman et Noam Chomsky (2018 [1988]) avaient pourtant consacré un ouvrage très documenté, antérieur

au sien, et donc bien avant l'invention du nom, *post-truth*. Et bien entendu, quand il évoque le *story telling* des grands responsables politiques, il n'évoque pas non plus la *Guerre des Gaules* de Jules César ! La manipulation des faits et le mépris de la vérité, pour l'historien, n'est pas une invention bouleversante du temps présent, et la propagande mensongère ou mystificatrice était même largement déjà pratiquée par les tyrans de la Grèce et de la Rome anciennes.

Notre propos n'étant pas d'explorer plus avant le phénomène dénommé *post-vérité*, ce que nous avons déjà fait par ailleurs (Fontanille 2020), nous n'entrerons pas dans le détail de l'analyse, en nous limitant à ce qui constitue son caractère explosif. Rien ne nous permet de constater aujourd'hui une prolifération inhabituelle des " faits alternatifs " et autres mensonges politico-médiatiques, en comparaison du passé. Mais en revanche l'accélération et l'expansion de la diffusion des *fake-news* est un fait établi : elle porte même, elle aussi, un nom spécifique, c'est la *viralité* dans les réseaux sociaux digitaux. Cela n'implique pas que les responsables politiques et la presse mentiraient plus aujourd'hui qu'hier. Il ne semble pas, par exemple, que l'émeute déclenchée en février 2021 au Capitole, à Washington, par la dénonciation ostensiblement mensongère d'une fraude électorale, soit d'une autre nature que bien d'autres émeutes urbaines ou jacqueries paysannes, suscitées jadis par d'autres rumeurs et d'autres peurs, si fréquentes au Moyen Âge, et en Europe.

En somme, que reste-t-il de tangible pour justifier à propos de la post-vérité d'aujourd'hui le motif de l'explosion ? Au moins trois opérations, mises en évidence ci-dessus : (i) une dénomination nouvelle, qui spécifie et qui singularise le phénomène, et qui explose elle-même dans l'usage, dans un temps très court ; (ii) une massification de la diffusion, rendue possible par la technique, et (iii) une restriction temporelle, dans l'appréhension du phénomène : en l'occurrence, une restriction dans l'élargissement du présent de l'expérience, un effet de perspective (pas de profondeur temporelle) et un effet d'échelle (l'échelle réduite de la seule expérience actuelle). En résumé, la *construction d'une actualité*.

Nous sommes toujours bien loin des objectifs, des exigences et des valeurs de la pratique historique. En outre, expliquer le phénomène de l'explosion culturelle par la perspective adoptée, et par l'appartenance au régime temporel de l'expérience, améliore peut-être, certes, notre

compréhension des conditions sous lesquelles des événements peuvent advenir par explosion, mais cela ne résout pas pour autant le problème initial : comment peut-on espérer faire au présent l'histoire de l'explosion culturelle, puisque cet objectif semble d'emblée paradoxal, voire aporétique ? Du point de vue des régimes temporels, la caractérisation de l'*explosion* comme relevant de l'*expérience* et des fluctuations de la *présence* est de nature *subjectale*, alors que l'histoire du temps présent devrait pouvoir faire appel à une approche *objectale* : nous proposons alors de transposer l'opposition discontinue entre deux régimes temporels, celui de l'expérience et celui de l'existence, à une autre échelle d'analyse, en *un processus graduel qui conduirait d'un pôle subjectal à un pôle objectal* : dans les termes de Coquet (2007), le parcours à accomplir n'est plus celui d'un changement radical de régime temporel, c'est celui de *l'objectivation progressive des instances énonçantes*.

2. La négativité et la liberté de nier

On peut maintenant examiner la prégnance de la négativité dans le raisonnement de Lotman. Sa réflexion sur l'explosion, en effet, dans ses définitions comme dans ses réalisations particulières, se présente comme une sorte *d'exploration systématique de la négativité* ; d'abord dans le vocabulaire de la description : l'*indéterminé*, l'*imprévisible*, l'*indicible*, l'*irreprésentable*, l'*illogique*, l'*irréductible* ; ensuite, dans les explications de l'explosion : l'irruption de l'étranger, de l'hétérogène, de l'altérité, l'invasion par d'autres textes, d'autres langues, par des formes *non* sémiotiques, *non* culturelles, *non* interprétables, *non* traduisibles ; enfin, dans les rôles emblématiques de l'explosion : l'imbécile et le fou, le tricheur et l'excentrique, la scandaleuse et l'ivrogne. Globalement, cette négativité est nécessaire pour que le taux d'informativité augmente, mais elle a bien d'autres effets !

Dans le parcours d'*objectivation* évoqué ci-dessus, la négativité, dont la portée est essentiellement modale (ce sont principalement des négations aléthiques, potestives, épistémiques, etc.), nous ferait faire un pas vers la position objectale. A minima, les opérations de négation supposent deux instances en interaction, une qui affirme, une autre qui nie : nous ne sommes

donc hors de la sphère étroite de la subjectivité réflexive, et nous sommes déjà dans celle des relations interpersonnelles, et en voie d'une généralisation objectivante. En outre, et toujours en faveur du processus d'objectivation, la problématique de l'explosion se déplace : elle dépend moins des conditions de l'appréhension des événements, et beaucoup plus de la morphologie (modale) de ces événements.

2.1. *Une sémiotique de la culture intensive*

Il y a plusieurs manières d'envisager une sémiotique de la culture, et notamment deux grandes tendances, que l'on pourrait caractériser l'une comme *extensive*, et l'autre comme *intensive*.

Dans le premier cas, la culture est considérée comme le rassemblement plus ou moins cohérent d'un ensemble d'objets, de textes et de pratiques dans lesquels une communauté se reconnaît : la sémiotique de la culture se divise alors en spécialités, voire en herméneutiques juxtaposées, qui ont pour tâche de décrire chacun de ces types d'objets ou de pratiques. Dans ce cas, on ne peut caractériser ce qui est culturel qu'en se référant à l'inventaire des objets et des pratiques dits " culturels ", ce qui implique qu'ils doivent avoir été préalablement répertoriés eux-mêmes comme tels. Le cercle n'est en l'occurrence guère vertueux. En outre, la sémiotique de la culture ne serait qu'une fédération d'herméneutiques spécialisées. L'avantage tactique évident est qu'une telle conception ne remet en cause ni les découpages disciplinaires ni le consensus académique en matière de classification des objets culturels.

Dans le second cas, la culture est considérée comme une activité globale de production matérielle et symbolique, un champ dynamique réglé par des lois générales et par les propriétés globales d'une *praxis*, qui définissent ce qu'est une culture indépendamment des objets et des pratiques qui la constituent ; dans ce cas, chaque culture particulière est définie par les règles spécifiques qui en contrôlent le champ dynamique. Et, inversement, les objets et pratiques ne sont reconnus comme culturels que dans la mesure où ils sont soumis à ces règles spécifiques. Quand Lotman, par exemple, explore les limites du culturel, en comparant les comportements humains avec ceux des autres animaux, il montre que la même pratique,

tantôt réflexive et inventive, tantôt purement rituelle et répétitive, peut être considérée comme culturelle dans un cas, et pas dans l'autre⁽⁴⁾.

Lotman ayant choisi cette seconde conception, les objets et faits culturels sont identifiés à partir du fonctionnement global du système, et, dans *L'explosion et la culture*, il prend en considération aussi bien des textes que des courants culturels et esthétiques, des faits historiques et politiques, des tactiques militaires, des phénomènes de mode, voire des cours de vie individuels, et même des anecdotes apparemment sans portée "culturelle", selon le sens commun. Le "culturel" ne se définit pas par les objets que l'on peut rassembler sous ce label, mais par leur mode de production.

Chez Lotman, l'une des règles dominantes concerne non pas des objets, mais des événements culturels, et elle est *inspirée par le principe de négativité* : l'application de procédures et de rituels caractérise le monde animal en général, et seule la capacité d'inflexions, de bifurcations et d'inventions imprévisibles, qui mettent en question ou en crise les procédures et les rituels, sont spécifiquement humaines et culturelles. Entre deux partenaires qui seraient strictement équivalents en compétences, motivations et maîtrise de l'échange, la communication serait insignifiante et vide d'information, et seule la dissymétrie, l'inégalité, le malentendu sont producteurs de valeur culturelle ; entre deux langues, la traduction exacte est impossible, et cette impossibilité est la bienvenue, car elle fait de la traduction une activité productrice de valeurs culturelles. La négativité est alors le ressort, la force productrice des valeurs culturelles : ce n'est plus une propriété (subjectale) du mode d'appréhension des événements, mais une propriété (quasi objectale) projetée sur les événements eux-mêmes.

(4) La conception de la culture que nous présentons ici est celle de Lotman, et ce n'est ni la nôtre, ni celle qui pourrait être présentée à partir des travaux de l'anthropologie et de l'éthologie contemporaines. Par exemple, l'éthologie animale considère aujourd'hui comme un fait culturel la *transmission* (non génétique) *des comportements entre individus de la même espèce et appartenant à des générations différentes*. On ne peut en effet parler de *transmission culturelle* que dans la mesure où il ne s'agit pas d'un héritage génétique (et donc sélectionné par sa prédominance et l'avantage reproductif que lui procure sa répétition efficiente) : par conséquent, ce qui est transmis culturellement chez les animaux est toujours marginal, singulier, voire innovant par rapport aux comportements hérités génétiquement. Les oiseaux inventent de nouveaux chants, découverts dans un environnement qui évolue ; les éléphants apprennent à barrir comme des bulldozers, à force de les entendre dans la forêt ; et leur progéniture sera capable d'en conserver l'usage même en changeant d'environnement. Ce ne sont peut-être pas des explosions, mais tout de même des innovations culturelles.

2.2. *Le sémiotique, le non sémiotique et le pluri-sémiotique*

Dès les premières lignes de son ouvrage, Lotman affirme que “ Les questions essentielles que pose tout système sémiotique sont, premièrement, son rapport avec ce qui n’est pas le système, avec le monde extérieur, et, deuxièmement, les relations entre les aspects statiques et les aspects dynamiques ” (Lotman 2004, pp. 10-11). Le premier problème du “ sémiotique ” (à l’intérieur), c’est la relation avec le “ non sémiotique ” (à l’extérieur) ; l’extérieur nie la sémiotique : c’est une négativité externe. Le second problème de la sémiotique est interne, ce sont “ les relations entre les aspects statiques et les aspects dynamiques ”, autrement dit les aspects dynamiques nient la stabilité des formes statiques : c’est une négativité interne.

Les deux types de négativité se conjuguent dans l’examen des relations entre le “ vivant ”, l’“ humain ” et le “ culturel ”. Dans le chapitre “ Le réseau pensant ”, on croit comprendre que le “ sémiotique ” (le monde signifiant) est un domaine plus large que le “ culturel ”, en ce sens que le monde animal est aussi un monde signifiant, y compris pour les animaux eux-mêmes. Mais précise Lotman, en substance, la signification ne produit alors aucune information, car elle émane d’une ritualisation figée, un mouvement clos et cyclique, à l’intérieur duquel il n’y aurait pas d’innovation possible, sinon au prix de l’insignifiance. Les humains participent aussi de ce type de fonctionnement sémiotique, en tant qu’animaux, mais ils sont pourtant en mesure d’échapper au figement rituel, de rompre les cycles, d’ouvrir les mouvements fermés sur eux-mêmes. C’est ce qui explique notamment que l’explosion puisse être qualifiée de “ culturelle ” : elle nie tout ce qui n’est pas elle, voire elle se nie elle-même en tant que positivité, mais cette indétermination et cette imprévisibilité n’engendrent pas pour autant l’insignifiance ; au contraire.

Le “ culturel ” innove et bouleverse l’ordre sémiotique sans pour autant le détruire, car selon Lotman, le monde sémiotique est pluriel, de droit et de fait. L’hétérogénéité et la multiplicité des langues et des cultures humaines sont à la fois le “ ressort ” du fonctionnement sémiotique, et source de la valeur même de l’information et des structures. Cette condition est une modalité particulière de la négativité ; en effet, la pluri-sémiotité n’est pas ici valorisée au titre de la “ diversité ” mais

en raison de l'altérité et de la négativité qu'elle implique. Entre deux langues, par exemple, les zones de négativité, celles où s'impose l'impossibilité de traduire, fourniront l'expérience optimale de l'existence d'un espace extra-sémiotique. Lotman retourne en somme entièrement le thème cratylien : la pluralité des langues et des cultures, leur intraductibilité réciproque, et la négativité interne qu'elle manifeste, ne sont pas des obstacles à la saisie du monde extra-sémiotique, mais leur condition : " Cette incapacité même n'est pas un défaut mais une condition d'existence car c'est justement elle qui dicte la nécessité de l'autre (autre personnalité, autre langue, autre culture) " (2004, p. 5).

Autrement dit, il ne faut pas seulement disposer d'un signe, ou de plusieurs signes mis en relation, encore faut-il qu'ils soient niés, ou qu'ils soient confrontés à leur propre absence. Ainsi, ce n'est pas un modèle des structures élémentaires de la signification, fondamental et isolable, dont il est question, mais d'un espace sémiotique et de propriétés dynamiques, notamment de négation, de disparition, ou d'expulsion, qui fondent la possibilité de la signification des faits culturels. Même dans une perspective dialogique (dialogue entre les cultures, dialogue entre les faits culturels), la négativité règne, la nécessaire différence entre les rôles d'émetteur et de récepteur n'est pas seulement une absence d'équivalence : c'est une *rupture de symétrie*. La rupture de symétrie dans le dialogue engendre la " différence de potentiel " qui produit l'information nouvelle : ce principe, déjà présent dans la définition de la sémiosphère, est ici hypertrophié, pour devenir un principe d'hétérogénéité et de négativité radicales, la condition pour qu'émerge la valeur culturelle de l'information.

2.3. *L'imprévisibilité et la liberté des impossibilités*

L'imprévisibilité est le motif principal de la description de l'explosion en tant que phénomène, mais elle implique, du point de vue des acteurs culturels et de leurs pratiques, une liberté créatrice et paradoxale. Entre les deux, *imprévisibilité* et *liberté*, les possibles et les impossibles assurent justement cette transition paradoxale.

Du côté des explications historiques rétrospectives, qui se transportent au moment qui précédait l'explosion, la répartition des possibles et des

impossibles est conforme aux règles modales : le passé revisité par l'historien est déclaré comme le seul possible, et ce qui n'a pas pu se réaliser est en revanche pensé comme impossible. Cependant, Lotman montre en plusieurs exemples que les choix imprévisibles ont aussi un caractère stratégique, et qu'on ne saurait réduire ainsi rétrospectivement les effets d'explosion à des impossibilités qui seraient restées inaperçues par les contemporains, et seulement explicables par leurs successeurs. En effet, l'imprévisibilité et l'explosion comme stratégies peuvent être sciemment provoquées, notamment dans les conflits sociaux, politiques ou militaires. Les comportements imprévisibles et aberrants sont particulièrement efficaces, parce que les adversaires ne peuvent les intégrer dans leurs calculs que comme des impossibilités. Dans cette perspective, la stratégie se saisit alors de ce que l'adversaire croyait impossible, ces impossibilités deviennent des failles tactiques, et sont converties en espace de liberté d'action, ce qui fait voler en éclat la stratégie adverse. *L'explosion a eu lieu, et elle convertit l'impossibilité en liberté d'inventer un futur.*

Plus généralement, chaque situation structurale comporte un ensemble de variétés, qui peuvent être évalués et pondérés comme plus ou moins possibles ou impossibles. L'explosion provoque un tri, mais en inversant les évaluations et les pondérations, entre, d'une part, une situation réalisée, mais auparavant considérée comme impossible, et d'autre part, un grand nombre de situations potentielles non-réalisées, mais pourtant considérées comme possibles juste avant l'explosion. La valeur culturelle des situations réalisées dépend entièrement du fait qu'elles sont perçues sur le fond de toutes les autres, qui restent potentielles, et sur le fond des inversions modales – la conversion de l'*impossibilité* en *liberté* d'agir et de créer – qui produisent l'effet d'"invention".

2.4. *Des paliers et des tempos asynchrones dans les transformations culturelles*

Lotman tient à prendre en compte aussi bien les phénomènes continus et graduels que les phénomènes discontinus et explosifs, et tout particulièrement la solidarité qui les rend indissociables : la valeur des uns dépend de leur solidarité avec les autres. La solidarité sémiotique entre processus explosifs et processus graduels, entre continuité et discontinuité est assurée,

par une dialectique de coexistence, réglée par des *modes d'existence* : la prévisibilité *actualise* les possibles et virtualise les impossibles ; l'explosion *réalise* les impossibles et *potentialise* les possibles. Les scénarios stratégiques évoqués ci-dessus en sont la claire illustration.

Cette coexistence de deux ou plusieurs types de production culturelle est inséparable de la dynamique globale du champ, et il faut alors se doter d'une représentation de ce champ de manœuvres où chaque couche, chacune dans un mode d'existence, évoluerait selon son propre *tempo* : chaque couche culturelle adopte ainsi une vitesse de changement propre, de sorte qu'en chaque tranche synchrone, mettant en perspective plusieurs couches asynchrones, coexistent simultanément des stades d'évolution différents. De fait, dans cette sémiotique de la culture, les différents " régimes temporels " sont les supports des opérations et transformations modales, ce qui contribue à les faire progresser dans le processus d'objectivation (cf. supra). Le possible devient impossible, l'impossible semble à nouveau possible, et des couches potentielles inaccessibles refont surface lentement ou brusquement : il n'est pas concevable d'attribuer ces transformations à l'analyse elle-même, elles ne peuvent caractériser que l'événement de l'explosion en tant que phénomène. C'est dans ces complexes mouvements et interactions entre couches culturelles que prend forme un *espace de liberté*, celui de l'invention ou de la création imprévisibles.

D'une certaine manière, le seul événement qui neutralise (provisoirement) les différentiels de vitesse, et même qui semble échapper à la fois aux contraintes temporelles et aux déterminants modaux, est justement celui de l'explosion pure, celui d'une liberté extatique, affirmée envers et contre tout : quelle que soit la durée réelle de ce type de transformation, dans la mesure où il unifie toutes les contradictions, et où il suspend toute possibilité de modalisation – après s'en être nourri –, ce moment est vécu comme étant hors du temps.

On aboutit ainsi à une représentation très complexe de l'espace sémiotique de la culture, qui combine au moins deux principes de coexistence et de solidarité tensives : d'un côté, entre les situations réalisées et les situations potentielles (celles qui sont exclues par l'explosion), et de l'autre, en même temps, entre les processus explosifs et les processus graduels.

3. De la liberté de nier à la folie et à l'art

Les sémiotiques structurales ont toujours eu le plus grand mal à intégrer dans leurs modèles les phénomènes imprévisibles et aberrants. Les lectures narratives rétrospectives, fondées sur les modèles de Propp et de Greimas (Greimas & Courtés 1979), leur procurent certes un sens culturel, mais en neutralisant leur caractère aléatoire, imprévisible ou aberrant, tout comme l'explication historique *a posteriori* : c'est ainsi que les schémas canoniques de l'action arasent et neutralisent les péripéties et les accidents d'un parcours narratif. Les processus interprétatifs à orientation progressive, comme ceux issus de la sémiotique peircienne, aboutissent finalement au même résultat : intégrés à la dérive infinie de la signifiante, ces faits aberrants ou imprévisibles peinent à se distinguer des autres, sans compromettre les règles du parcours interprétatif.

3.1. *Affirmer, dénommer et assumer une singularité*

Les modèles d'analyse de l'erreur, de l'oubli, du lapsus ou de l'acte manqué ne manquent pas : les uns sont anthropologiques, comme l'analyse de l'oubli chez Lévi-Strauss (1975), ou comme le choix de la victime émissaire chez René Girard (1982) ; d'autres sont linguistiques et sémiotiques, comme notre étude consacrée au lapsus (Fontanille 2011), mais la plupart sont psychanalytiques. Tous opèrent sur ces phénomènes une réduction épistémologique : (i) ces phénomènes sont traités comme exclusivement individuels (ou, inversement, ils consacrent l'individualisation du système), et (ii) ils présentent un caractère pathologique (le plus souvent individuel, ou parfois collectif, comme chez Lévi-Strauss), et ils sont considérés comme des dysfonctionnements du système.

La force de la pensée de Lotman tient à sa résistance à ces deux réductions : même individuelle, l'aberration n'est que la réalisation d'un possible collectif ; même profondément perturbateur, l'événement explosif et aberrant fait partie du système, comme un des modes de réalisation (imprévisible, discontinu) des possibles et des impossibles potentiels. Ainsi, la conduite scandaleuse d'une princesse russe, ou la folie politique d'un tsar ou d'un empereur romain fournissent-elles de précieuses indications

sur la dynamique même de la culture au sein de laquelle elles s'expriment. Notons ici qu'il n'est plus alors question d'erreur, d'oubli ou d'aberration au sens d'un manque ou d'un dysfonctionnement. Il est question de *folie*, et ce n'est plus alors un manque, un défaut de sens, mais une affirmation de soi, *un trop plein de sens*.

Il faut revenir alors à la liberté de nier, notamment, cas extrême, de nier l'impossibilité et de la réaliser : *la liberté de nier singularise* ; Lotman parle en ce cas de "moment d'individualisation" : "Le comportement conscient n'est pas possible sans un choix, c'est-à-dire sans un *moment d'individuation*, et, par conséquent, il présuppose l'existence d'un espace rempli de noms propres" (Lotman 2004, p. 59, souligné par nous). Ce chapitre consacré aux "noms propres" est quelque peu énigmatique, et pourtant il offre la clé d'une transformation essentielle : le passage de la négation à l'affirmation, de la liberté de choisir, et donc de nier des options et d'en élire d'autres, à l'affirmation d'une singularité. Le "nom propre" est pour Lotman le nom d'une irréductible singularité, d'une occurrence unique, et il s'oppose au nom commun considéré comme générique, comme le nom d'une classe d'entités identiques. L'événement explosif n'entre dans aucun genre, dans aucune classe, ce n'est pas même une occurrence, puisqu'il n'y a pas de type en référence : c'est un *hapax*, auquel on ne peut donner qu'un nom propre.

Si de tels hapax événementiels sont pour Lotman emblématiques du fonctionnement des cultures, c'est probablement parce qu'il estime, avec quelque raison, que dans le règne animal, ils sont spécifiques de l'humanité : seuls les humains ont la possibilité et la liberté de peupler leur environnement de singularités qu'ils peuvent individualiser au point de leur donner un nom. En somme, c'est cela précisément, la *folie* : au terme d'une chaîne de négations diverses et accumulées, l'assomption de leur résultat global grâce à *la désignation d'une irréductible singularité*. Nous parlons ici d'*assomption*, car l'affirmation de la singularité, notamment comme "folie", s'accompagne pour Lotman d'une possibilité de dénomination : affirmer la singularité d'une folie et la reconnaître comme dénommable, voire lui donner un nom, c'est l'assumer. C'est ainsi que les humains passent de la liberté de choisir et de nier, à *l'assomption de leur folie singulière*.

Que ce soient celui de la culture en général ou celui du texte en particulier, le système sémiotique doit toujours être considéré à la fois

comme le lieu d'une organisation homogène, et comme le lieu d'accueil pour l'irruption d'éléments "fortuits" venant d'ailleurs, d'autres textes, d'autres acteurs, d'autres entités étranges. Ces éléments entrent alors en interaction avec les structures principales, et augmentent brusquement l'imprévisibilité de leur développement ultérieur, mais ce fait-là est *en lui-même* caractéristique de la culture en général, et la manière dont le système réagit à ces intrusions et à ces interactions est elle-même spécifique et caractéristique de chaque culture en particulier. Dans le cas de l'explosion, l'"élément fortuit et étrange" a été produit, voire dessiné, modelé, sculpté par l'enchaînement des opérations de la négativité, et pour signifier pleinement, il lui faut assumer ce résultat comme singularité.

3.2. *Faire de la vie une œuvre d'art*

Sous cet éclairage, on comprend mieux alors l'étonnante parenté que Lotman semble percevoir entre le dandy et le fou, entre le tyran dément et la femme du monde scandaleuse. Tout d'abord, c'est un fait qui semble aller de soi, quand on s'efforce de faire l'histoire des explosions culturelles, on constate que certains genres historiques conviennent mieux que d'autres à cet exercice : il semble que les biographies et les monographies s'y prêtent mieux que les grandes fresques séculaires ou les chroniques au long cours, et ce, d'autant plus si le personnage central meurt jeune et tragiquement – ce qui évite la répétition et la banalisation des comportements les plus excentriques.

Il serait en effet légitime de s'étonner de l'intérêt tout particulier que Lotman accorde, notamment dans *L'explosion et la culture*, aux vies individuelles, aux vies de femmes et d'hommes remarquables, ayant eu quelque influence sur la société ou la politique de leur époque. Les biographies individuelles font bien partie du genre historique, dès lors que l'existence de ces individualités est attestée. Mais elles spécifient le discours historique par un changement d'échelle, du collectif vers l'individuel, et par un accès plus direct aux intentions des acteurs. Les vies individuelles sont des œuvres qui ont un auteur bien identifié, dans tous les cas plus facilement identifiable que celui des vies collectives.

Cette focalisation sur les vies individuelles et sur leur “ auteur ” constitue une indication intéressante sur ce que Lotman recherche dans l’explosion culturelle : la sublimation de la négativité systématique dans un *art de vivre*. Pas seulement l’esthétique, le jugement esthétique, ou la production d’objets artistiques au sens habituel, mais la manière dont on peut, en assumant une singularité, *faire de sa vie une œuvre d’art*. D’où le problème à traiter pour l’analyste et l’historien : comment saisir plus généralement un tel processus d’artistisation dans l’histoire ?

Le développement consacré au “ vrai ” et au “ faux ” dandy (Lotman 2004, pp. 31-32), dans le chapitre “ Le progrès graduel ”, met particulièrement en évidence un processus de *singularisation stylistique*. Un dandy célèbre, Russelton, évoque la relation que doit entretenir un dandy avec son couturier, et il donne l’exemple d’un tailleur, Stultz, qui multiplie à dessein, dans la confection de ses fracs, les signes aristocratiques. Russelton lui reproche la banalisation de ces signes, et de faire ainsi “ des gentlemen et non des fracs ” (*ibid.*). Il conclut par cet aphorisme : “ C’est l’homme qui fait le couturier, et pas inversement ” (*ibid.*). Son interlocuteur, Willoughby, croyant avoir compris ces propos, explique alors qu’il demande à son couturier “ de ne pas copier les fracs et les pantalons des autres mais de les tailler en accord avec [sa] constitution, et pas du tout à la manière d’un *triangle isocèle* ” (*ibid.*, souligné par nous). Russelton désigne alors dédaigneusement l’habit que porte Willoughby, et interroge : “ D’après vous, cet objet représente un frac ? ” (*ibid.*).

Lotman commente cet échange en opposant l’explosion stylistique et son imitation et sa banalisation. Mais il n’explique pas pourquoi, précisément dans cet échange, le caractère explosif de la mode ne supporte ni la répétition et l’accumulation (cas Stultz), ni l’adaptation et la défiguration stylistiques (cas Willoughby). En d’autres termes, pour un dandy, qu’impliquent les valeurs de *rareté* et de *modèle* stylistiques ? L’homme et le frac doivent s’ajuster l’un à l’autre sans s’adapter, et sans ostentation ni reprise : pour le vrai dandy, le comble, sans doute, est de renoncer à ce que le frac soit un “ triangle isocèle ”, c’est-à-dire une idéalité stylistique sur laquelle il devrait être en mesure de se projeter sans aucune adaptation réciproque. Autrement dit, nous assistons à la réunion des deux faces (le dandy et le frac stylisé) d’une même occurrence singulière, non reproductible, et qui s’ajustent sans renoncer, ni l’une ni l’autre, à ce qu’elles sont

en elles-mêmes séparément. Ajustement, mais sans adaptation : c'est un ajustement irréductiblement singulier, par définition.

En somme, nous assistons à une rencontre inouïe, et que ne suivra sans doute aucune autre occurrence. Toutes proportions gardées, elle ressemble étonnamment à la rencontre, dans le conte de Perrault, entre le pied de Cendrillon et sa petite chaussure de vair : elle seule peut la porter, et cela suffit à leur procurer une identité commune exceptionnelle. En outre, si Russelton insiste sur le fait que c'est " l'homme qui fait le couturier ", c'est pour indiquer laquelle de ces deux faces prend l'initiative : c'est l'acteur humain qui se met ici au défi de coïncider et de s'ajuster parfaitement à un habit qui manifeste un idéal stylistique et qui n'a pas été conçu pour s'adapter à lui.

Cette rencontre est de toute évidence paradoxale, et peut-être, plus profondément, de l'ordre de l'impossible. Mais cette impossibilité étant dépassée, voire transcendée, elle permet d'accéder à un style inimitable. Dans le chapitre " L'intersection sémantique comme explosion du sens. L'inspiration ", Lotman évoque un autre type de rencontre inimitable et explosive : celle entre deux domaines sémantiques qui ne sont pas, avant l'explosion, associables l'un à l'autre, et qu'une métaphore inouïe réunit pourtant. Il en commente le résultat ainsi : " Cette union du désuni sous l'influence d'une tension créatrice quelconque se définit comme une *inspiration* " (Lotman 2004, p. 44, souligné par nous). La rencontre est *imprévisible*, et même sémantiquement, selon les lois de la langue, *impossible*, et pourtant elle a lieu, sous l'effet d'une tension – une force – qui la convertit en évidence : les deux domaines n'étaient pas faits l'un pour l'autre, tout comme pour le dandy et le frac stylisé, mais ils s'ajustent parfaitement et constituent ensemble un nouveau domaine sémantique entièrement innovant. Cette conception des métaphores créatrices n'est certes pas originale, mais la dramatisation lotmanienne en fait tout le prix : Lotman met en scène l'acte d'innovation sémantique, l'inspiration artistique, comme la création d'une irréductible singularité. Et, si on peut revenir un instant au dandy, on comprend alors la parenté qu'il peut y avoir entre la création d'une métaphore inouïe et l'ajustement singulier entre un homme d'exception et un frac parfaitement isocèle : c'est *l'explosion d'une œuvre d'art*.

Lotman consacre en outre tout un chapitre au " Phénomène de l'art ", où il ne fait que confirmer les résultats des réflexions qui précèdent. L'art,

dit-il, apporte “ la liberté [...] aux sphères qui, en réalité, ne la possèdent pas. Le non-alternatif reçoit la possibilité d’une alternative. [...] Il rend probable non seulement ce qui était défendu mais aussi ce qui est impossible. L’art se présente comme le domaine de la liberté par rapport à la réalité ” (Lotman 2004, p. 193). A cet égard, le domaine de l’art est celui où il est possible d’expérimenter les effets d’une liberté croissante et presque sans limites. Il définit à la fin du chapitre un modèle philosophique de l’histoire en opposition complète avec la tradition hégélienne : “ un créateur-expérimentateur au cours d’une grande expérience dont la fin est imprévisible ” (Lotman 2004, p. 203)⁽⁵⁾.

Globalement, le déplacement opéré est considérable : il ne s’agit plus de l’art considéré comme un domaine culturel parmi d’autres, ayant une place spécifique à l’intérieur de la culture et de son histoire ; il s’agit de considérer l’histoire – en régime explosif – comme une *création-expérimentation artistique* : l’acte créateur comme moteur de l’histoire. L’“ inspiration ” individuelle et l’enthousiasme du créateur (qui peuvent apparaître comme une folie ou une excentricité incompréhensible) sont des effets locaux d’une énergie créatrice qui traverse toute la culture, en chaque moment et à travers les temps : en faisant l’expérience de leurs capacités créatrices, les humains – en régime explosif – font l’histoire.

Il faut noter ici que le point de vue qui permet un tel renversement de perspective est tout de même spécifique. On ne peut pas reprocher à Lotman d’énoncer une loi universelle de l’histoire. Ce point de vue est celui de la culture, et de son ressort principal, l’explosion : l’histoire ne se résume pas à l’innovation-création, mais ce serait, selon Lotman, du point de vue des sciences de la culture, le seul domaine de la connaissance

(5) Pour comprendre la place du processus d’*artistisation* chez Lotman, on peut se référer à cette déclaration extraite de l’article “ Les hommes et les signes ” : “ Si nous connaissions tous les secrets constructifs du texte artistique, nous pourrions les utiliser pour résoudre l’un des problèmes les plus urgents de la science contemporaine : celui de la densification de l’information. Bien sûr, cela ne limiterait pas la capacité des artistes à trouver de nouvelles voies : ainsi, la connaissance des lois de la mécanique ne limite pas les concepteurs à la recherche de nouvelles idées et de nouvelles applications. Maintenant, nous avons déjà la bionique, science qui étudie les formes constructives du monde biologique dans le but de les utiliser dans des mécanismes artificiels. *Y aura-t-il jamais une ‘ artistique ’*, science qui étudie les lois des constructions artistiques pour ‘ greffer ’ [en russe, vacciner] certaines de leurs propriétés dans des systèmes de transmission et de stockage d’informations? ” (Lotman 1969, p. 10, traduction du russe Inna Merkoulova, version de travail, souligné par nous)

où l'innovation pourrait prendre un caractère explosif et irréductiblement non déterministe, le seul où l'innovation pourrait passer pour une création sans fin.

Il serait donc possible de faire l'histoire de l'explosion au présent, et même d'accomplir le *parcours d'objectivation* que nous suivons depuis le début de cette réflexion : il faudrait alors considérer le sens de la vie collective et des vies individuelles comme un sens *en cours d'artistisation*. Faire de sa vie une œuvre d'art, c'est l'objectif affiché par la plupart des personnages célèbres chers à Lotman. Faire de nos vies collectives une œuvre d'art en cours, en création permanente, ce serait le défi à relever par qui voudrait faire au présent l'histoire de l'explosion. Du point de vue temporel, le prix à payer, avec la transgression des impossibilités, c'est la ligne de fuite dans le hors temps, et notamment *une étroite fusion entre la présence du présent et celle du futur*.

4. Pour vivre le présent : y projeter le design des futurs

4.1. Le design des futurs comme œuvre d'art

Dans cette fusion entre la présence du présent et celle du futur, l'“ œuvre d'art historique ” est en cours de constitution. Nous avons fait observer, à propos du dandy et de son frac isocèle, et à propos de la métaphore créatrice, que le processus en cours (i) prend son origine dans un passé proche (celui de l'impossibilité) maintenu à l'horizon du champ de présence, (ii) traverse la présence du présent (celui de la liberté de nier, et de choisir l'impossible) et (ii) se projette sur un futur lui-même déjà présent (celui de l'explosion artistique).

Dans la production littéraire moderne et contemporaine, il existe déjà un genre qui est en mesure de faire l'histoire de cette projection explosive à l'intérieur d'une présence actuelle : la science-fiction, du moins celle qu'il est convenu d'appeler aujourd'hui la “ Hard-SF ”, ou “ science-fiction réaliste ”. Prenons l'exemple de l'œuvre de Kim Stanley Robinson⁽⁶⁾:

(6) Kim Stanley Robinson est surtout connu pour deux trilogies célèbres : une sur la “ terraformation ” de Mars, et une autre sur les changements climatiques. Son plus récent roman, *New York 2140*, se déroule exceptionnellement sur Terre, et dans un futur relativement proche :

bien entendu, ses fictions se déroulent au cours du troisième millénaire, sur d'autres planètes que la Terre (sauf quelques-unes, comme *New York 2140*). Mais il explore justement, sous ces conditions d'éloignement temporel et spatial, toutes les questions actuelles relevant de l'écologie d'une planète, de la vie sociale et de l'organisation économique et politique, traitées comme les prémisses présentes des futurs envisageables. Il se livre en somme à une histoire du présent grâce à une projection simulée dans le futur et dans la galaxie, qui permet d'extrapoler les frontières des impossibilités à venir, mais déjà entremêlées dans les potentialités du présent. En outre, cette projection est l'exacte manifestation de la liberté dont il a besoin pour "artistiser" cette présence du futur : elle lui permet en effet de découvrir de nouvelles impossibilités, de rechercher comment les transcender, d'y parvenir le plus souvent, ou d'y renoncer sciemment, comme dans *Aurora*, qui est, eu égard à l'œuvre de Robinson, un envers désabusé et critique. Sous ces conditions, l'*histoire de la présence du futur* invente des problèmes, des solutions et des échecs, des *arts de vivre* (des formes de vie stylisées) qui seraient restés inaccessibles à une histoire du présent, tout court, et au sens du présent existentiel.

Pour clore cette réflexion, et sans aucune prétention à la science-fiction, nous pourrions explorer plus précisément cette "présence des futurs", et la manière dont ils pourraient nous conduire à une esquisse de l'histoire du temps présent, à la lumière de l'explosion lotmanienne. La présence des futurs, donnant accès à l'histoire de la présence du présent, sera, si l'on suit la leçon de Lotman, sinon pleinement un acte artistique – en serions-nous capable ? – du moins un ensemble d'*actes de stylisation*. Sur le modèle des "rencontres inouïes" et improbables (cf. supra), un acte accompli au sein de la présence actuelle doit rencontrer une certaine forme stylisée du futur, et leur réunion aura l'allure et le statut

il explore, en se limitant à la ville de New York, toutes les conséquences pratiques, économiques, sociales, techniques et politiques de la montée des eaux océaniques. Il est également réputé pour la rigueur, la sophistication et l'exactitude de ses références scientifiques et techniques, bien qu'il soit de formation littéraire. Comme ses romans m'ont semblé faire appel à des questions fréquemment traitées en sémiotique, j'ai exploré sa biographie, et découvert que son directeur de recherches pour la préparation de son PhD, consacré aux romans de Philip K. Dick, était Fredric Jameson, philosophe et théoricien de la littérature fortement influencé par la *french theory* ! Un de ses romans les plus célèbres, *Mars la Rouge*, contient même deux pages consacrées à la construction d'un carré sémiotique, et une dizaine à son exploitation romanesque !

d'un " projet ", ce dernier étant composé, par définition, à la fois des potentialités propres au champ de présence et des futurs stylisés ; comme la discipline qui s'occupe des *projets* ainsi définis est le *design*, alors c'est dans ces *designs du futur* que trouveront place les formes de vie en tant qu'*art de vivre* en cours de construction.

4.2. *La typologie du design des futurs*

Dans cette perspective, le futur n'est évidemment pas conçu comme une position temporelle, ou comme un mouvement entre des positions, sur une dimension autonome de l'*existence*. Les futurs émergeraient de l'association, dans l'expérience, de plusieurs dimensions solidaires, dont en particulier celle des activités pratiques déployées dans un présent dilaté et mouvant. Ces futurs seraient alors le produit symbolique d'activités pratiques modalisées (par le vouloir, le savoir, le pouvoir, le devoir) portant sur les potentiels du présent. Ils seraient le fruit d'un ajustement entre les prémisses potentielles (notamment de stylisation) permettant d'imaginer les futurs possibles, et les pratiques via lesquelles ces futurs modifieraient en retour leur présence actuelle.

La diversité de ces futurs repose principalement sur celle *des manières de les appréhender, de les faire signifier et de les pratiquer*. En extrapolant l'expérience singulière du dandy et de son frac, nous considérerons que cette diversité des designs du futur aura deux faces : (i) une face de *modalisation préfigurative*, reposant sur la tonalité modale (vouloir, savoir, devoir, pouvoir) spécifique des activités visant à la schématisation-stylisation des futurs, (ii) une face d'*iconisation prospective*, débouchant sur la reconnaissance de tel ou tel style de futur. La revue de littérature sur ce type de problèmes montre que, sans passer nécessairement par les œuvres littéraires de science-fiction, les champs de recherche qui en traitent sont précisément ceux qui sont directement intéressés au *design* social, environnemental, managérial ou politique. Dans le domaine des sciences de gestion, par exemple, on s'intéresse à la manière dont les décideurs peuvent élaborer une stratégie explicite, reconnaissable et publiable (donc iconique et stylisée) en combinant des figures hypothétiques des futurs et des potentiels d'activités présents (Wiltbank et al. 2006 ; Vian & Silberzham 2020).

Les figures hypothétiques du futur dépendent d'abord de la possibilité/impossibilité de les prévoir à partir des potentialités présentes ; autrement dit, sur la face que nous avons dénommée *iconisation prospective*, la valence sollicitée est celle du *potentiel de prédiction* du futur. Les activités de schématisation et de stylisation des futurs dépendent, inversement et en retour, de la capacité de ces futurs à infléchir nos activités présentes, de manière à ce qu'elles puissent contribuer à les préfigurer : sur la face que nous avons dénommée *modalisation préfigurative*, la valence sollicitée est celle du *potentiel de transformation* de la situation présente, c'est-à-dire la capacité du futur d'*influer* sur le présent.

En bref, d'un côté la *prédictibilité* (à partir du présent vers le futur), et l'*influençabilité* (à partir du futur vers le présent) participent à une boucle rétroactive, entre l'*iconisation prospective* des styles potentiels et la *modalisation préfigurative* des activités actuelles ; les deux valences peuvent être considérées comme deux facettes de la *prise* réciproque entre la présence des présents et la présence des futurs : *prise* et *reprise*.

Ces deux valences étant solidaires, ce sont les équilibres et déséquilibres entre les deux qui permettront de caractériser les ajustements entre les deux faces, c'est-à-dire les "designs" des futurs. Dans une structure tensile, on obtient ainsi quatre zones de tensions spécifiques, que nous proposons ici de mettre en œuvre dans une esquisse d'histoire de la pandémie⁽⁷⁾.

- Une forte prédictibilité rencontrant une forte influençabilité caractérise un projet selon la tonalité modale du vouloir : l'iconisation prospective est au maximum de son extension, et la modalisation préfigurative, au maximum de son intensité. Le vouloir peut donc à la fois se projeter et opérer de manière efficiente : c'est un futur "qui s'éloigne de nous" mais sur lequel le vouloir-faire donne prise, et réciproquement, qui a une forte prise sur les activités au présent. Dans le contexte de la pandémie, ce serait le régime organisé autour des pratiques de production et de mise en œuvre des vaccins : le vaccin est en effet un effet d'un futur prédictible sur des activités

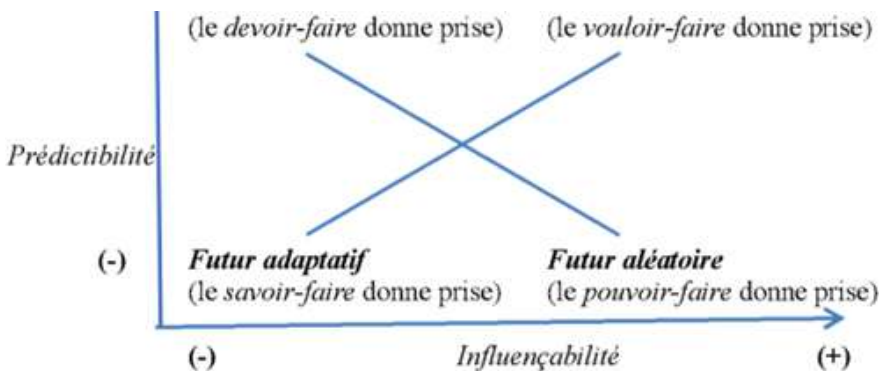
(7) Cette démarche et l'exemple de la pandémie ont été également présentés parallèlement à cette étude, dans Fontanille (2021).

présentes et programmables. Mais plus généralement, les confinements et mesures de restrictions, avec la baisse ou l'arrêt des activités socio-économiques, ont permis de faire l'expérience au présent, quasi immédiate, des impacts sur l'environnement : d'un côté, cela justifie fortement les scénarios prédictifs écologiques, et en retour, cela fournit une image stylisée de ce que pourrait être notre futur si nous réorganisons notre présent.

- Une faible prédictibilité rencontrant une faible influençabilité ne peut conduire, au mieux, qu'à des esquisses de pratiques d'adaptation et de protection, " à l'aveugle ", sous la tonalité modale du savoir-faire : l'iconisation prospective est au plus bas, et la modalisation préfigurative ne mobilise que des savoir-faire routiniers, des habiletés déjà disponibles, sans aucune capacité d'innovation globale. Les acteurs assument leur ignorance, et déploient par compensation des habiletés multidimensionnelles. Eu égard à la situation pandémique, ce régime temporel est particulièrement représentatif de la prolifération des " petites inventions " locales ou domestiques, touchant aux solutions de protection, aux distances sociales, aux traitements, etc., une pratique de " bricolage à l'aveugle ", qui s'apparente à une activation individuelle et sociale foisonnante et opportuniste, mais en aucune manière " explosive ".
- Quand une forte prédictibilité rencontre une faible influençabilité, le style de futur auquel on peut accéder résulte de la reconfiguration d'une anticipation en une contrainte et une soumission à cette contrainte. Ce futur anticipé " qui va nous tomber dessus " est une injonction à nous soumettre par avance, sans que les activités présentes puissent y changer quoi que ce soit. Proclamer l'état d'urgence en situation de pandémie relève précisément de ce style de futur : la décision prise au présent est un design de ce futur, mais pas encore une activité présente : on ne sait pas quelles dispositions seront prises, mais on s'assure dès maintenant que, quand elles seront nécessaires, elles seront injonctives. Plus généralement, la certitude que le " monde d'après " sera radicalement différent du " monde d'avant ", et que nous ne pouvons rien faire pour l'empêcher, ou nous y préparer, ne laisse qu'une seule issue : se soumettre à l'avance. Le potentiel d'explosion (sociale) est bien connu.

- Enfin, quand une faible prédictibilité rencontre une forte influençabilité, la modalisation préfigurative des activités présentes l'emporte sur l'iconisation prospective des futurs : une multitude de programmes d'activités de précaution et de protection se mettent en place, et ils sont tous conçus pour faire face aux aléas, sous la tonalité modale du pouvoir. Quel que puisse être ce futur inconnu, le pouvoir-faire associé au savoir-faire donne prise sur les aléas potentiels. Ce design du futur est alors une esquisse, une approximation des possibilités et impossibilités, qui a au présent l'apparence d'une forteresse en état de siège. Dans la pandémie, on découvre ainsi que l'expansion de la maladie obéit à des paramètres qui semblent incontrôlables ; la biologie ne peut pas prévoir seule les métamorphoses des virus, et il faut faire appel à une biologie évolutive des grandes populations vivantes en expansion, pour comprendre la dynamique des aléas génétiques dans la prolifération des populations virales. On mobilise alors à toutes les ressources disponibles pour se préparer à faire face à ces aléas, dès qu'on observera qu'ils deviennent massifs. Concrètement, cela revient à mobiliser une théorie et une méthode de traitement des aléas (ceux des mutations virales), et c'est alors une manière de procurer un design à ce futur, qui reste pourtant inconnu.

La structure tensive qui en résulte aurait la forme suivante :



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PARTE I

GENEALOGIE: ESPLORANDO LA VITA, LE PERSONE E LE CULTURE

PART I

GENEALOGIES: LOOKING INTO LIFE, PEOPLE, AND CULTURES

OSWALD SPENGLER AND THE CULTUROLOGY OF JURI LOTMAN: ON THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM^[1]

DI TATJANA KUZOVKINA^[2]

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Oswald Spengler e la culturologia di Juri Lotman: a proposito della dichiarazione del problema

KEYWORDS: Juri Lotman; Oswald Spengler; cultural studies; laws of history; World War II

ABSTRACT: The article describes the influence of Oswald Spengler's ideas on Juri Lotman's concept of the cultural history and his ideas about the laws of history. The name of Spengler appears in Lotman's later works. Starting with his final monograph, *The Unpredictable Mechanisms of Culture*, Lotman posed a global question regarding the role of people in history. It is important to note that in the first chapter of this book he recalled one of Spengler's concepts. The article discusses Lotman's thinking about the *The Decline of the Europe* in four of his letters from the frontline (1943–1944) and the context they were shaped in. Lotman read *The Decline of Europe* in the atmosphere of an "explosion" in the autumn and winter of 1943–1944. In the late period of his works, the scientist was recognized and remembered as a public intellectual of his time. Concepts of Spengler's book and some of his ideas, almost half a century after reading it, became relevant for Lotman's final works.

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One of the most popular theories introduced by Juri Lotman is the theory of semiosphere. It started to form in his lecture series in the beginning of 1980 and was formulated into its final form in the paper published in 1984 (Lotman 1984). The semiosphere, according to Lotman, is primary when it comes to relation to its conforming elements, it precedes any communicative act and is “a single mechanism (if not, an organism)” (Lotman 1984, p. 7). At the border of the semiosphere, there is “semiotization of what comes from outside and its transformation into information” (Lotman 1984, p. 10). The semiosphere acts like the creator of a text in that it processes information from the external space around it and “constructs it for itself in the case of absence” (Lotman 1984, p. 8). One of the conditions that allows the semiosphere to exist is a constant dialogue between the elements functioning within it. At the same time, peripheral elements increase the activity and their shift to the center is an essential condition for the emergence of new significance (Lotman 1984, pp. 5–14). The universality of this theoretical model allows further development of the theory across different fields in humanities: biosemiotics (Mandelker 1994; Alexandrov 2000), the body of work that studies the relationship between the human mind and culture and the process of change in complex sign systems used by humans (see Rosa and Valsiner 2018). Scientific potential of this theory is also based on the fact that the theory was formed in a dialog and was influenced by other significant theories, such as Vernadsky’s noosphere, but also others that we will discuss further in this article. In this article, we will focus on how the German philosopher Oswald Spengler’s ideas influenced Lotman.

Spengler does not appear much in Lotman’s articles or books, though he does appear in the later period of Lotman’s works. In the summer of 1991 in an interview for *Independent Magazine*, Lotman compared *perestroika*, to an explosion, where all possible paths are equally probable. He said that he would have liked to be a bit younger so that he could actively participate in these crucial historical events⁽³⁾. In response to the question

(3) At the same time, Lotman was very skeptical about *perestroika* (and he turned out to be right!): “We are going to make American life, that is, a good, gradual, technical, peaceful life, where laws would operate and the economy would be such where two plus two turns out to be four, not a bomb. [...] But it won’t be good. We will definitely have explosions. But there will be no explosions only in one instance; if we are all driven into prison. And to establish human order

of the place of culture in the modern world, he compared different understandings of culture and grouped Spengler together with the “genius” Blok, noting, that they did not know each other. They both opposed the idea of “not culture and nature (like Voltaire or Rousseau), but culture and civilization” (Lotman 2003, p. 280). For them, culture was associated with something deep and elemental, “located in the foundations of the highest human value”. Civilization, with technology, is something superficial, “with surface-level scientific-technological progress” (Lotman 2003, p. 280).

Starting with his final monograph, *The Unpredictable Mechanisms of Culture*, Lotman posed a global question regarding the role of people in history. It is important to note that in the first chapter, while formulating the objectives of this new book, he recalled one of Spengler’s images: “Oswald Spengler wrote of the road as length without width, as movement into the unknown, a symbol which lies at the foundation of all Egyptian culture” (Lotman 2013, p. 39).

This reference, as we will try to show below, was not incidental. Lotman had been familiar with the works of Spengler since 1943.

In 1940, while he was a second-year student of the philological faculty at Leningrad University, Lotman was drafted into the army. He served throughout the whole war as an artillery operator, served another year and a half in Soviet occupied Germany, then returned to university in December of 1946. The letters he wrote to his mother and sisters (Kuzovkina *et al.* 2022) allow us to see what an incredible feat it was for Lotman to educate himself during those years as he studied French, translated one of Henrich Heine’s poems from German and read books about history and philosophy (see Kuzovkina 2019a).

On November 18th, 1943, in a letter to his sister, Lydia Lotman, he talks about finding a large and substantial library just outside of Kharkov, where books about Pushkin turned out to be of a particular interest to him. Two days later, on November 20th, 1943, in a letter to his mother and sister, Inna Lotman, he mentions Spengler for the first time when he refers to his book *The Decline of Europe*.

so peacefully, quietly, as now everyone swears, only by legal means ... I don’t know...” (Lotman 2003, p. 280).

Two translations of Oswald Spengler's book exist in the Russian language. Both were available in 1923: the first was done by Nikolai Garelin and published along with a foreword by Abram Deborin (Spengler 1923b), the second was edited by Andrian Frankovsky (Spengler 1923c). Lotman's apparent, yet vague references to Deborin's foreword indicates that he read the former edition.

The book was largely recognized as being harmful as it "supported the idealistic spirit."⁽⁴⁾ The general directorate of the literature and publishing house permitted the publication of *The Decline of Europe* only "with amendments of a political nature." Deborin's preface solved that ideological issue.

Deborin described Spengler as being an "idealistic intuitionist" whose religious "devilry" is "vividly hostile to the Marxist worldview" and reproached him with "Prussian stupidity" and "unacceptably arbitrary treatment of facts" (Spengler 1923b, p. XIX–XXI).

The first reviews by Lotman, both in tone and content were close to those of Deborin's: "metaphysics and mysticism, therefore — nonsense"; "very exciting, but of course, very untrue. All the facts are so exaggerated that you wonder: is he himself deceived or does he deliberately intend to deceive the reader?" (in a letter to Lydia on December 8th, 1943)⁽⁵⁾.

At the moment, we are not entirely sure how much Lotman knew or read about Spengler before the war, although he had two of Spengler's books in their original German in his personal library (Spengler 1922, 1923a)⁽⁶⁾.

There is no evidence that points to how much Lotman knew in 1943 about the collection *Oswald Spengler and The Decline of Europe*, its authors (Nikolai Berdyaev, Fedor Stepun, Semyon Frank and Yakov

(4) Documents published by Mikhail Zelenov: <http://www.opentextnn.ru/censorship/russia/sov/org/glavlit/norm/1923/index.html?id=224>; accessed on 8 September 2021.

(5) Hereinafter, the letters are cited from originals or photocopies from originals kept in the home archives of Lotman's niece Natalya Obratsova. All cited letters will be published in Kuzovkina *et al.* (2022).

(6) Lotman's personal library (located at Tallinn University) contains Spengler's books in German (Spengler 1922, 1923a), but they only appeared in the library in 1992. They were presented to Lotman by the heirs of the famous Estonian ballerina, Anna Ekston (1908–1992) according to her will.

Bukshpan) or about the controversy surrounding Spengler's book, the tone of which was set by Vladimir Lenin⁽⁷⁾.

Lotman was born into a family of European intelligentsia, who had lived in St. Petersburg since 1909. His father, Mikhail Lvovich Lotman (1882–1942), was a lawyer who specialized in copyright matters and had graduated from St. Petersburg University where he studied law and some physics and mathematics, as well. He worked as a legal advisor for various institutions including the Phonetic Institute for the Practical Study of Languages, the publishing house *Krasnaya Gazeta* and the Leningrad Regional Publishing House. It can be assumed that the family discussed the expulsion of famous representations of the intelligentsia from Soviet Russia in 1922, which has also affected the authors of *Oswald Spengler and the Decline of Europe*, along with the debate about Spengler's book in the pages of the magazines *Under the Banner of Marxism* and *Krasnaya Novi*⁽⁸⁾.

A typical example of an “ideologically truthful” assessment of *The Decline of Europe* was given, for example, in an article by Georgy Pyatakov: “Spengler's “philosophy” is a flat ideological mishmash, completely anti-scientific, pretentious, mystical nonsense. Scientific thinking has nothing in common with it [...]” (Pyatakov 1922, p. 182).

From the references in the letters, it is evident that Lotman read *The Decline of Europe* in the second half of November 1943. His final reviews of the book differ greatly from his first two. On December 1st, 1943, he writes to Lydia that he wants to talk about *The Decline of Europe* but is not able to: “I am content with making notes on the margins — I argue with the authors since they cannot retaliate”. Apparently, in addition to Spengler, Lotman is also referring to the author of the foreword. On January 9th, 1944, Lotman writes to his sister Inna that he has many topics he would like to discuss:

(7) “The old bourgeois imperialist Europe, which used to consider itself the navel of the earth, rotted and burst in the first imperialist massacre like a stinking abscess. No matter how much the Spenglers and all educated bourgeois were capable of being admired (or at least being noticed) this decline of old Europe plays only one part in the history of the fall of the world bourgeoisie, which was devoured by imperialist plunder and oppression of the majority of the world's population” (N. Lenin, *On the tenth anniversary of Pravda*, “Pravda”, No. 98, May 5, 1922).

(8) Individual issues of *Krasnaya Novi* from 1923, 1924, 1926 and almost all their issues from 1927 are in Lotman's library.

Especially in connection to Oswald Spengler's book, *The Decline of Europe*. I found the book to be very interesting. Of course, it's not true but 1) the way it is written is captivating, 2) it is on a very intriguing topic, 3) his methodology has a lot to offer, if applied practically, could be very useful. With such an arrangement, one can come to the conclusion that works of art (often subconsciously) reflect the degree of a person's thinking. With this way of thinking, one could say that Rodin and Rembrandt are dialectical, while Praxiteles and other Greeks are at the metaphysical stage.

Many other interesting thoughts have come up along the way, however, there is no more room to write them down.

I would like to ask you (the question arose while reading this book), what *counterpoint* and *dominant seventh chord* are.

However, despite all his education, Spengler is distinguished by a terrible Prussian stupidity, and moreover, by an unacceptably arbitrary treatment of facts. The facts that do not fit in with his agenda, he, without a doubt, treats them as if they do not exist.

On February 8th, 1944 Lotman gives a detailed review of the book in a letter to Lydia Mikhailovna:

Recently I read Oswald Spengler's book, *The Decline of Europe*. If we discard the "ideal outer shell" and the Nietzschean Prussian ideas, then there is something quite interesting that remains. One can conclude that the stage of human thinking that has developed thus far, though subconscious, penetrates all spheres of life and that if, for example, between Einstein and Euclid, the connection is only genetic, then between Einstein, Rodin and Blok, there is a deeper, albeit subconscious connection. However, for Spengler, it is all turned so upside down that it is even strange for an honest, practical soul to read. Although he covers it up with a brilliant exposition, he still gives the impression that he is deliberately deceiving his readers, talking his way out of all sorts of paradoxes.

We cannot confidently say that Lotman was being entirely honest in these reviews, as he knew that the letters from the army were being censored and would often use special ciphers that his sisters knew, in order for

his message to get across. For example, if the letter was written by pencil, it meant that he was currently in the war zone, if by pen, he was on leave. He hinted at the location of his regiment by using facts known to the letter recipients or by using literary quotes.

Perhaps the cliché phrases about Spengler's book ("ideal outer shell", "terrible Prussian stupidity", "an unacceptably arbitrary treatment of facts") were written because of the censorship. On the other hand, Lotman did not immediately accept or come close to accepting all of Spengler's ideas. However, he was particularly interested in the approach of the German thinker, to consider all types of human activity – science, art, and politics – as being parts of one whole, as a certain stage in human development. Spengler wrote that "[...] there is a deep commonality of forms between differential calculus and the dynastic state principle of the era of Louis XIV, between the state structure of the ancient polis and Euclidean geometry, between the spatial perspective of Western oil painting and the overcoming of space with the help of railways, telephones, and long-range weapons, between counterpoint instrumental music and the economic system of credit" (Spengler 1923b, p. 5).

In Lotman's personal journal entries during that time, a similar thought process can be seen. For example, from a note written on January 18th, 1944 about the awakening of dialectical consciousness in Russia:

The beginning of the 19th century is one of the most interesting eras of Russian life, as the awakening of dialectical consciousness begins. It would be very interesting to trace it through the art of that time. This is the main difference between the art of the 18th and 19th centuries and between "classicism" and "romanticism". Consider Baratynsky from this angle. (Kuzovkina *et al.*, p. 201)

The fact that Spengler's book made, albeit an ambiguous, but vivid impression on Lotman is also evident by the later mention of it. On October 11th, 1944, he wrote to his mother, Inna and Lydia about a new book discovery: "I tried to read Max Stirner's *The One and His Own*, but could hardly keep myself from yawning. Oswald Spengler writes fascinatingly, but this is utter boredom."

Reading these reviews in letters from 1943-1944 are especially interesting because over the next forty years, the name of the German thinker was never again mentioned in any of Lotman's texts.

It can be assumed that Lotman was familiar with the polemical article by Sergei Averintsev, published in *Voprosy Literatury* in 1968 (a copy of this issue without reader's notes is available in his library). Averintsev called for a revoking of Spengler's legacy and criticized him for his lack of faith. He emphasized that for Spengler, culture "[...] is like a vegetative soul of a collective, united as a 'people group' [...]" and therefore, everything that is abstractly "dimensional", — which is not only science, but also religion or classical idealism, is, in fact, foreign" (Averintsev 1968, p. 143).

Averintsev criticized not only Spengler's culturological concept, but also the very peculiarity of his thinking, reproaching him with philistinism: "[...] Spengler's concepts are just too close to common sense, [...] they, in many ways, only convey an unprecedented consistency and clarity to that which is unverified and cannot withstand verification of commonplace truths" (Averintsev 1968, p. 133).

Recognizing the artistic talent of the author of *The Decline of Europe* and his virtuosity in handling his words, the author of this article considered the excessive complexity and metaphoric nature of the language to be disadvantages: "At times, I wish to say that it is not Spengler thinking, but the German language that is thinking for him"; "metaphorical convergence of words is hopelessly confused with philosophical work of concepts" (Averintsev 1968, p. 140).

Perhaps, Averintsev's argument influenced Lotman's criticism of Spengler in his book *Inside the Thinking Worlds* (Lotman 1996), which was first published in English in 1990 (Lotman 1990). In the chapter titled "Historical patterns and structures of the text", Lotman wrote about the impact of narrative models on the consciousness of a scientist-historian. In particular, that sometimes historians consider their "classification as an immanent quality of the non-textual material" and transfer "the eschatological experience of 'beginnings' and 'endings' from the level of descriptions onto the level of what is being described" (Lotman 1990, p. 243). So, Spengler, according to Lotman, "made language, the *instrument* of description, into the object of description — which was world history" (*ibid.* p. 243). He has "absolute gaps" between the death of one

cultural spirit and the birth of another. It is this absoluteness that allows us to consider each culture as a separate organism. Here, Lotman does not agree with Spengler: “On some levels life is intermittent, on others continuous, and if we talk of a boundary we must know from whose point of view it is meant”. (*ibid.* p. 243).

With the beginning of *perestroika*, began an active publication of texts that in Soviet times were considered “ideologically incorrect” including several new translations of Spengler and his commentary edition (Spengler 1993). This time coincided with a new, last stage in Lotman’s work, which began on May 22nd, 1989 and continued until his death in November 1993. The historical background included the collapse of the USSR, Estonia gaining independence and the accompanying changes in public consciousness, caused, among other things, by the abolition of censorship. From February to November 1989, Lotman was in Munich as he was the recipient of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Prize. Prior to this trip, he worked on a number of final projects that unite and connect his work. In addition to the book for the I.B. TAURIS & CO. LTD Publishers (Lotman 1990), the first volume of the three-volume collected works was completed and sent to be printed (Lotman 1992).

The final period of his work was also characterized by being in active contact with his readers, especially after the release of the television lectures series “Conversations on Russian Culture”. Lotman received many letters, which to some extent built up the author’s self-esteem and led to developing topics for his later work (Kuzovkina 2019b, pp. 121–124). However, deeply personal issues became the main influencers. On May 22nd, 1989, in Munich, Lotman suffered a stroke, as a result of which he partially lost his ability to read and write. From that moment on, he dictated all his new texts (from personal letters to scientific monographs). His wife, Zara Grigorievna Mints (1927–1990), was the first to help him write, and after her death, his secretaries took on that role (the author of this article being one of them).

This new way of working led to his available resources becoming very limited. In one of the letters, Lotman wrote: “Now I have to rely on memory much more which is a treacherous thing, but life teaches you to count not what is gone, but what has remained [...]” (Lotman 1997, p. 446). Looking into the past led to a revision and rethinking of the traversed life path. Wartime life experiences and the books read at that became

relevant once again. This was especially clearly apparent in Lotman's final books, *Culture and Explosion* (1992) and *Unpredictable Mechanisms of Culture* (1993), which, although they were written at different times, are parts of one whole, the final book that raises a wide range of humanitarian problems caused, among other things, by the collapse of the USSR.

This idea of Lotman's was close to *The Decline of Europe* both in terms of the universal coverage of topics (laws of historical development, features of herd and individual human behavior, fashion history, philosophy of explosion and unpredictability), and in deeply personal experiences of a historical moment, as well as the need to act with vigour during a critical moment in history.

Reading the first volume of *The Decline of Europe* through the lens of the late Lotman's ideas reveals interesting parallels. For example, Lotman's idea of two paths of development of the historical process — gradual, causal and explosive — when the role of chance increases drastically and it is impossible to foresee exactly which way further development will go, seems typologically similar to one of the weightiest statements of Spengler, that history does not develop linearly. It is known that the Spengler's method was based on the morphology of history, the search for similar stages of development in different cultures. He considered each cultural organism in relation to the stages of development of the "soul of culture." When the task of culture is completed, it freezes and becomes a civilization. Many researchers noted that after Spengler, the idea of the historical process as a straight line on which historical processes are strung began to seem very naive (Spengler 1923b, p. XI).

Spengler opposed the necessity of causality with the necessity of fate (Spengler 1923b, p. 460), and connected the category of fate with a number of the latest scientific hypotheses, among which was the hypothesis of explosions accompanying the decay of atoms:

[...] the primordial atoms, which have kept their essence unchanged for millions of years, in spite of external influences, suddenly, for no apparent reason, explode and scatter their smallest parts throughout the space of the universe at a speed of thousands of kilometers per second. Among the entire mass of radioactive atoms, this fate always befalls only on individual atoms, while those adjacent to them remain completely intact, therefore, this picture is also history [...] (Spengler 1923b, p. 461).

It is characteristic that in the behavior of atoms, Spengler distinguishes two kinds of processes — gradual and explosive. This is very similar to Lotman's later ideas about the gradual and explosive nature of history. A detailed comparison of Lotman's late culturological ideas and the works of Spengler will lead to the identification of other parallels.

Thus, the material shows the need for a typological comparison of the cultural ideas of Oswald Spengler and Juri Lotman. Lotman read *The Decline of Europe* “in the atmosphere of an explosion” in the autumn and winter of 1943–1944. In the late period of his works Lotman's memory turned not only to the wartime events, but also to the books he read at that time. Both the concept of Spengler's book and some of his ideas, almost half a century after reading it, became relevant for Lotman's final works.

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LA SEMIOSFERA NELLO SPECCHIO DELLA VITA

DI FRANCISCU SEDDA⁽¹⁾

ENGLISH TITLE: The semiosphere in the mirror of life

ABSTRACT: This work returns to the contents of the essay *On the Semiosphere* looking at them through the perspective of everyday life deposited in the correspondence between Lotman and Uspenskij. Among the results that will emerge there is the significance of the relations of power and belief that mark intellectual work; the intertwining and reciprocal influence between the traumas / joys of life and the development of thought; the creative circularity that supports both the trend of experiences and that of Lotman's semiospheric vision; the fundamentality, if possible made even more fundamental by this unprecedented perspective, of relationality in the processes of meaning-generation; the explicit attempt, contradictory in every sense of the term, to affirm a semiotic vision and language at the same time based on dialogue and not ancillary to other disciplines.

KEYWORDS: semiosphere; everyday life; thought; dialogue; creativity

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Introduzione⁽²⁾

Il presente lavoro vuole tornare da una diversa prospettiva sui contenuti del saggio *La semiosfera*⁽³⁾. Nel concreto si tratta di operare uno spiazzamento del punto di vista consueto mettendo in dialogo il famoso e fondamentale saggio lotmaniano non con il complesso dell'opera del padre della semiotica della cultura o con altre visioni teoriche, semiotiche e non, ma con la sua stessa vita. Più precisamente si tratterà di chiamare in causa uno strato meno considerato della sua esistenza, quello dei suoi vissuti quotidiani e del suo ragionare informale, colti attraverso una peculiare forma di testualizzazione, quella dell'epistolario con Boris Andreevič Uspenskij, recentemente reso parzialmente accessibile in italiano⁽⁴⁾.

L'epistolario lotmaniano, con le sue 22.000 lettere, è uno dei più formidabili e vasti a livello europeo⁽⁵⁾. Le lettere che noi utilizzeremo ne sono un frammento quantitativamente ridotto. Viene dunque da chiedersi come le lettere scambiate con Uspenskij possano essere assimilate a “la vita” per intero di Lotman, essendo *poche* ed essendo *lettere*. Al di là dell'evidente portata esplorativa, sperimentale ed aurorale di questo nostro lavoro – che auspichiamo di poter sviluppar in futuro o che speriamo possa ispirare altri colleghi e colleghe – crediamo di poter mostrare nei fatti, attraverso l'analisi, come il valore qualitativo del carteggio con Uspenskij compensi questo doppio scacco. In primo luogo, per il fatto di coprire un arco temporale di quasi trent'anni, dunque una parte importante dell'esistenza di Lotman e di fatto tutto il percorso della sua maturità intellettuale. In secondo luogo, per il fatto di essere rivolte all'amico “di una vita”⁽⁶⁾ cosa che consente a Lotman di mettere potentemente in

(2) Grazie a Laura Gherlone e a uno dei due revisori anonimi per le critiche puntuali alla prima versione del testo e per gli utili suggerimenti che ho provato, per quanto possibile, ad integrare.

(3) Per delle discussioni in inglese del concetto di semiosfera si vedano ad esempio Torop (2005), Semenenko (2012, 2016), Nöth (2014).

(4) Il volume Lotman, Uspenskij (2018) traduce parzialmente la raccolta del 2016 *Perepiska 1964-1993*. Per motivi di competenza linguistica lavoreremo su quanto trovato in traduzione.

(5) Per una panoramica su catalogazione, numeri, contenuti, interlocutori dell'epistolario Lotman-Mints, si veda Kuzovkina (2021) con la relativa bibliografia.

(6) Tale condizione è chiaramente esposta e confermata dalle lettere stesse, dai loro toni e contenuti. Nell'economia del nostro discorso è importante ricordare che non vi è nessun altro con cui Lotman abbia così tanto co-firmato articoli o co-editato volumi: ciò avvalorà l'ipotesi che le lettere con Uspenskij, più di quelle scritte a chiunque altro, svolgano per Lotman anche il ruolo

scena se stesso, il suo vissuto, il suo sentire, il suo ragionare incorporato e in divenire: in altri termini quella corporeità che diviene invisibile ai più nei suoi scritti teorici (§7). In terzo luogo, infine, perché tutto ciò in più punti entra in profonda risonanza con quanto egli scrive nel saggio sulla semiosfera, in alcuni completandone la portata, in altri spostandone il fuoco, in altri casi ancora rendendo passaggi già forti, seppure nella loro astrattezza teorica, ancor più vividi, in altri casi infine mostrando i residui di un complesso meccanismo di (in)traducibilità (§3).

Fra i risultati che emergeranno vi è la significatività delle relazioni di potere e di credenza che segnano il lavoro intellettuale; l'intrecciarsi e l'influenzarsi reciproco fra traumi e gioie della vita e sviluppi del pensiero; la circolarità creatrice che regge tanto l'andamento dei vissuti quanto quello proprio della visione semiosferica di Lotman; la fundamentalità, se possibile resa ancor più fondamentale da questa inedita prospettiva, della relazionalità nei processi di generazione del senso; infine, il tentativo esplicito, contraddittorio in ogni senso del termine, di affermare un linguaggio e una visione semiotica non ancillare rispetto ad altre discipline.

Nel complesso ciò che si rivela è l'inesauribile ricchezza del lascito lotmaniano.

1. Ritrovarsi nei pensieri altrui

All'inizio del saggio sulla semiosfera Lotman accredita l'idea che il suo ragionamento parta da un confronto con i padri della semiotica (Peirce e Morris da un lato, Saussure e Jakobson dall'altro) e dall'esigenza di un ribaltamento della loro prospettiva atomistica. Il passaggio ad una visione olistica del senso genera l'immagine di un "continuum semiotico" in cui gli elementi isolati sono immersi e rispetto a cui sono debitori per "vivere", vale a dire per sviluppare significato. È subito dopo questa definizione

di laboratorio intellettuale, di occasione per l'esposizione/elaborazione di idee inedite. Tale ipotesi resta da mettere alla prova della comparazione con i contenuti delle lettere inviate agli altri interlocutori di Lotman. Per il lettore del russo valgono come punti di partenza Lotman (2006a), Lotman, Mintz, Egorov (2012 e 2018). A mo' di esempio si noti la distanza siderale, in termini di dialogo personale-intellettuale, fra il carteggio Lotman-Uspenskij e le pur importanti lettere scambiate fra Lotman e Sebeok fra il 1967 e il 1991 (cfr. Raudla e Pern 2011).

astratta che Lotman dice: “Chiamerò questo continuum semiosfera in analogia con il concetto di biosfera introdotto da Vernadskij” (Lotman 1984, p. 56). Il pensiero del biologo sembra dunque essere secondario rispetto alla creazione che Lotman ha in mente ed appare principalmente funzionale alla creazione di un calco linguistico. Tuttavia, una volta che l’atto di nominazione ha materializzato questa relazione analogica, Lotman inizia a pensarci attraverso e comincia ad usare tale relazione per meglio delineare la sua idea: “La concezione della natura della biosfera formulata da Vernadskij può essere utile per determinare il concetto che abbiamo introdotto” (*ibid.*, p. 57). Da questo scavo discenderà un ulteriore parallelismo: come ogni essere vivente è funzione della biosfera in quanto struttura unitaria, così ogni componente della semiosi (testi e linguaggi) è funzione della semiosfera in quanto unico meccanismo-organismo (*ibid.*, p. 58). È questo il punto di partenza della visione vitalistica della significazione che Lotman avanza nel suo saggio, sviluppando l’analogia fra biosfera e semiosfera⁽⁷⁾.

Se ora andiamo al carteggio fra Lotman e Uspenskij la relazione fra semiosfera e biosfera si complica ed arricchisce ulteriormente. Gli sprazzi di vita – al contempo vissuta e intellettuale, in divenire e testualizzata – che le lettere fra i due amici ci offrono, ci danno modo di entrare nel laboratorio della creazione concettuale, ne evidenziano le implicazioni passionali, ne svelano i travagli esistenziali, dischiudono ulteriori significati.

Il 19 marzo 1982 Lotman, in un *P.S.*, comunica a Boris Andreevič: “Sto leggendo con grande interesse Vernadskij e vi ritrovo molti miei pensieri (sto scrivendo un articolo sulla semiosfera)⁽⁸⁾. Scrive molto bene, con uno stile disteso e poetico. Così può scrivere solo un geologo, abituato a pensare per intervalli di milioni di anni. Era tanto che non leggevo nulla del genere” (Lotman in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, p. 247).

(7) Per motivi di spazio non possiamo ulteriormente riassumere i molteplici contenuti de *La semiosfera* (Lotman 1984). Più avanti, tuttavia, torneremo sul modo in cui altri fondamentali concetti al cuore del saggio lotmaniano – periferia e alterità (§2), confine come filtro (§3), relazione traduttiva fra spazio extrasemiotico e spazio semiotico (§4), dialogismo (§5), autodescrizione (§6) – si possono rileggere a partire dai passaggi dell’epistolario.

(8) Uno dei due revisori anonimi del presente saggio, che ringraziamo, fa notare che questo passaggio cambia dalla prima alla seconda edizione russa delle lettere con Uspenskij: nell’edizione del 2008 si legge “(sto scrivendo degli articoli di semiotica)” mentre in quella del 2016 “(sto scrivendo un articolo sulla semiosfera)”. Senza addentrarci in ragionamenti di filologia lotmaniana che competono a colleghi più esperti in materia, diamo per buona la seconda edizione.

È la prima volta che il termine semiosfera appare nell'epistolario fra i due amici⁽⁹⁾ sebbene non fosse la prima volta che entrambi facevano riferimento all'idea di biosfera, cosa su cui torneremo più avanti (§6).

Qui ci interessa cogliere la forma propria alla creazione che questa attestazione fa emergere. Come si può intuire, infatti, a differenza della dinamica tutto sommato lineare e strumentale che si trovava nel saggio *La semiosfera* qui ci troviamo davanti ad un movimento circolare: Lotman ritrova nel lavoro del geologo russo quanto stava già maturando. La stessa idea di semiosfera si presenta come sospesa fra qualcosa che era già nelle idee di Lotman e qualcosa che deriva dall'incontro con Vernadskij. L'inciso in parentesi rimanda ad un presupposto: Lotman legge Vernadskij perché sta già scrivendo un articolo sulla semiosfera, perché il parallelo con la biosfera è già da tempo uno sfondo del suo pensiero, ma è solo grazie alla lettura di Vernadskij che egli può sviluppare pienamente l'idea stessa di semiosfera.

La circolarità creatrice messa in luce dal rapporto fra l'epistolario e il saggio, la vita sui libri e la vita nei libri, il retroscena e la scena della vita intellettuale, è qualcosa di più che un fatto episodico e tutt'altro rispetto alla tentazione che colpisce chiunque pensi per davvero, e dunque pensi sempre attraverso i pensieri altrui, di ribadire ad un certo punto "e comunque c'ero già arrivato! Quanto ho ritrovato in altri è solo una conferma, un rafforzamento, di quanto avevo già pensato". Ciò che questa dinamica mette in scena, come proveremo a mostrare (§4), è la questione che è al cuore dell'impresa, ed è la risposta a questa stessa questione: la *circolarità della creazione* rima, è isomorfa, con la *circolarità del creato* che la stessa creazione intellettuale vuole spiegare. La *circolarità creatrice* è, in altri termini, la struttura che regge un'intera esistenza, l'esistenza per intero.

(9) La puntualizzazione è doverosa perché la versione italiana dell'epistolario presenta una selezione delle lettere intercorse fra i due e perché, come anticipato, essendo solo un frammento delle migliaia di lettere scritte da Lotman non si può escludere che Lotman ne avesse già scritto con altri. A futuri studi il compito di verificare altre occorrenze.

2. Abissi creativi

Nel saggio sulla semiosfera Lotman valorizzerà il ruolo della *periferia* nei processi di emersione del nuovo. La periferia intesa non solo in senso spaziale-geografico ma anche nei termini di ciò che sta ai margini di un dato sistema semiotico in quanto sfugge alla grammaticalizzazione operata dai codici dominanti, dalle autodescrizioni che una cultura pone esplicitamente come suo riferimento. La periferia, dunque, come dimensione e condizione che si manifesta laddove una data gerarchia semiotica diminuisce la sua presa sul mondo o addirittura viene negata, distrutta, frammentata, neutralizzata, creolizzata (cfr. Lotman 1984, pp. 61-64).

Ora se andiamo a vedere dove si manifesta per la prima volta il termine “semiosfera” e il ragionamento attorno a questa idea noteremo che ci troviamo davanti ad un *incassamento di periferie*. L’affacciarsi nello spazio discorsivo del nuovo concetto avviene dentro una parentesi all’interno di un *Post Scriptum* di una lettera: *la periferia di una periferia di una periferia* dal punto di vista della gerarchia del classico discorso scientifico-accademico. Come se questo non bastasse il *Post Scriptum* apre su di un *Nota Bene*, dunque *una periferia alla quarta potenza*, che mette in scena l’irruzione della “vita reale” e con essa una ancora più radicale esplosione concettuale: Lotman dice all’amico Uspenskij di essere “rimasto stupito” da una affermazione di Vernadskij che porta conferma a quanto egli ha “osato esprimere ad alta voce” durante un seminario moscovita tenuto nientemeno che “nel seminterrato di Andrjuščenko”, ovvero uno spazio così immediatamente percepibile come periferico, nascosto, inusuale da catapultarci in una *perifericità all’ennesima potenza*.

Lotman ci mette così davanti ad un *abisso di perifericità*, ma soprattutto pare dimostrare nei fatti l’idea che le esplosioni più grandi si possono ottenere solo quando si è immersi in questi abissi, o come sarebbe più corretto dire in questi *dialogismi abissali*.

Per rendersene conto torniamo al racconto lotmaniano. In un seminario tenuto in un seminterrato moscovita Lotman ha avanzato, stando alle sue parole, una “opinione”, una sorta di intuizione fortissima a cui non dà ancora statuto scientifico e che per questo può venire a discorso solo in uno spaziotempo iper-periferico.

Ecco come Lotman descrive questa opinione: “il testo può esistere (e cioè essere socialmente riconosciuto come testo) se è preceduto da un altro testo, e qualsiasi cultura avanzata deve essere preceduta da un'altra cultura avanzata” (Lotman, in Lotman, Uspenskij 2018, p. 248).

Ora, in questo *N.B.* che segue un *P.S.*, Lotman rivela lo stupore di aver trovato conferma a tale idea – a tale questione – attraverso un dialogo inatteso, in un lavoro che tratta di tutt'altro dalla semiotica, nell'opera di un geologo “abituato a pensare per intervalli di milioni di anni”: “E ora in Vernadskij ho trovato l'idea, profondamente radicata in un'enorme esperienza di ricerche sulla geologia cosmica, che la vita può nascere solo da qualcosa di vivo, e cioè che essa è preceduta dalla vita” (Lotman, in *ibid.*).

Precipitato in abissi temporali (un pensiero che ragiona su intervalli di milioni di anni), spaziali (lo spazio cosmico, quello di un seminterrato, quello di un *Post Scriptum* e un *Nota Bene* dove si traducono e fissano tutti gli altri), attoriali (radiazioni e organismi viventi; un seminario moscovita di una disciplina marginale e avversata come la semiotica), Lotman può dialogare liberamente, fuori dai soliti schemi e con pensieri radicalmente altri.

Questo incontro inatteso, questa conferma analogica che trasforma un'opinione in una visione scientifica, questa omologia che consente di mettere in correlazione scalare testo, cultura, vita e cosmo (e correlativamente cosmo, vita, cultura, testo), questa circolarità che porta Lotman a trovare una nuova idea che stava già cercando, apre la via verso una visione olistica e vitalistica della significazione: la semiosfera, il *continuum* della vita del senso.

Al contempo questo frammento di vita vissuta testimonia con una vivezza che non troveremo nella scrittura saggistica, l'idea che la periferia è luogo di produzione di novità e che ciò che arriva dall'esterno può non solo dinamizzare ma torcere un intero sistema fino ad esiti impreveduti. Gli *abissi* che Lotman mette in scena con e nelle sue lettere riassumono questo gioco: periferia interna di un sistema dato, ma così periferici da risultare di fatto esterni a quello stesso sistema, essi sono il luogo da cui può (o forse, deve!) passare l'alterità più altra e perciò più creatività.

3. Dire e non dire. O della (in)traducibilità

Le lettere che stiamo analizzando spingono a percepire con forza il gioco e gli effetti dinamici dell'ingresso dell'alterità in uno spazio non proprio⁽¹⁰⁾. Ogni traduzione è tuttavia produttrice di intraducibilità, è il luogo di un incrociato movimento di *(in)traducibilità*. Questa dinamica è implicita nell'idea lotmaniana di *confine* come “somma dei ‘filtri’ linguistici di traduzione” (1984, pp. 58-59), eppure anche Lotman nei suoi studi è portato a focalizzare maggiormente l'aspetto positivamente creativo della traduzione piuttosto che la più sfuggente *produzione dell'intradotto*, se con quest'ultimo termine possiamo chiamare non solo il materiale ma anche la forma di ciò che resta fuori dalla traduzione.

Se teniamo a mente la doppiezza del meccanismo di (in)traducibilità allora il trattamento del concetto di semiosfera, prima nelle lettere e poi nel saggio, apre la via ad altre forme di significatività.

Si prenda il centrale passaggio, intravisto precedentemente, secondo cui “la vita può nascere solo da qualcosa di vivo, e cioè che essa è preceduta dalla vita”. Staccato dal suo contesto discorsivo d'origine, di tipo scientifico-geologico, esso apre su di un potenziale scivolamento verso una speculazione di carattere teologico-filosofico che nelle lettere Lotman tende ad assecondare, come vedremo meglio più avanti (§4). Tale forma di speculazione nel saggio del 1984 tende invece a farsi invisibile, a condensarsi vertiginosamente in formule come “il dialogo precede e genera il linguaggio” (Lotman 1984, pp. 68-69), che sintetizzando e negando al contempo lo sfondo di pensieri e problemi da cui si originano finiscono per assumere una portata divinatorio-oracolare: *Il signore che ha l'oracolo in Delfi, né dischiude, né nasconde il suo pensiero, ma lo indica attraverso segni*⁽¹¹⁾. Ecco Lotman, l'oracolo di Tartu, che per conto del suo signore, la Semiotica, indica con i suoi segni il luogo di una origine non originaria – la relazionalità – irta di paradossi creativi (§4).

(10) Utilizziamo questa formula perché la circolarità creatrice ci mette davanti all'ingresso di qualcosa che non era previsto ma a suo modo era atteso dal sistema, e che a posteriori sarà ancor più vissuto come tale.

(11) La formula dell'oracolo di Delfi è così riportata in Manetti (1987, p. 32), a cui si rimanda per la scelta di tradurre il termine *sēmaínei* con “indica attraverso segni” invece che con il fin allora preferito “significa”.

Il dire e non-dire del linguaggio oracolare espone la doppia anima dell'(in)traducibilità: lavoro al contempo produttivo-distruttivo, lavoro al contempo manifesto ed invisibile. Per cogliere almeno minimamente il nugolo di queste abbaglianti contemporaneità bisogna guardarle in controluce: bisogna considerare il saggio *La semiosfera* come un *filtro di intraducibilità* e a partire da esso ritornare alle lettere, a ciò che è restato in esse, nelle loro isotopie più o meno compiute o interrotte, in altri strati di esistenza.

Si vedrà così emergere l'importanza del nesso credere-potere, così come il problema della complessa ricerca di una visione semiotica, e con essa di un linguaggio di autodescrizione, non ancillare rispetto a visioni religioso-metafisiche quanto ad altre discipline umanistiche.

Per quanto riguarda la dimensione del *credere* va notato che nell'epistolario con Uspenskij, Lotman più volte ricorda il suo essere un "vecchio ateo", un "non credente". Tuttavia Lotman nella corrispondenza col suo amico credente non teme di evocare la presenza di un Qualcuno che sia di conforto e sprone davanti ai tanti tormenti che lo attanagliano: il silenzio dell'amico-collega che da tempo non gli risponde, i malanni fisici piccoli e grandi che non lo abbandonano, il pensiero per la sorte degli amici polacchi immersi in una crisi che di lì a poco avrebbe portato alla legge marziale imposta dal governo sovietico. Da qui discende il lungo ed articolato passaggio che riportiamo, che riassume tutta la tensione personale davanti al tema del credere nell'esistenza di Dio:

Lo sconforto è un peccato, ma come resistere allo sconforto? Lo so da me che chi s' aiuta Dio l' aiuta, ma che può fare una persona che non conosce e non ha Dio ed è abituato a contare solo su se stesso e improvvisamente si rende conto di quanto debole e stanco sia questo sostegno?

Per rincuorare Lei e me Le racconto una favola armena che mi è piaciuta molto:

- Una vecchia cammina portando in mano un tizzone acceso.
- Dove vai, vecchia?
- Ad accendere il mare.

– Ma non prenderà mica fuoco!

– Quanto a questo, sarà come Dio vorrà.

Certo il nostro compito è quello di accendere il mare, e poi sarà come Qualcuno vorrà. Ma in qualunque luogo non c'è modo di fare a meno di Lui (Lotman, 5 aprile 1981, in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, p. 235).

In altri passaggi, che vedremo più avanti (§5), ricorrono nell'epistolario potenti immagini intrise di una spiritualità per così dire panteistica⁽¹²⁾. In esse Lotman declina il suo sentimento di *re-ligo*, di legame profondo con il creato, attraverso quella corporeità, quel sentire incarnato, che così poco spazio ha invece nella sua teorizzazione accademica (§7). Il dialogo con Vernadskij porta a declinare tale "spiritualità" nei termini di una visione olistica, connettiva (§5), calata tuttavia completamente nella materia, come è evidente al principio del saggio *La cultura e l'organismo*, un inedito del 1984 in cui Lotman prosegue il suo confronto con la teoria del naturalista-biologo (vedi Lotman 1985, p. 77).

A pesare su questa assenza, oltre le convinzioni personali di Lotman, è anche la pressione del *potere* sotto forma di *censura*. Di lì a poco, il 6 febbraio 1984, Uspenskij scriverà a Lotman di essere stato accusato di "propaganda religiosa" da uno studioso, Derjagin, per la sua recensione ad un volume di Gorškov sulla storia della lingua letteraria russa. Il conflitto che ne seguirà, come spiega Giovanna Zaganelli nelle note all'epistolario, porterà le riviste che avevano commissionato la recensione a non farla uscire e Uspenskij vedrà persino saltare la pubblicazione di un suo libro, già consegnato e approvato dalla redazione, da parte della casa editrice Vysšaja Škola.

Si può dunque intuire quanto pesi il timore di vedere la circolazione del proprio lavoro bloccata dall'inserimento di ragionamenti che possano suonare "religiosi". Al contempo Lotman rifugge dallo stile filosofico, che potrebbe consentirgli di sviluppare almeno parzialmente tali argomentazioni. Più volte Lotman nelle sue lettere, dopo essersi lanciato

(12) Segre (1996) farà notare come nella prosa accademica dell'ultimo Lotman un certo afflato religioso si faccia più presente. Per quanto ciò sia vero questo afflato rimane comunque, secondo noi, incomparabile per intensità rispetto a quello proprio di alcuni passaggi dell'epistolario che vedremo più avanti (§5).

in astratti pensieri sull'esistenza, si schermisce: "Mi scusi, mi sono lasciato andare a disquisizioni filosofiche", dirà ad esempio in una delle ultime lettere all'amico e della sua vita (21 gennaio 1993, in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, p. 293).

Lotman non è, non si sente e non si vuole filosofo. Anche qui sta l'ultimo e non meno decisivo aspetto, su cui torneremo: con la semiosfera Lotman vuole infatti rivendicare la sovranità della semiotica, la sua capacità di darsi un proprio linguaggio, di emanciparsi dalla tutela di altre discipline e punti di vista sul mondo. Anche per questo certi ragionamenti non si possono dire o vanno detti condensandoli dentro concetti semioticamente pertinenti. Anche a costo di scivolare in un linguaggio oracolare o in un posizionamento apparentemente contraddittorio (§6).

4. Sulla non-originaria origine dialogica dell'esistente

Riprendiamo a questo punto nel merito i ragionamenti che Lotman sviluppa nel *Nota Bene* scritto per l'amico Uspenskij, ragionamenti che non si ritroveranno nel saggio *La semiosfera*: "Il momento in cui la non-vita si trasforma in vita non è mai stato osservato o ricostruito nell'universo. Anche tornando indietro a milioni di anni fa, troviamo sempre alcune forme di vita organica (o tracce della sua esistenza) e non-vita. Tutte le ipotesi sull'origine della vita sono invece delle speculazioni basate sulla presunzione che esse debbano derivare l'una dall'altra" (Lotman, 19 marzo 1982, in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, p. 248).

Così Lotman riassume la visione di Vernadskij, che egli definisce un "positivista empirico" che basa le sue idee solo su fatti osservati o ricostruiti, tenendosi a distanza dal pensiero mistico-teologico. Per Lotman questa visione scardina il paradosso di una vita che si origina dalla non-vita e mette in ponte la diatriba fra "la necessità di un punto di vista teologico o di quello ad esso contrario" (*ibid.*).

Per rafforzare il tentativo di fuggire dall'impasse Lotman rimarca che la questione circa l'esistenza di qualche entità primordiale capace di generarsi e generarci dal nulla va sospesa per "evidenziare una cosa semplice": "(...) non possiamo decidere se le radiazioni emesse dalle stelle siano o meno un segnale semiotico perché per noi manca la presunzione di

sensatezza. Solo se la sfera semiotica precede la comunicazione quest'ultima è intesa come comunicazione. Solo l'esistenza della ragione spiega l'esistenza della ragione" (*ibid.*).

Il ragionamento che chiude la nota lotmaniana è tutt'altro che semplice. L'approdo ad una circolarità creatrice, infatti, custodisce in sé molto più di quanto Lotman non dica.

In primo luogo, perché la circolarità implica una traduzione, un invertito ma radicale scivolamento: il geologico e il teologico vengono tradotti nel semiologico. Il problema circa l'esistenza di una qualche entità creatrice si trasforma nella questione di una qualche esistenza razionale primordiale capace di inviarcì messaggi. Non è solo il metafisico-religioso a tradursi ma anche il naturalistico-geologico, dato che il tema del rapporto fra le radiazioni solari e l'intrusione di elementi cosmici, da un lato, e l'origine della vita terrestre, dall'altro, si risolve in un meccanismo semiotico. Un ragionamento sulla vita e la sua origine si traducono in una questione sull'origine del senso e sul funzionamento della comunicazione.

In secondo luogo, perché ciò che regge la traducibilità fra campi così diversi è il fondamentale relazionalismo che scioglie la circolarità. La teoria di Vernadskij letta da Lotman ci presenta infatti, in primo luogo, una ab-originarietà della tensione differenziale fra vita e non-vita⁽¹³⁾ e, in secondo luogo, una sfera vitale che ha bisogno delle radiazioni mortali per esistere ma può renderle produttive, vitali appunto, solo nella misura in cui essa già esiste e dunque può tradurle. Tale ragionamento, implicito, rima con l'idea secondo cui la semiosfera esiste solo in dipendenza di uno spazio extrasemiotico che a rigore la nega. Lo spazio semiotico vive solo trasformando un'alterità esterna potenzialmente distruttiva in una condizione del suo dinamismo e della sua stessa autocoscienza: per riuscire nel compito lo spazio semiotico deve tuttavia essere *già da sempre* in condizione di compiere questa operazione traduttiva.

In realtà Lotman nel saggio sulla semiosfera semplifica la tensione, quasi la distende, presentando come un dato di fatto la presenza di un interno organizzato, un esterno amorfo e un confine che li mette produttivamente in connessione traduttiva. Letta attraverso le lettere la questione

(13) Notiamo, senza poter sviluppare, che qui Lotman gioca jakobsonianamente sulla differenzialità fra un termine affermato e uno negato, quasi a proiettare la relazione di contraddittorietà, che già Greimas riteneva "originaria", nelle profondità della costituzione del cosmo.

risulta ben più spinosa. È vero infatti che la tensione “naturalistica” fra vivo e inerte, fra vita e non-vita, fra vita e morte, si riproduce a suo modo nella tensione “culturalista” fra semiotico ed extrasemiotico, fra interno ed esterno, fra proprio ed altrui: tuttavia la tensione fra un positivo e un negativo, con il loro apparente e continuo rincorrersi, pare risolversi in una sostanziale indistinzione. Nella misura in cui uno è necessario all’altro è impossibile se non inutile attribuire all’uno piuttosto che all’altro un valore sostanziale di positività e negatività: il “positivo” e il “negativo” sono pure posizioni dentro una relazione differenziale.

Qualunque sia la coppia chiamata a dar corpo a questa circolarità creatrice – sia essa quella propria della biosfera, della semiosfera o di qualcosa ancora da teorizzare che le riunisca e superi – ciò che resta è la necessità di una dualità al contempo asimmetrica e complementare⁽¹⁴⁾. Una dualità che proprio in quanto è parte di un meccanismo unitario rifiuta un ragionamento sull’origine, sulla primarietà di un termine sull’altro, per affermare la fundamentalità della relazione reciproca, il *relazionalismo* come principio, come *non-originaria origine dialogica dell’esistente*.

Non è dunque solo la circolarità a perdere parte della sua fastidiosa aporeticità ma è il dualismo stesso a smorzare i suoi difetti rivelandosi solo un caso limite, il più semplice, della logica della relazione in quanto costitutiva della realtà.

Non a caso nelle sue ultime opere Lotman (1992) porrà il plurilinguismo del reale come dato primario e porterà al parossismo l’idea da lungo tempo coltivata della creazione come congiunzione dell’incongiungibile, come traduzione dell’intraducibile.

Che si tratti delle astratte concettualizzazioni del circolare rapporto fra vita e non-vita, fra semiotico ed extrasemiotico, o delle ben più concrete dinamiche che portano Lotman ad anticipare e seguire al contempo il pensiero di Vernadskij fino al punto di creare qualcosa di nuovo, resta il fatto che le cose emergono nella relazione e la relazione emerge come la cosa che fa emergere tutte le cose.

(14) Non a caso, in un altro inedito del 1984 che verrà inserito nella prima sezione del volume italiano *La semiosfera*, ovvero il saggio *La metasemiotica e la struttura della cultura* scriverà: “L’asimmetria e la complementarietà diventano leggi strutturali di tutte le strutture generatrici di senso. Dall’asimmetria funzionale degli emisferi del cervello umano alle più complesse strutture della cultura questa legge viene sempre rispettata” (Lotman 1985, p. 86).

5. Non siamo soli

In uno dei tanti densi passaggi del saggio sulla semiosfera Lotman traccia una distinzione netta fra quella che definisce la “semiosfera del mondo contemporaneo” e ciò che l’ha preceduta. Per comprendere questa distinzione e renderla sinteticamente Lotman fa riferimento ad una *utopia* simbolo del passato, che evidentemente segna in profondità la differenza non solo con il tempo che egli vive e vuole descrivere ma ancor più con l’impostazione che egli assume rispetto allo studio del mondo stesso: si tratta dell’utopia di Robinson e del suo isolamento comunicativo o, più astrattamente, l’idea che ci possa essere conoscenza senza comunicazione (Lotman 1984, p. 68).

È in risposta a questa idea-utopia-impostazione che Lotman formula un’altra celebre definizione della semiosfera: “Proprio questo è alla base dell’idea della semiosfera. L’insieme delle formazioni semiotiche precede (non in senso euristico ma funzionale) il singolo linguaggio isolato ed appare la condizione necessaria per l’esistenza di quest’ultimo” (*ibid.*, pp. 68-69).

Un altro modo per rimarcare la primarietà del dialogo rispetto a quanto da esso risulta (§3). Ciò che appare interessante per il nostro discorso è il proseguo di questo passaggio:

Senza la semiosfera il linguaggio non solo non può funzionare, ma nemmeno esistere. Le diverse sottostrutture sono in rapporto d’azione reciproca e non possono funzionare senza il sostegno l’una dell’altra. In questo senso la semiosfera del mondo contemporaneo che, allargandosi ininterrottamente nello spazio nel corso dei secoli, ha assunto carattere universale, ingloba i segnali dei satelliti come i versi dei poeti e le grida degli animali. Il rapporto reciproco fra tutti questi elementi dello spazio semiotico non è una metafora, ma una realtà (*ibid.*, p. 69).

Si ricorderà che già nelle *Tesi per una semiotica delle culture* del 1973 Lotman, insieme agli altri studiosi di Mosca-Tartu, ribadiva che nessun linguaggio funziona in isolamento ma solo appoggiandosi agli altri linguaggi (cfr. Lotman 2006b). Qui lo studioso russo spinge l’idea più avanti fin su un terreno nuovo, un terreno che – come già evidenziava Salvestroni (1985) nella sua introduzione al volume *La semiosfera*

– avvicina il pensiero di Lotman a quello di Bateson, alla sua idea di una struttura che tutto connette.

Questo fatto può sfuggire, anche a causa del metalinguaggio e della distanza apparentemente oggettivante che – a differenza di Bateson – Lotman pone fra sé e il proprio argomento (§7). Tuttavia se ci si immerge nello scambio epistolare fra Lotman e Uspenskij si noterà che proprio nel periodo di elaborazione e pubblicazione della semiosfera tale questione ritorna nell’insistenza con cui Lotman rimarca un dato costitutivo dell’esistenza: il *non essere soli*.

Questo pensiero, che espone chiaramente una forma del sentire e del credere di Lotman, compare vivido prima nel 1978 e poi nel 1984, in due momenti critici per Uspenskij: la grave malattia della prima moglie, la preoccupazione per la vita futura dei figli.

Vale la pena leggerli insieme, questi due stralci, in modo da coglierne la coerenza profonda, gli elementi ricorrenti:

Quanto ha sofferto Zara [la moglie di Lotman, n.n.] quando avevo il fegato malato, ma ora è uno dei nostri ricordi più intimi: la forza con cui in quei minuti si sente di essere necessari l’uno all’altro, persino per me, vecchio ateo, è un’allusione al fatto che non siamo soli, non siamo abbandonati e lasciati a noi stessi in questo mondo. Saremo forti d’animo, e che la Speranza sia con noi (Lotman, inizio aprile 1978, in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, p. 209).

*

Io non sono un credente. Però quanto più vivo, tanto più al mio intelletto e al mio sentimento diviene chiaro che non sono solo. La sensazione della compresenza a volte è davvero fisica. Ieri me ne stavo nel vagoncino buio (dormivano tutti) e provavo un senso di fusione fisica con la pianura innevata che scorreva via fuori dal finestrino. Non importa che io sia una polvere di atomi e materia o un grumo di informazioni inserito nel gioco delle strutture mondiali a me ignoto, o, infine, un’anima immortale nelle mani del Padre, o semplicemente una scheggia alla deriva in un ruscello primaverile: comunque non sono solo. E contrapponendomi alla routine del mondo o uniformandomi ad essa io sono incluso in qualcosa verso cui provo fiducia. Non ho paura non solo della morte, ma neanche della vita (Lotman, fine gennaio 1984, in Lotman e Uspenskij 2018, pp. 268-269).

Sono molti i temi che meriterebbe sviluppati, alcuni dei quali sono stati già anticipati (§3). Ciò che qui ci pare interessante è mostrare sinteticamente quattro cose. La prima è come il testo accademico traduca nel suo linguaggio, astratto, tendenzialmente oggettivante, quanto i testi della vita ci offrono in concreto, in un linguaggio figurativamente, passionalmente ed esteticamente denso. La seconda è come il sentimento di legame fra le strutture che Lotman ci descrive ne *La semiosfera* qui si faccia senso incorporato che può essere detto solo attraverso una parola che tende al poetico, che dispiegando una panoplia di contrastanti, vertiginose, immagini connettive rende percepibile il senso fondante del legame in quanto tale: “comunque non sono solo”. La terza riguarda il peculiare rapporto fra tale legame, delle passioni cardine (la fiducia, la paura, la gioia) e la vita stessa con le sue ripetizioni apparentemente insensate: per Lotman si tratta di non sottrarsi ad esse, di accoglierle o contrastarle, ma in ogni caso viverle. Come dirà in un altro bellissimo passo: “La vita ha una ricchezza inesauribile e nelle sue eterne ripetizioni nasconde una gioia infinita” (*ibid.*, p. 209). Infine, quarto aspetto, tutto questo ragionare nasce in correlazione con dei traumi, dei momenti di crisi che fanno sentire soli, che sembrano intaccare esattamente la trama connettiva dell’esistente. Si ricorderà che Lotman ne *La semiosfera* ad un certo punto dice che “nella realtà della semiosfera (...) i testi paiono immersi in linguaggi ad essi non correlati” (Lotman 1984, p. 64): non è un caso che questi momenti risultino essere quelli in cui la cultura stessa sembra venir meno ma anche delle potenziali riserve di senso per creare nuovi legami, per ricreare il legame su basi nuove, per prendere coscienza della fundamentalità del legame stesso. Nelle lettere all’amico tormentato dal dolore ritroviamo in pratica questa idea, che sotto questa luce oltre che illuminante risulta commovente.

6. Contraddittorie dichiarazioni di sovranità

Come abbiamo anticipato in apertura (§1), quando Lotman si riferisce alla semiosfera nella lettera ad Uspenskij del 1982 non si trattava della prima volta che entrambi si trovavano a ragionare per *sphere*. Tantomeno era la prima volta che in un loro testo si poneva un parallelo fra la sfera culturale e quella biologica. Ne *Il meccanismo semiotico della cultura*,

scritto a quattro mani proprio con Uspenskij e pubblicato nel 1971, Lotman aveva fatto riferimento alla “sociosfera” mettendola già allora in parallelo con la “biosfera”: “Il ‘lavoro’ fondamentale della cultura, come tenteremo di dimostrare, sta nell’organizzare strutturalmente il mondo che circonda l’uomo. La cultura è un generatore di strutturalità; è così che essa crea intorno all’uomo una sociosfera che, allo stesso modo della biosfera, rende possibile la vita, non organica, ovviamente, ma di relazione” (in Lotman e Uspenskij 1971, p. 42).

Come è possibile che Lotman dica di star leggendo Vernadskij nel 1982 quando fa riferimento alla biosfera già nel 1971? Ovviamente è possibile che Lotman avesse dimenticato di aver già letto Vernadskij o che a suo tempo avesse citato la biosfera, concetto già classico, senza approfondire la lettura del volume scritto da Vernadskij nel 1926, o ancora che il passaggio fosse frutto di Uspenskij più che di Lotman. Un’altra ipotesi, che ci pare la più probabile, è che Lotman nella lettera da cui siamo partiti stia facendo riferimento al fatto di aver finalmente soppesato l’opera del geologo nel suo insieme: nelle due densissime pagine che aprono il saggio del 1984 egli infatti non cita solo *La biosfera* ma anche *I pensieri filosofici di un naturalista* nonché le *Opere scelte*. In quel marzo del 1982 Lotman doveva essere alle prese con un intenso corpo a corpo con l’insieme del pensiero (geologico e filosofico al contempo) del biologo.

Come che sia, ciò che qui conta è che nel 1971 il riferimento alla biosfera non produceva gli stessi effetti di pensiero che produrrà nel 1984. Nello specifico, infatti, il paradossale gioco fra cultura e sociosfera – in cui la prima crea la seconda che a sua volta la contiene – si risolveva non nell’allargamento verso la visione olistica che il riferimento alla biosfera avrebbe dovuto e potuto ispirare – e dunque in una visione plurilinguistica del reale – ma nella centralità e primarietà del *linguaggio naturale* in quanto “dispositivo stereotipante” più proprio dell’uomo, capace di generare intuitivamente strutturalità. Una posizione in voga all’epoca che, seppur fruttuosa, a distanza di tempo sarebbe apparsa riduttiva, atomistica e, soprattutto, incoerentemente monologica. Lotman lo dice in modo articolato ed astratto all’inizio del saggio su *La semiosfera*:

[Seguendo le “due tradizioni” che hanno fondato la semiotica, quella Peirce-Morris che partiva dal segno isolato e quella Saussure-Scuola di Praga che partiva dall’atto comunicativo isolato] si è cominciato così a considerare l’atto individuale dello scambio segnico come modello del linguaggio naturale e i modelli dei linguaggi come modelli semiotici universali e si è cercato di interpretare la stessa semiotica come estensione dei metodi linguistici ad oggetti che non facevano parte della tradizione linguistica (Lotman 1984, p. 55).

In modo ancor più diretto ed immaginifico Lotman lo dice nell’introduzione scritta proprio per il volume italiano in cui il saggio si trova tradotto. Un’introduzione che se ben letta rivela un’inedita presa di posizione politica internamente ai conflitti del campo intellettuale:

Come capita spesso ai domini di data recente, che hanno appena liberato il loro territorio dalle vecchie potenze che si sono formate storicamente, a guidare la semiotica è stata per un certo tempo una dinastia esterna – la linguistica –, che, come accade in questi casi, parlava nella sua lingua nativa, così come faceva tutta la sua corte. Nel giovane dominio della semiotica la lingua della corte era l’unico linguaggio della cultura.

È il caso di chiedersi a questo punto se la semiotica non sia entrata in un nuovo periodo della sua storia (Lotman 1985, p. 49).

Dopo essere stata “figlia adottiva della linguistica” la semiotica era dunque finalmente pronta per considerarsi “sovrana indipendente” (*ibid.*). Per farlo serviva, appunto, concettualizzare pienamente l’idea di semiosfera. La semiosfera come una teoria semiotica del dialogo. O, nei nostri termini, *una teoria della non-originaria originarietà delle relazioni di (in)traducibilità*. Anche per questo, buona parte di quanto Lotman scrisse nell’epistolario non trovò spazio nella scrittura accademica: la semiotica in cerca di affermazione doveva far risuonare il suo linguaggio. Rompendo apertamente la concatenazione con la linguistica e aprendosi al concatenamento con la biologia Lotman puntava a creare una distinta *personalità semiotica* della Semiotica. Ma come tutti i meta-linguaggi di autodescrizione anche questo era sotterraneamente il risultato di molte imperfette correlazioni, di molti dialoghi solo

parzialmente traducibili⁽¹⁵⁾. Non ultimo il dialogo fra la teoria e la stessa vita di chi la stava producendo.

Come spiegare dunque la fundamentalità che il dialogo riveste all'interno della logica della semiosfera e la contemporanea affermazione di una individualità apparentemente slegata da ogni dialogo? Siamo davanti ad una contraddizione? Sì, ma in tutti i sensi della parola.

In primo luogo, nel senso che Lotman, sebbene nel fugace spazio di una introduzione ad un volume italiano, *parla-contro*: espone apertamente ciò da cui ritiene la semiotica debba emanciparsi. E in questo parlare-contro rende paradossalmente più evidente l'esistenza di una relazione. In secondo luogo, perché il dialogo, la differenzialità che esso rappresenta, è così essenziale per la significazione da persistere anche nella negazione dell'altro o nella rivendicazione di una coincidenza. Lotman ha scritto che "la coincidenza è un caso particolare di conflitto" (1970, p. 228). Si può di converso affermare che il conflitto è un caso particolare di coincidenza: chi confligge per emanciparsi da un linguaggio ed affermare il proprio, la propria sovranità semiotica, vuole coincidere in termini gerarchici con ciò da cui si emancipa. Non nega la relazione ma la ri-articola ri-posizionandosi. In terzo luogo, perché ancora una volta Lotman ci dimostra nei fatti ciò che la teoria riesce a dire più ordinatamente ma con minor forza: mettendo il dialogo al centro della semiotica proprio quando questa affermava la sua indipendenza dalle altre discipline umanistiche Lotman ci dà modo di toccare la vitale ed inevitabile contraddittorietà dei processi semiotici. Il che equivale a dire, della vita stessa.

7. Il corpo: un'assenza?

Chiudendo la sua introduzione al volume *La semiosfera* Simonetta Salvestroni (1985) faceva notare come la centralità della spazialità nello sviluppo del nuovo concetto aveva completamente lasciato da parte il ruolo della temporalità nei processi semiotici. Si può dire che questa mancanza verrà colmata dai lavori che a partire dalla fine degli anni Ottanta,

(15) Sul rapporto fra concatenamenti e correlazioni, e sulla loro reciproca invisibilità, rimandiamo a Sedda (2018).

sotto l'egida di un nuovo dialogo, quello con l'opera di Ilya Prigogine, porteranno a trattare la storicità, l'imprevedibilità, i processi gradualisti ed esplosivi di evoluzione e trasformazione delle culture.

Resta da chiedersi dove e come Lotman abbia colmato il vuoto della corporeità. Abbiamo infatti visto che se c'è un elemento che pare non tradursi all'interno del saggio sulla semiosfera è la densa fenomenologia corporea, fatta di una panopia di sensazioni (e di immagini che provano a tradurle in parola), che nelle lettere accompagna l'emersione del nuovo concetto.

Due cose vanno tuttavia notate. La prima è che ne *La semiosfera* e nei saggi coevi emerge potente il ruolo del cervello, che surroga la presenza del corpo nel suo insieme. La corporeità si riduce (ma Lotman non sarebbe certo stato d'accordo con questo termine) al cervello che a sua volta, attraverso il gioco differenziale fra i suoi due emisferi, risulta per Lotman isomorfo al funzionamento basilare della cultura intera. In questo senso il corpo è presente e centrale ma solo nella misura in cui è ricondotto ad una fenomenologia cerebrale-intellettuale. La seconda è che è proprio in quegli stessi anni che Lotman parlerà dell'esigenza di focalizzare l'attenzione sulle "emozioni culturali". Si potrebbe dunque ipotizzare che la presenza della corporeità scorra sotterranea attraverso i saggi sulle grandi passioni culturali (paura/vergogna, onore/gloria ecc.) e le poetiche del comportamento quotidiano⁽¹⁶⁾ e trovi infine sfogo nelle *Conversazioni sulla cultura russa* (2017) e nella scrittura autobiografica delle *Non-memorie* (2001) che coinvolge intensamente l'autore nel periodo prossimo alla morte. Tuttavia, se di fenomenologia si tratta, ci pare di trovarci pur sempre davanti ad una fenomenologia culturale del corpo.

Ciò che non va dimenticato è che la corporeità non si proietta nei testi solo attraverso una tematizzazione esplicita del sentire, una mobilitazione dei suoi più evidenti simulacri figurativi, ma si distribuisce e diffonde in essi attraverso modi più sottili, come la forma di una elaborazione, lo stile di un'opera, la qualità di una scrittura. Per il lettore non episodico dell'opera di Lotman il suo piacere per lo studio e la scoperta, la sua ostinazione nel perseguire delle piste di ricerca, l'intensità del pensare per arrivare a creare qualcosa di nuovo, il suo entusiasmo sublime e

(16) Per orientarsi semioticamente in questi temi rimandiamo rispettivamente a Pezzini (2010) e alla nostra introduzione in Lotman (2006b).

un po' folle nel ritessere continuamente e nuovamente i fili del proprio pensiero è qualcosa di percepibile, qualcosa che fa della lettura del suo lavoro un vero corpo a corpo, un dialogo ogni volta imprevedibile, più di quanto non consentano di fare tante manieristiche scritture semio-fenomenologiche. Se forse dall'opera di Lotman resta assente una aperta ed approfondita riflessione sulla fenomenologia corporea non sono tuttavia assenti spunti e piste per pensare il corpo nella cultura. E soprattutto, per chi sappia cogliere l'intensità di un pensiero che non smette di mettere in dialogo la vita e i concetti per spiegarla, non è assente il corpo di Lotman.

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A PARADOX OF THE “SEMIOTICS OF LIFE”: JURI LOTMAN’S LATER WORKS^[1]

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Un paradosso della “semiotica della vita”: gli ultimi lavori di Juri Lotman

ABSTRACT: In a series of interviews given in the early 1990s, Juri Lotman contemplated the boundary between the human and the animal. Keenly interested in animals, the scholar stressed in his later work the need to include animal communication in the semiosphere. Lotman’s model holds that semiosis requires at least two languages between which instances of untranslatability occur. However, he did not extend this model to animal communication. This is the apparent paradox of Lotman’s later work. Lotman might not have had enough time to think these problems through, although these issues had been addressed earlier by other authors. Until now, the paradoxical structure of semiosis which includes temporal cyclicity and atemporal relation, the old and the new, repetitions and novelty, the algorithmicity and non-algorithmicity as aspects of each act of interpretation have not been sufficiently investigated. Therefore, Lotman’s later work in which he discussed these topics deserves attention today.

KEYWORDS: animal semiosis; biosemiotics and general semiotics; history of semiotics; primary modelling systems; semiosphere

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Reflecting on the works written by Juri Lotman during the last years of his life (including his little-known texts and interviews), we noticed a paradox concerning general semiotics, or, more precisely, the semiotic boundary separating human and animal⁽³⁾.

Let us emphasize that the system of basic concepts developed by Lotman in the last years of his life⁽⁴⁾ has not been sufficiently analyzed yet, in particular from the point of view of general semiotics. This concerns, for example, the study of the (logical) relationship – within the framework of Lotman’s model – between the closely interconnected concepts of individuality, unpredictability, (dis)continuity⁽⁵⁾, multilingualism, untranslatability, semiosis. In addition, Lotman’s system of concepts as such has not been completely developed; he introduced a number of important changes to this system shortly before he died.

However, despite some disagreements in the interpretation of several concepts in Lotman’s texts written not long before his death (see Salupere 2017), “there is no doubt that such a system exists”, although it is difficult to discover it (Chernov 1997, p. 10; see also Kull 2015). Lotman manifestly strove for scientific clarity, repeatedly emphasizing that semiotics is a science and that a well-developed system of concepts is undoubtedly important for semiotics. The following is what he expressed with regard to this question in 1992:

Therefore, the danger here is that the terms will not be sufficiently defined. Even though it is not always possible to define them, one should at least try. [...] You see, it often happens that when I have a new idea, I shift the use of terms without warning the readers. I must struggle with this. (Kull and Lotman 2015, pp. 177-178)

As is well known, Lotman was interested in animals throughout his life⁽⁶⁾, and some remarks on zoosemiotics as a legitimate part of semiotics

(3) Instead of “non-humal animal” as proposed by an anonymous reviewer of this article (whom we would like to thank for the idea), we use “animal” throughout of the article as following Lotman’s expression in order not to create a terminological and anachronistic confusion.

(4) In this connection, cf. Avtonomova (2014).

(5) Cf. “In this sense, continuity – this is a meaningful predictability” (Lotman 1992, p. 17).

(6) Alexei Lotman, Juri Lotman’s younger son, has attested it several times, in particular during our meeting on February 28, 2017 (cf. Kull and Velmezova 2021); cf. also below.

can be found already in his works of the 1960s (see, for example, Lotman 1998 [1969]). The interest in “animal issues” is also evidenced by the programmes of some semiotic seminars which were organized by Lotman in Estonia, as well as by the contents of the volumes of *Sign Systems Studies* (*Труды по знаковым системам*), published during his lifetime. However, it is obvious that by the end of his life, questions in regard to the semiotics of life occupied Lotman more than previously⁽⁷⁾.

In particular, in some interviews given in the early 1990s, Lotman reflects on the boundary separating humans and animals. Today it is a complex and, to a great extent, semiotic problem (for example, animals are not capable of mastering symbols, unlike people in whose natural languages such signs prevail⁽⁸⁾). Lotman, however, reasoned in different terms: for him, the boundary between human and animal is a boundary that separates unpredictable and predictable behavior. According to Lotman, human beings, unlike animals, are unpredictable and capable of producing surprises: “[...] we can say that human behaviour in principle differs from animal behavior in how much the unpredictable plays a significant role in it” (Lotman (2010), p. 134); “[...] novelty is the result of fundamentally unpredictable situations” (Lotman 2010, p. 46; 2013, p. 64).

Here are his more detailed statements on this topic:

This, by the way, is a fundamental and still unexplained difference between living beings for whom the most crucial moments of life are programmed and the way of behavior inherent in a person who can perform unexpected actions; these unexpected, not hereditarily programmed types of behavior encompass all the greater part of life and gradually become major. This is a rather strange thing, if you think about it.

(7) The problem of difference between human beings and animals is discussed, for instance, in some chapters of the books *Unpredictable Mechanisms* [Workings] of Culture (Lotman 2013 [1992]) – especially in the chapters on “A dialogue in different languages”, “Fashion and dress”, “A workshop of unpredictability”, “In place of a conclusion” – and *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 2009 [1992]) – especially in the chapters on “Thinking reed”, “The world of proper names”, “The fool and the madman”, “The moment of unpredictability”). Regarding Lotman’s interest in biology and his contacts with biologists see also Kull (1999).

(8) See, for instance, Deacon (1997).

In this, by the way, consists the principal and for me still inexplicable difference between the living beings for whom the important moments of life are pre-programmed, and human way of behaving which may include unexpected actions, and where these unexpected, hereditarily non-preprogrammed types of behavior cover an ever increasing part of life and gradually become the main ones. This is a rather strange thing if one thinks about it.

Semiotics of animals studies such moments as, let us say, sexual intercourse, nutrition, learning; they constitute traditional forms, and the animal acquires them, transfers them. This behavior constitutes a language which resembles our language of folklore. It is repeated as the same and it is recreated anew each time, while human beings place repeated forms of behavior into the background and put forward unpredictable behavior. It is not by chance that when human beings appeared, they seemed crazy [mad] to the animals, and I think this was the reason that the relatively weak creature, the ancestor of man, could not only survive, but also destroy much more powerful animals. They could not predict his behavior.

When animals meet, in semiotic situations, in situations of battle, weddings, fights between predators, between deers, they make much more gestures than they actually fight, and with the help of gestures they find out the intentions, strength, behavior of the enemy and they respond, it is a very complicated dialogue, but it is absolutely ritual, it can be very simply described as a ballet.

They make stable movements, but of course from movements which are stable for different situations it is possible to create a relatively large set, but for the animals, humans behaved unpredictably. Just as it is very difficult for a normal person to fight a madman, so it was probably difficult for animals. Animals are severely deformed under the influence of millennial contacts with humans. I think that now the animals, those that survived, are distorted, and it is probably very difficult to judge the normal behavior of animals looking at them. A usual, normal animal made predictable gestures, while a human being behaves unpredictably by nature. (Lotman 1990b, pp. 15-16)

Lotman's statements contain the following paradox. On the one hand, he considered the behavior of animals to be predictable, thereby "denying" semiosis to them (and, therefore, excluding the ability of animals to create anything new, to interpret situations in some new way). On the other hand, animal communication constituted part of the semiosphere

for him⁽⁹⁾. Moreover, as Vladimir Alexandrov (2000, p. 342) observes, Lotman "attempts to equate the *organization* of biological and semiotic *entities*".

Today Lotman's point of view on the predictability of animal behavior, of course, should be challenged. Modern biosemioticians agree that unpredictability and semiosis are directly related (Hoffmeyer, Emmeche (1991); Hoffmeyer (2008)). Individuality is inherent not only in humans, but also in animals, if not in all living beings in general. If the animal world is a world in which semiosis takes place (which justifies the existence of zoosemiotics as a particular discipline), this means that the animal as such is also unpredictable: animals also have a certain freedom of choice; another thing is that, compared to the freedom of human choice, animals' freedom of action can really seem very limited.

In the last years of his life, Lotman did not deny that semiosis takes place not only in systems related to human communication, but also in systems related to animals. Let us quote, for example, what Lotman wrote about the semiosphere in the 1990s:

We have reason to assert that isolated acts of a semiotic nature do indeed exist and that they are possible only as manifestations of a semiotic universe. By analogy with the biosphere, our planet is surrounded by a real semiosphere, synchronously including all the variety of signals from bird singing to radio signals from artificial satellites, and diachronously including the entire cultural memory of mankind, from "recordings" of neurons in the brain and genetic memory to libraries, film collections and museums. Each semiotic system functions, being in certain relations with other systems and levels of the semiosphere. And if we can argue that the full development of a complex structure is characterized by self-description (self-awareness), then the emergence of semiotics as a science in the middle of the 20th century is also a fact of modern culture, a recognition that the process of formation of the global semiosphere is completed. (Lotman 1991, p. 4)

Let us pay particular attention to birdsong as constituting a part of the semiosphere for Lotman: it turns out that semiosis existed for him

(9) See also Kull and Maran (2021).

beyond the limits of human sign systems. Lotman also clarified the definition of the concept of primary modeling systems, including in the latest biological codes too:

Semiotic structures of a simpler type are called primary modeling systems: starting with symptomatology (it is no coincidence that the word “semiotics” in the 19th century meant the study of disease symptoms, and the department of diagnostics at the University of Tartu was called the department of semiotics), as well as with all the signals that cybernetics puts at the exit from the “black box”, and ending with road signs, zoo-semiotics and parasemiotics, as well as natural languages (for example, English, Estonian, Polish, Russian, etc.) systems on top of this layer – all those living and dead languages in the world. (Lotman 1991, p. 3)

In addition, in the 1990 interview which has already been quoted above, discussing the concept of unpredictability, Lotman himself directly speaks about the inclusion of biology into theoretical semiotics:

Semiotics means two things. One thing is semiotics as a description, as a translation of some activity into an adequate scientific language. The second is an understanding of the mechanism itself. The first aspect is more formal; of course, for a scientist the word “formal” does not have ... any negative connotation, and the second [aspect] concerns more of the internal mechanism.

With regard to biology, semiotics can be taken into consideration in its two directions – as a mechanism for describing various communications in the animal world. We can describe the behavior of higher animals relatively well; a semiotician will be interested in this behavior as a form of communication. Much more complex, I think, will be the description of the behavior of insects. I think, I am familiar with the behavior of insects; once I was very interested in this and for a long time, before university, I was going to be an entomologist. It still interests me.

Animals with insects (I apologize if I say stupid things, this is not my field) – in this area, for the semiotic structure that we are constructing, we involuntarily have to use human languages that are familiar to us, for example, the concept of “individuality”, since semiotics involves the human situation of transmitting information from one individuality

to another, or the intellectual processes which are also associated with individuality.

It is very difficult to decide what the individuality of insects is and to what extent this concept is generally applicable to them, especially when we are dealing with ants or with those insects where, by analogy, it is easiest for us to find a parallel with humans. These are so different languages and so different worlds that I don't know if we can even switch to this language. This is the opinion of an ignorant, I do not insist on it, I would only like to be careful in transferring the categories extracted from human semiotics, since it is necessary to prove that such basic semiotic concepts as individuality, communication, language, are in general applicable [to insects], because we still use languages as a sign communication, but perhaps there exists non-sign communication, for which we have no mechanisms of understanding – at least at present.

I am optimistic and I believe that a person will be able to understand a lot with the help of science, to understand what is not at all given to us by nature, but the path of direct transferences is dangerous. That is why it is difficult to penetrate into the consciousness of non-mammals, of those who are not higher vertebrates, who are not collective mammals or predators, but insects (by the way, why not to admit the existence of communication among unicellular organisms?). How can one forget Vygotsky's idea of the individuality of the world in general, the idea that the world can be considered as some living whole, at least a living world. But these are languages that are still closed to us, and I am not a supporter of science fiction novels. A scientist should know where he limits himself, and science differs from pleasant scientific fantasies in that it cannot do much, and the scientist must first of all clearly understand what he cannot. Science fiction writers can do anything, I wish them all the best, but I do not belong to them.

Therefore, I would speak of the semiotics of mammals. This seems to me to be reality, it is a different semiotics, a different type of language – but we are not only people, we are also mammals, and therefore we have the capabilities to master this language as well. It can be loaded, it can be more dynamic or less dynamic.

The appearance of language in our sense of the word was a revolution, perhaps a tragic one, but a radical revolution, and it created a completely different situation. This is one aspect of the semiotics' approach to animals, so to speak, that allows us to penetrate the world of semiotic constants, of permanent situations and communication, which is inherited. But what is similar in animals and humans is very interesting, and in general I think

that zoosemiotics should become a part of linguistics or linguistics a part of zoosemiotics – we will not argue about ranks, but it seems to me that a zoologist should be linguist, or maybe a linguist must be zoologist.

These are related things, and I think that semiotics may constitute the bridge that allows to speak about communication here. [At the same time] semiotics is associated not only with human consciousness, but also with automatic consciousness, with machine consciousness. Thus, we can get here some big bridge: machine – human being – animal (at least the highest animal, available to our understanding), and see what they have in common. Apparently, there is a lot in common, and only this will allow us to distinguish the dynamics, the differences. (Lotman 1990b, pp. 18-19)

Comparing animals and humans, Lotman characterizes animal communication as cyclical, non-individual, monolingual – but nevertheless covered by semiotics⁽¹⁰⁾. He writes:

A “conversation” between animals of the same species represents communication in the one and the same language. This should be understood in the sense that the receiver of the message extracts from the sounds or gestures directed at him or her only that which contains a fixed meaning – excluding any play of language – although communication between a beast and its victim or between a human hunter and a fox may include deceptive gestures. In all these situations, however, the word (gesture) is inseparable from its denotative meaning. (Lotman 2010, p. 38; 2013, p. 54)

On the other hand, Lotman clearly understands that “monolingualism” cannot constitute the basis of semiosis:

[...] the abstraction of a single language of communication as a basis for semiosis is an erroneous abstraction as this distorts, in an imperceptible way, the whole essence of the mechanism. Of course, we can examine

(10) Only in a few cases does Lotman directly speak of the existence of freedom of choice when talking about animals – for example, in the conclusion to the book *The Unpredictable Mechanisms [Workings] of Culture*: “Even for those mammals whose basic behavioural unit is the herd (the collective), individual choice is activated during the ritual period associated with the propagation of the species. The imperative to choose one’s behaviour, which arises at that moment among the creatures of a herd, becomes in man a continuous mechanism, which radically alters the entire system” (Lotman 2010, p. 187; 2013, p. 223).

cases, where the transmitting and receiving mechanisms are relatively identical and can, therefore, communicate via a single channel. However, this is not a general model but a particular space isolated [abstracted] from the “normal” polylingual model. (Lotman 1992, p. 45; 2009, p. 24)

The idea that the generation of meaning requires a situation of untranslability which is possible only for – at least – two languages, becomes so important and fundamental for Lotman in the 1990s that he speaks about it in the initial chapters of all three books written at this time (Lotman 1990a; 1992; 2013). But in order for one language to remain a semiotic system in the framework of this model, it must be admitted that even one language, in a sense, consists of several languages.

So, on the one hand, Lotman considered the behavior of animals to be predictable, thereby “denying” semiosis to animals. On the other hand, animal communication was part of the semiosphere for him, and therefore suggested semiosis. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that Lotman did not have time to think about these questions, although other researchers had already written about problems of this kind (see, for example, Sebeok 1979). More precisely, in the last years of his life Lotman came to the formulation of the fundamental mechanism of semiosis, but obviously he did not have time to think in detail about the consequences arising from this conclusion, the consequences which radically change the semiotic interpretation and understanding of the differences between humans and animals. However, despite this contradiction – and perhaps partly thanks to it – Lotman’s late work is so interesting to read today.

However, the problem of the relationship of cyclicity and openness, old and new, repetition and novelty, algorithmicity and nonalgorithmicity as aspects of semiosis and of each act of interpretation is still insufficiently developed in today’s semiotics.

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SEMIO-POIESIS: ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE SEMIOSPHERE WITHIN THE BIOSPHERE⁽¹⁾

DI SUREN ZOLYAN⁽²⁾

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Semio-poiesi: sull'emergere della semiosfera nella biosfera

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the possible development of Lotman's idea of the semiosphere, expanding it by introducing the concept of semio-poiesis as applied to the emergence of the genetic code. The birth of life, which involves controlling complex information processes, leads to the first semiotic relations expressed in genetic coding. Semio-poiesis, recursive auto-referential processing of a semiotic system, becomes a form of organization of the bio-world when notions of meaning and aiming are introduced into it. The increasing complexity of the genetic code, semio-poiesis, is manifested as the establishment of regularly reproduced connections between signifieds and signifiers; and the emergence of operations, allowing to generate meaningful, hierarchically organized entities (codons) and describing relationships within the system (gene expression). The notion of semio-poiesis can clarify the characteristics of semiosis as an intrinsic dynamic process of the self-organization and self-development of the semiosphere, what Lotman designated as the "self-growing Logos".

KEYWORDS: Lotman; semiosphere; semiosis; semio-poiesis; genetic code

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1. The semiosphere as a subject and its own object⁽³⁾

In 1984, when Juri Lotman introduced the notion of the semiosphere, it was far ahead of its time. Since then, it has become one of the basic concepts in semiotics; quite a few ideas of it have received their proper development and clarification (their description alone could become an independent study). However, the critical question remains unclear – who is the subject (or an agent – in this case, the difference is insignificant) of semiotic activity, causing such an organization and creating semiotic paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, both between and within systems, texts, signs, and contexts. Lotman raised these questions and gave some preliminary answers to them. For him, the semiosphere is a hierarchically organized integral space, and at the same time, a system of systems; it functions as a unified self-sufficient organism without any external control. This system of systems is not created through gradual addition of elements but emerges as a result of its inner activity: “All semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the ‘greater system’, namely the semiosphere” (Lotman 2005, p. 208). Lotman did not associate this *mechanism (or organism)* with conscious human activity, neither with the individual nor the collective subject (people, culture, society, etc.):

The individual human intellect does not have a monopoly in the work of thinking. Semiotic systems, both separately and together as the integrated unity of the semiosphere, both synchronically and in all the depths of historical memory, carry out intellectual operations, preserve, rework and increase the store of information. (Lotman 1990, p. 273).

Lotman pointed out the interaction of exclusively semiotic entities: languages, signs, codes, systems, texts. The semiosphere and its components function as quasi-subjects endowed with quasi-consciousness. As a result, boundaries and semiotic characteristics of sub-spaces of the semiosphere are permanently transformed. The semiosphere is equated

(3) This subtitle is a periphrasis of Lotman’s article “Culture as a subject and its own object” (Lotman 2019); one may also recall Lewontin (1983).

with an intellectual being and acts as a “semiotic personality” (Lotman 2005, p. 209). Thus, self-regulation and self-organization of the semiosphere as a system of systems becomes ways of its operations: “[the parts of the semiosphere] acquire a behavioral character, they gain the ability to Independently choose programs of activity” (Lotman 2005, p. 215). These programs of activity arise as a result of the same fundamental principle as the organization of matter – symmetry and differentiation (Lotman 2005, p. 219). Probably, such an explanation was influenced by analogies with physical processes. The semiotic answer seems more appropriate, and Lotman pointed this out: he compared the principle of symmetry and its transformations with Saussurean “*mechanism of similarities and difference*” (ibid., p. 219). Lotman explained the development of the semiosphere and its internal dynamics by increasing its complexity and internal differentiation, not by the conscious actions of communicants using this or that semiotic (sub-) system. While no description of this process was suggested, the following extension of Lotman’s ideas may be considered. We shall try to connect the dynamics of the semiosphere with the mechanisms of semiotic self-organization. In developing and adding to this, we introduce the concept of *semio-poiesis*⁽⁴⁾. It also may connect the notions of the semiosphere and semiosis with the concepts of *auto-poiesis* (Maturana and Varela 1980), self-reference (Luhmann 1990), teleodynamics (Deacon 2011), biosemiosis (Pattee 2007; Wills 2014), and codepoiesis (Barbieri 2012).

2. Semiosphere and biosphere: Lotman’s rethinking of Vernadsky⁽⁵⁾

The concept of the semiosphere Lotman put forward as a development of the concept of Vernadsky’s idea of the biosphere: “By analogy with the biosphere (Vernadsky’s concept) we could talk of a semiosphere” (Lotman

(4) This concept was proposed in Zolyan 2020; however, the term, without explanation, was previously used in Feshchenko and Koval’ (2016) and Sharov (2017, p. 92).

(5) The relationship between the biosphere and semiosphere in the light of Lotman’s ideas is considered in Hoffmeyer (1998 and 2007); Kull (1999, 2015a, 2015b); Kotov (2002); Kotov and Kull (2011); Nöth (2006 and 2015); Lotman M. (2002); Markoš (2004 and 2014); Kull and Maran (2021).

1990, p. 123)⁽⁶⁾. However, Lotman does not mention *noosphere*, the other Vernadsky's fundamental concept⁽⁷⁾, probably to avoid inappropriate polemics. While *the noosphere* is associated with mind and human consciousness, Lotman denies providing them a "monopoly" on semiotic activity (Lotman 1990, p. 273). Therefore, even while quoting, Lotman shifts the emphasis. For him, intellectual activity is a continuation of the conflict between *life and matter*: "In his notes dating from 1892, Vernadsky pointed to human intellectual activity as a continuation of the cosmic conflict between life and inert matter" (Lotman 1990, p. 123). Meanwhile, in the passage he quotes, Vernadsky argues the opposite: human mental activity overcomes the unconscious order of the dead laws of nature (Lotman 1990, p. 123); without going back to the earlier pre-human stages.

In his letter to Boris Uspenski (19/03/1982), Lotman emphasizes another idea of Vernadsky's, cited below, and interprets it in relation to semiosis:

Now I have discovered in Vernadsky the idea, deeply substantiated by the vast experience of the cosmic geology research, that life can arise only from the living, that is, if it is preceded by life. Therefore, he considers life and dead matter (as he says) to be two primordial cosmic principles, manifested in different forms but mutually eternally separate and eternally in contact. And I am convinced that thought also cannot be derived evolutionarily from non-thought. [...] After all, just as all forms of vital activity relate to life, from the work of oxygen-free bacteria to the most complex forms, so thought (semiosis) has simple and complex forms... Only the precedence of the semiotic sphere makes the message a message. Only the existence of the mind explains the existence of the mind. (Lotman and Uspensky 2016, p. 544).

This issue is one of the constants for Lotman. In his view, life can be preceded only by life, semiosis – by semiosis, and the semiosphere by a previous state of semiosphere:

(6) As Lotman described the situation as follows: "I read Vernadsky with enthusiasm and find many of my thoughts in him (I am writing an article on the semiosphere)" (Lotman and Uspensky 2016, p. 544, letter of 19/03/1982).

(7) "Noosphère: Probably first used by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in a 1925 essay 'L'hominisation'. The genesis of the word is also associated with the French philosopher and mathematician Édouard Le Roy and the Russian-Ukrainian geochemist Vladimir Ivanovič Vernadskij, with whom Teilhard was in contact at the time" (Merriam-Webster, accessed 26 Dec. 2021).

“Self-increasing logos” does not imply but excludes isolation. A thinking device cannot operate in isolation. This is confirmed by both the individual “natural mind” (in a sense parallel to the term “natural language”) and the secondary collective intelligence of culture. The role of the trigger mechanism is played by the text coming from outside, which sets the individual consciousness in motion... Text entered from the outside stimulates, “turns on” consciousness. But in order for this turning on to take place the device must have in its memory a representation of semiotic experience, that is, such an act cannot be “first”. The static state-trigger-action model is opposed by a model of circular, mutually stimulating exchange. - (Lotman 1992, p. 28)

Apart from “thinking device,” Lotman also used the terms “thinking structure”, “semiotic personality”, “monad”, and connected their workings with autocatalytic reactions. The semiosphere functions as an organism and organisms function as semiosphere:

The idea that ‘thinking’ semiotic structures need an initial impulse from another thinking structure and that text-generating mechanisms need a text from outside to set them going reminds us on the one hand of so-called autocatalytic reactions, that is, those reactions where, in order to obtain the final product (or to fasten a chemical process), the final result has to be already present in some quantity at the beginning of the reaction. On the other hand, this question finds a parallel in the as yet unsolved problem of the ‘beginning’ of culture and the ‘beginning’ of life. The biologist V. I. Vernadsky refused to respond to such questions, finding it more productive to study the interrelationship of structures that are binary, asymmetrical, and at the same time, unitary. This is the approach we shall be adopting. - (Lotman 1990, p. 3).

It may be further specified: *the ‘beginning’ of culture and the ‘beginning’ of life* is a process of semio-poiesis -- the establishment of the basic conditions of semiosis (part 3); and the ‘beginning’ of life can be observed already at the lowest, relatively simple and at the same time the most significant level - the processes of self-organization of the genetic code (part 4).

3. Semio-poiesis as modus of self-organization

According to Lotman, the development of the semiosphere is subject to its internal regulations and is not determined by an intervention of some external subject. Texts display the properties of an intellectual device:

It ceases to be an elementary message from sender to receiver. Revealing a capacity to condense information, it acquires memory. At the same time, it reveals a quality that Heraclitus defined as “self-growing logos.” At this stage of growing structural complexity, a text displays the properties of an intellectual device: it not only conveys the information put into it from without but also transforms messages and develops new ones [...] In light of the above, a text presents itself not as a realization of a message in some language, but as a complex system storing diverse codes capable of transforming messages received and generating new ones, a generator of information with the traits of an intelligent person. (Lotman 1988, p. 55).

Question arises as to whether semiotic activity is possible without a thinking subject endowed with cognitive faculties. The description of informational processes in molecular genetics makes it possible to see semiosis without the participation of cognizant beings because a semiotic system itself performs operations on signs. Sign systems outside social relations do not imply consciousness (intelligence). This should not come as a surprise – a similar situation long before the discovery of the genetic code was foreseen by Charles Peirce. As Peirce pointed out, semiotic relations may not presuppose an agent with intelligence; they can be carried out by a kind of “quasi-mind,” “quasi-intelligence,” associated with operations on signs and inherent to sign and sign system (Peirce and Welby-Gregory 1977, p. 195). This approach makes it possible to abandon the attribution of mystical cognitive abilities to cells and ribosomes and provides a methodological opportunity to study genetic information as a semiotic phenomenon. Peirce also outlined the possibility of communication since, within the structure of the sign, he detected two (at least) quasi-intelligences, a speaker and an interpreter (CP 4.551).

Note that in Peirce’s triad “sign-object-interpretor” paradoxically, there is a result of interpretation (interpretant), but there is no agent

(interpreter). The latest term was introduced by Charles Morris, for whom an interpreter is an organism, and an interpretant is a habit or reaction of an organism (Morris 1938, p. 31). This situation is not accidental, and Peirce himself pointed this out – his definition of the sign does not imply the presence of a cognizant agent:

A sign is something, A, which brings something, B, its interpretant sign, determined or created by it, into the same sort of correspondence (or a lower implied sort) with something, C, its object, as that in which itself stands to C. This definition no more involves any reference to human thought than does the definition of a line as the place within which a particle lies during a lapse of time". (Peirce 1976, p. 54).

Since the basic concepts of semiotics are defined exclusively in relation to each other (Morris 1938, p. 55), it can be considered that at the lower levels of semiosis, the interpreter and interpretant coincide:

The enzyme⁽⁸⁾ comes into contact with all the indifferent elements present in the system in a purely statistical, thermodynamic way, and enters into relationship only when it encounters its own substrate and no other. The substrate is thus the referent sign for the reading machine, or interpreter, and the 'reading' — that is, the signaling phenomenon — consists of the destruction and utilization of the substrate. Here an interpreter is One who interprets', a synonym of interpretant, and the two terms, though quite distinct at a higher level of semiotic analysis, are equivalent at this level. (Prodi 1988, p. 207).

The scheme outlined by Peirce, even without pointing to it, is reproduced by modern researchers based on the analysis of the recent results. For example, Markoš extended the concept of genetic reading claiming that the opposite of mechanical decoding is to be that of hermeneutic reading, which is "not merely a matter of deciphering meaning - as such a method would simply reveal what is already pre-existing - but rather, it is the very act of acquiring knowledge. ... and creating meaning" (Markoš

(8) Enzymes are proteins that act as biological catalysts.

2002, p. 35). According to Wills, as a result of self-organization processes, even before the very primordial genetic code, an interpreter also arises; and the very origin of genetic coding may be identified as biosemiosis (Wills 2014, p. 152).

As Lotman foresaw, the basis of the primary semiosis are patterns of autocatalysis. Based on the data on the functioning of ribozymes (Aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases complexes - aaRS), Wills and Carter explicate the connection between the catalysis processes of protein synthesis with the formation of reflexive self-referential relations. Genetic information is mapped into molecular interaction mechanisms; due to it, mechanical causality begins to be controlled by semantic structures. A system of constraints imposed on the synthesis process arises: heterogeneous spheres (biological, informational, thermodynamic) act as constraints for each other (Carter and Wills 2018a, 2018b; 2021). At the same time, the primary semiotic relevance lies in the self-completing interpretation processes, which lend meaning to polymer sequences meaning. The information transfer (replication) is estimated as a zero level of interpretation. Higher levels of interpretation presuppose the development of self-execution mechanisms. The language and the interpreter are systems of recursive operations, and self-contained processes (auto-cataly-zation - auto-reference - self-regulation - self-description) acquire decisive functions. A meaning emerges not as a result of the separate operation of correlating nucleotides with amino acids; it is determined within a system of other operations and interactions of different factors (i.e., in the communication). In this case, the causes and effects generated by them are transformed into each other (Wills 2016, p. 8); and a vicious circle of recursive transformations arises (or, as the authors labeled it: *Hofstadter's strange loop* – (Carter and Wills 2021). Protein acts both as a catalyst and as a product of protein synthesis. An analogy with “understanding” can also be seen in the ability of an enzyme to distinguish correct messages from incorrect ones, and this ensures adequacy of translation: if an error occurs at the first stage, then a wrong complex “tRNA + amino acid” is disassembled and sent back.

The process of biosynthesis evidently appears as semiosis without a subject – this, as Lotman outlined, is the workings of some autocatalytic recursive processes. The concept of meaning can be defined as a product

of the interaction of a bio-system with its environment. It results as a stable interpretation of a system in another one. This relation can be fixed as a semiotic relationship between a signified and a signifier.

4. The emergence of the semiosphere from the biosphere

Considering existing hypotheses regarding the origin of the genetic code allows us to identify possible ways of the emergence of semiosis. The modern genetic code manifests the characteristics of semiotic systems emerging as a result of the processes of semio-poiesis. There are essential characteristics of the genetic code which are not inherent in either biological or chemical systems, but at the same time are organic for sign systems, namely linearity, textuality, contextual dependence and arbitrariness of the sign (an arbitrary association between codons and encoded amino acids). The arbitrariness of the genetic code and its linearity drew the attention of Francis Crick. (Crick 1981, pp. 46-48). This leads to very significant consequences: biochemical and semiotic characteristics of the GC may obtain some autonomy from each other. From ancient times, arbitrariness has been interpreted as the result of certain conventions between human beings. However, the emergence of sign relations may not be connected with conscious human activity. The question of the origin of semiotic and informational processes led to the issue of the origin of life (Pattee 2007, pp. 120-121). In most general terms, this is a transition process from biochemical irregularity and non-reproducibility to rigid coding and elimination of possible ambiguity. The emergence of conditions for amino acid replication can be considered a crucial moment. The connection between nucleotides and amino acids is determined by the fact that they appear in the same prebiotic "soup," while nucleotides act as catalysts for synthesizing amino acids (Monod 1971, pp. 141-142). The initial connection between them resembles a fire-smoke relationship: amino acids are a by-product of nucleotide synthesis. It makes sense to recall the idea of Jacques Monod: "The third step, according to our hypothesis, was the gradual emergence of teleonomic systems which, around replicative structures, were to construct an organism, a primitive cell" (Monod 1971, p. 142).

The new teleonomic/teleodynamic principles should begin to operate, presuming such notions as meaning and purpose.

The dominant theories of evolution proceeded from the concepts of self-organization and self-assembly based on stochastic, primarily thermodynamic processes (cf. Woese 1969; Eigen 1971; Hoffmann 1975). However, with the development of such studies, this approach required significant changes. The introduction of semiotic principles for organizing genetic information, control mechanisms through symbols, and the semantic dimension should be associated with the concept of a sign. Terence Deacon distinguishes three levels of organization of information processes: thermodynamic, morphodynamic, and teleodynamic. Introducing the concept of teleodynamics, Deacon starts from the theory of autopoiesis by Maturana and Varela (1980), but prefers to use different terminology (autogenesis, autogen, telodynamic). The principles of self-organization identified earlier are also considered; without them, it is impossible to achieve the third (Deacon 2011, p. 417). At the third teleodynamic level, additional restrictions should be introduced. As a result, the nature of interpretation is fundamentally changed, and such a phenomenon as a significance (meaning) arises. The interpretation process consists of transforming physical mechanisms into semiotic relations, and vice versa; semiotic relations are embodied in physical processes.

The teleonomic/teleodynamic dimension of biosynthesis can no longer be explained based on the characteristics of the biochemical substance. The causal connection between cause and effect is stabilized as a semiotic relationship between a signifier (a codon-anticodon) and a signified (an amino acid). With this approach, one can refer not only to a mapping of one set of symbols to another and rules of such a mapping, or to some “matter - symbol” complementary relationship. The central point will be forming a semiotic system, and the generation of elements is to be subordinated to relationships and operations. It is also vital to elucidate the transformation of replication into recursion (Carter and Wills 2018a; Wills 2019) and make it possible to construct an infinite set of new messages from a finite alphabet.

Therefore, it makes sense to take one more step and go from code to sign systems. The main semiotic issue is to recognize a correlation between

a signifier and a signified. Only in this case is it possible to speak about signs and meanings. The next step is to establish their functional characteristics and rules of operations with them, transcending from a set of signs to a sign system. The conception of evolution as a process of codepoiesis and coding disambiguation (Barbieri 2019a and 2019b) may be complemented by its consideration as the emergence of semiosis based on:

1. The establishment of regularly reproduced connections between signifieds (amino acids) and signifiers (nucleotides)
2. Recursive operations generate new meaningful hierarchical structures (triplets, codon-anticodon pairing).
3. Operations describing relationships within the system (the emergence of the reading frame, start- and stop-codons).

Considering possible ways of the origin and evolution of the genetic code, one may describe it as a process of semiosis, i.e., as the emergence of sign relations, regulations, and operations. The primordial stereo- and biochemically motivated association of nucleotides and amino acids was replaced by arbitrary correspondence. This correspondence between trinucleotides and amino acids must be expressed in some sign form: as a dictionary mapping rules analogous to symbolic signification. In the meantime, spatial co-occurrences between nucleotides (positions) became operational similarly to grammatical categories. In addition to the list of correspondences, the grammar (recursive rules for generating new structures from initial symbols) also appeared. The genetic code emerged as a system of formal restrictions imposed on a biochemical substance. The hypothesis of the emergence of the genetic code may be considered a description of the genetic code's etymology: how the current mapping between sets of nucleotides and amino acids appeared and how these derivative pathways are reflected in the current codon's structure and formal rules of codon's formation. These hypotheses demonstrate how linguistic and semiotic principles of its organization increased step by step. The hypotheses on this issue differ from each other (cf. Koonin and Novozhilov 2017; Kun and Radvanyi 2018); nevertheless, they can be interpreted as a transition from determinacy by a biochemical substance to coding governed by principles of information transfer (code

optimization, error minimization, disambiguation, recursion, linearization, textualization, contextualization)⁽⁹⁾.

The main characteristics of the genetic code's genesis and evolution are consistent with its formal semiotic model, based on the differentiation between grammar (categories, positions) and vocabulary (codons and nucleotides). The increasing complexity of life forms led to new amino acids and new principles for their structuring (Trifonov 2009; Pattee 2012). The doublet code is converted to a triplet one: the functional inequality of the third position correlates with its later appearance (cf. Copley et al. 2005; Patel 2005; Wu et al. 2005; Frank and Froese 2018). As the substance becomes more complicated, biochemical regularities are supplemented by (or even give way to) linguistic and semiotic principles. Newly emerged relations (arbitrariness, contextual dependence, linear order, semantic relations, textual features) are not inherent to biological systems but semiotic ones. In addition to the standard version, there are 23 variants (dialects) of the genetic code (Koonin and Novozhilov 2017, p. 48). The genetic code is not eternally and invariably extant but is the product of multi-stage evolution, leading to its various synchronic and diachronic variants. As it becomes more complicated, the mechanisms of its organization become closer to the principles of natural language organization (for more details, see: (Zolyan 2020 and 2021; Zolyan and Zhdanov 2018).

5. Coming back to the semiosphere

As previous sections attempted to demonstrate, the evolution of the genetic code can be viewed as a process of semio-poiesis - semiosis in action. Thus, the association of material phenomena (in this case, nucleotides and amino acids) led to the creation of semiotic connections. As a final result of random processes, mechanisms for storing and transmitting information emerged, allowing stable forms of life. The increasing complexity of the organization leads to the crystallization of informational

(9) Cf. Ikehara (2002); Queiroz and El-Hani (2006); Higgs (2009); Hateren (2015); Sengupta and Higgs (2015); Wills (2016 and 2018); Sharov (2016); Barbieri (2019a and 2019b); Gare (2021); Carter and Wills (2021).

and semiotic principles. Semio-poiesis, recursive auto-referential processing of a semiotic system, becomes a form of organization of the bio-world when and while notions of meaning and aiming are introduced into it. Regarding the standard genetic code and hypotheses about its origin, the semio-poiesis is manifested as the establishment of regularly reproduced connections between signifieds and signifiers; the emergence of operations, allowing to generate meaningful hierarchically organized entities and describing relationships within the system.

The very dualism of the genetic code, its simultaneous biochemical and linguistic-semiotic organization, as well as the processes of gene expression can be compared with what Lotman considered as the basic principle of the functioning of the semiosphere - this is the interaction of at least two oppositely organized heterogeneous mechanisms. In molecular genetics, storage, transmission, and modification of information is carried out by non-discrete biochemical reactions, which at the same time are regulated by discrete linearly organized abstract structures. Nucleotides and amino acids are both interacting chemicals, but at the same time, they function as signs and texts. In the most general form, these mechanisms coincide with those that Lotman identified as some minimal models of semiotic monads (according to Lotman, a text, an individual personality, and the human brain, intelligence, or culture and the semiosphere as a whole are all isomorphic monads of varying degrees of complexity) - (Lotman 2019, p. 86). The constant process of multilevel transformation of discrete texts into non-discrete ones and vice versa predispose infinite cascade generation of possible forms and meanings. As stated in Lotman's still unpublished oral presentation,

A particular principle of difference is given, a tendency is set for an increase in these differences, for an increase in mutual untranslatability, and for the erasure of these differences, for work on the ultimate translatability, and both of these mechanisms, working in different directions, create all the diversity (Lotman 1981, p. 4)

This idea has a direct relation to the genotype-phenotype relationship. Through the interaction of heterogeneous mechanisms, genotypic structures based on the same standard genetic code and an almost identical

genome generate an unpredictable variety of life in the process of expression, from cells to organisms. The genetic code provides and at the same time self-describes mechanisms of memory that Lotman considered decisive for the functioning of culture, intelligence, and the semiosphere.

Pointing to the interaction of two discrete and non-discrete message generators, Lotman also describes their operations to organize the semiosphere (Lotman 2005). These are replication, mirror symmetry, palindromic structures, change of the nucleus and periphery, the crucial role of boundaries and interfaces (membranes and adaptors), special marking of the beginning and end of the message, the interaction of spatial and linear structures, metalanguage and metaphorical operations leading to the creation of texts (messages) of a higher level:

The entire space of the semiosphere is transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts, and the internal space of each of these sub-semiospheres has its own semiotic 'I' which is realized as the relationship of any language, groups of texts, or separate texts, to a metastructural space which describes them, always bearing in mind that languages and texts are hierarchically disposed on different levels. (Lotman 1990, p. 131, 138).

The semiosphere as integrity and its particular subsystems have properties of self-organization and self-development, their *semiotic "I"* acting both as a subject of semiosis and as an object created by semiosis (*the subject and its own object*). Therefore, the semiosphere appears as a communication between different semiotic monads, each of them can act as a text for the other. (It is worth recalling here that Lotman considered text as a trigger for semiotic activities, and text-generating mechanisms need a text from outside to set them – see chapter 2).

For all of the aforementioned characteristics of the semiosphere, it is possible to find analogs in molecular genetics. At the same time, the consideration of the processes of gene expression allows us to see these processes in their primary and explicit form; it confirms the presence of different functional mechanisms for information processing. As a result of evolutionary differentiation, the functionally specialized segments of DNA and RNA were formed. Thus, the functions of storing, copying, transmitting, and interpreting information are distributed between two strands of DNA, the sense, and antisense sequences, and four types of RNA.

Lotman's idea of replication and mirror symmetry also receives its obvious and visible representation – starting with complementary bonds between nucleotides and codons and anticodons and palindromic structures on the highest levels of the genomic organization. Of particular note is the presence in the genetic code of so-called nonsenses - these are four codons, which do not encode any amino acid, but function as a signal for the beginning (start-codon) or end (three stop-codons) of primary messages. Their appearance can be explained as a manifestation of intersystem meta-function, like logical and grammatical elements in natural languages. In general, informational genetic structures can be characterized as Lotman defined structures – *binary, asymmetrical, and at the same time, unitary* entities (Lotman 1990, p. 3). This structural explanation may demonstrate how the semiosphere arises from the biosphere – at the time of its emergence, the biosphere already obtains certain features of semiotic organization. The birth of life, which involves controlling complex information processes, leads to the first semiotic relations expressed in genetic coding. Moreover, the functioning of the semiosphere and biosphere assumes the presence of some semiotic relations; they arise as mutually binding and determining factors. At the same time, the conception of semio-poiesis can clarify the characteristics of semiosis within the semiosphere as an intrinsic dynamic process of its self-organization and self-development (“*self-growing Logos*”).

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SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE: CONVERGENCES BETWEEN LOTMAN AND GREIMAS

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Semiotica della cultura. Convergenze tra Lotman e Greimas

ABSTRACT: Rethinking Jurij Lotman in the 21st century involves in my view (i) highlighting the suggestions he made through his culturological studies that helped to identify culture as the object of study for semiotics, and (ii) combining these suggestions with a semiotic method of analysis, which Lotman himself did not develop and did not use. In this article, as regards (i), I shall focus on the concepts of intersemiotic text and translation (or transduction), which are central to a mature and modern semiotics; while for (ii), I aim to propose the integration of Lotman's theory of culture with the methodological semiotics of Greimas, since in my view they are wholly complementary.

KEYWORDS: Lotman; semiotics of culture; semiotic method; text; transduction

1. Culture as the object of semiotic study

Although they assigned particular and original meanings to their own semiotic theories, the most important 20th century semioticians agreed on one thing: that the discipline's proper object of study was culture. According to Barthes, everything is culturally and historically constructed, and the task of semiotics is to demystify the bourgeois practices through which what is in fact historical and cultural is presented as being natural (Barthes 1957).

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Greimas says that it is necessary to deal with the “natural” world, but immediately goes on to specify that by “natural” (in inverted commas) world we simply mean its pre-existence in relation to individuals, who find themselves inscribed in it from birth: indeed, the extralinguistic world is culturalized, created by humans and established by them as meaningful (Greimas 1968)⁽²⁾. In the introduction to his *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975) – whose introduction is evocatively titled *Toward a logic of culture* – Eco defines semiotics as a *general theory of culture*, believing that culture can be studied as a whole from a semiotic perspective⁽³⁾. As is well known, Lotman believes that culture can be defined as memory, or rather as the recording in memory of what the community has experienced. Culture is “*the non-hereditary memory of the community*” (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975 [1971], p. 43). When thought of in these terms, culture is revealed as a powerful mechanism for the preservation of information, which can include written texts, images, buildings, different types of objects, etc. Lotman stresses, however, that culture must not be understood simply as a static store of information: culture preserves information and absorbs new information in a continuous process of codification and decodification of texts, messages, objects, and practices that come from other cultures. It follows from this that culture functions against a background of *non-culture*, whereby non-culture we mean a different cultural space that has different codes. In its dynamic aspects, culture assimilates texts, translates them into its own languages, dialoguing continually with the non-culture to produce new information. In semiotic terms, Lotman and his colleagues from the Tartu school believe that culture can be defined as a *secondary modelling system*⁽⁴⁾. Lotman indeed believes that natural language, the primary modelling system, functions as a medium and as a model for the other cultural languages (or secondary modelling systems): as a medium, because we talk about art, religion, architecture, dance, fashion using “natural” language, and so we can correlate different systems of signs; and as a model because we think of art, architecture and other cultural systems as languages, and are therefore

(2) I will return below to Greimas’s distinction between “natural” language and the “natural” world, between linguistic and extralinguistic, which is undoubtedly in need of reappraisal.

(3) In those years Eco was certainly influenced by some Lotman’s writings, which he was having translated for the publisher Bompiani.

(4) See Lotman and Uspenskij (1975 [1971]).

inclined to believe that these languages work in the same way as language itself.⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, if culture is a generator of structurality, since its basic job is to organize structurally the world that surrounds us, then in Lotman's view natural language is the mechanism that allows this structuring to take place.

So far, I have alluded to some semiotic definitions of culture, but how can we describe/define a semiotics *of* culture, that is, a study of culture that is specifically semiotic? Lotman and the other members of the Tartu school identify two main methods: the first, which continues along the lines of the Russian formalists and the work of Saussure, consists of analysing cultural phenomena using the structural method; the second consists of analysing the relationships between different cultures and the different systems of signs that make up a culture. The first perspective is more static and could be defined, in Saussurian terms, as synchronic: this method includes attempts to identify cultural typologies based on the main structural characteristics, using specific metalanguages where necessary (Lotman and Uspenskij 1975 [1969]). The second is more dynamic and could be called, in Saussurian terms, diachronic: this area covers analyses of the relationships, loans and translations that take place between cultures and non-cultures as well as between different signification systems in the same culture (writing, fashion, visual arts, religion, science, architecture, games, myths, photographs, urban planning, objects, etc.)⁽⁶⁾. I shall return shortly to these two ways of understanding a semiotics of culture, but first I think it is important to stress that Lotman was chiefly a cultural historian who did not use a semiotic method in his analyses.⁽⁷⁾ Even his attempts to establish cultural typologies are limited to identifying very general tendencies on the basis of macrocategories (such as grammaticalized cultures/textualized cultures). If on the one hand, then, Lotman and the Tartu school provide useful and incisive pointers towards a mature semiotics, on the other it is necessary to supplement this vision with a systematic method of analysis. Points of contact thus emerge with the generative semiotics of Greimas and the Paris school which I would like to focus on. My hypothesis is that Lotman's

(5) Lorusso (2015).

(6) On the possible ways of understanding and conceiving a semiotics of culture, see Leone (2012).

(7) On these aspects of Lotman's theory, see Eco (1990).

culturology and Greimas's methodological semiotics should converge in a comprehensive semiotic theory, since they are complementary. I propose, then, to develop this integrated model in three directions: the definition of the text as a unit of analysis (§ 2); the centrality of *transduction* (§ 3); and the use of a semiotic method (§ 4).

2. The unit of analysis: the text in the semiosphere

In line with the other semiotic traditions, Lotman and his Tartu colleagues believe that the unit of analysis for semiotics is the *text*, understood as the “condensed programme of a whole culture” (Lotman *et al* 2013 [1973])⁽⁸⁾. Semioticians of culture do not apply the concept of the text solely to messages in “natural” language, but to any vehicle of communication, be it a ceremony, a work of figurative art, a musical composition, and so on. This very broad vision of the object of analysis is confirmed when Lotman (1990, pp. 123-214) perfects his reflections on culture by introducing the concept of the *semiosphere*, understood as the “semiotic continuum” within which signs with their symbolic values interact. As is well known, Lotman was greatly influenced by the concept of the *biosphere* proposed by the biologist Vernadskij (2013, or. ed. 1926): but while the biosphere is conceived by Vernadskij as “living matter”, or more precisely as “the totality of all living organisms”, the semiosphere is the totality of all the signs that belong to a circumscribed symbolic space. The semiosphere can be regarded as a single organism, a total semiotic space, which by its unified nature renders the single sign (text, fragment of language, etc.) meaningful. As Lotman writes (1990, pp. 126-127):

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 in this hall tour-leaders and visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which *in a certain sense* it is). This is an image of the semiosphere.

(8) See Gherlone (2015).

In another passage the author says that the semiosphere of the modern world includes the signals of satellites, the verses of poets and the cries of animals, as well as many other elements that are in reciprocal relationships among themselves. In Lotman's view it is not possible to consider single signs, in isolation, but rather signs within broader systems that function as organisms.

The reason for repeating these observations is that I believe they can be useful in defining the status of the *text* as the object of semiotic analysis. Some years ago, there was a long debate on the status of practices in relation to the semiotic category of the text. Renowned scholars placed on one side *texts*, seen as communicative forms bound above all to writing, and on the other *practices*, or behaviours, situations, interactions. Fontanille (2008), for example, maintains that on one side there are texts and on the other, there are practices, which go beyond the limits of texts, indeed going *outside the text*. Gianfranco Marrone (2014) reconstructed the genealogy of the notion of text and showed how in its common meaning, text is anchored in some way in writing and is identified with Works. Even when semioticians turned their attention to different objects of study, such as paintings, films, plays, cartoons, musical compositions, design objects, etc., they considered these new objects of study *as if* they were texts, thus reinforcing the model of the written text as exemplar. In addition, they accepted as natural certain textual delimitations – such as the cover and title page of a book, the frame of a picture, the stage in a theatre – without considering that these are cultural delimitations that have undergone a process of naturalization. On the basis of these assumptions, analysts counterposed *texts*, which are bounded and based on the model of writing, with *practices*, seen as open, fluid, unbounded. In a semiotic sense, however, Marrone reminds us that any material thing in the world can be a bearer of cultural content and can therefore be considered *text*. The text is a portion of the world that is isolated by the scholar for the purpose of analysis, on the basis of a precise project of description, and from this perspective we move beyond the idea that “natural” language is on one side and the “natural” world on the other, connected through the activity of translation (Greimas 1968): the two levels coexist and are interwoven, and a text can include linguistic forms and pieces of the outside world, or words, objects and bodies. A painting can be

a text, as can a painting with captions viewed by a visitor to an art gallery. The space of a supermarket can be a text, as can that same space when it is crossed by a customer who moves around and interacts with other customers. From the point of view of formal semiotics, the substances in which something is expressed are irrelevant and textuality is understood as the empirical manifestation of an underlying discourse. The expression is the support from which emerge the structures of a cultural content that must be described using a method, as I will show shortly. Rather than thinking of objects of study that our culture identifies as texts because they are characterized by indicators of closure and delimitation, like books, paintings, or artefacts, we should think of an observer who circumscribes a portion of the world in order to answer certain questions. Furthermore, from a standpoint that is first fully Saussurian and then phenomenological, we know that the object of analysis is always constructed from the interaction with a subject observer.

Lotman confirms this perspective in his work. He places no limits on the matter that can constitute a text; on the contrary, he posits the existence in the background of a semiosphere that is made up *globally* of different types of signs, from which units of analysis (texts) on which to work can be carved out *locally*. Lotman's contribution to modern semiotics is this first, great theoretical and epistemological legacy.

3. The centrality of transduction

As we have already noted, Lotman focused a great deal on the concept of translation, both of texts and phenomena from other cultures, and between texts and phenomena in the same culture.⁽⁹⁾ Exchanges with the outside are the life blood of a culture, which through them metabolizes new codes and is transformed. As for internal translations, the starting hypothesis is that culture is a vast space in which many systems of signification coexist: writing, fashion, visual arts, religion, architecture, games, myths, photographs, urban planning, objects, etc. According to

(9) On the concept of translation in the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, see Sütiste and Salupere (2021).

the scholars of the Tartu school, an isolated signification system cannot constitute culture because the minimum condition is that there must be at least two correlated systems, for example a text in natural language and an image, or a photograph and an audiovisual text: the idea is that systems of signs only work in union, leaning on one another, and that none possesses a mechanism that would allow it to function in isolation (Lotman *et al* 2013 [1973]). Semiotics is therefore the discipline that studies precisely that correlation between different systems of signs that make up a culture. Hence there are texts from other cultures that are translated and start to circulate in recodified form, texts from tradition that are retranslated and thus updated, and texts belonging to a system of signification that are translated into a different signification system (eg from literature to the visual arts, from theatre to fashion, from philosophy to urban planning). Translations are a culture's driving force and guarantee the continuity of semiosis also as a result of their inevitable imperfection⁽¹⁰⁾.

When he discusses the semiosphere too, Lotman returns to the possibility of exchanges with the external world through the translation of texts that come from a non-culture, interiorized through the application of their own codes; and of internal exchanges, among discourses that are characteristic of the same culture. Insofar as it is directed towards the production of new information, the organism must of necessity find a partner with which to establish a dialogue, which will be open and dynamic. As for relationships with the outside world, Lotman highlights the concept of *boundary*, understood to be the sum total of the linguistic "filters" of translation (Lotman 1990, pp. 131-142). In order for texts that are outside the semiosphere to become comprehensible it is necessary to translate them into one of the languages of the semiosphere, and the boundary of a semiotic space has considerable functional and structural importance since, as a "bilingualistic mechanism", it helps bring about the translation of external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Only in the space of the boundary, therefore, can the semiosphere establish contacts with the extrasystemic space. Lotman also notes that if on the one hand the boundary unites two semiotic spheres, from the point of view of self-awareness (that is, of

(10) See Sedda (2012).

self-description) it divides them, because having awareness of oneself in a cultural relationship means having awareness of one's own specificity in contraposition to other cultural realities.

As is well known, modern semiotics places great focus on the centrality of intersemiotic translations, that is, translations between different systems of signs (from the external to the internal, or simply within the internal space of a culture). Jakobson (1959) believed that first of all came linguistic translation, and then intersemiotic translation. The modern point of view, in contrast, assigns absolute centrality to *transductions*, which operate between different signification systems (Fabbri 1998; 2017): linguistic translation is one among these. Paolo Fabbri (2000) sang the praises of Babel, stressing the potential richness of linguistic differences. Indeed, communication should not be seen as an act through which to seek agreement and to talk about the same things: rather, we are interested in what is incommunicable, which emerges through the juxtaposition of linguistic differences. Fabbri himself stressed, however, the importance of transductions, that is, intersemiotic transpositions (from the visual to the written, from sound to vision, from writing to audiovisual, and so on), which also relate to polisensoriality (Fabbri 2017; 2021a).

Sociosemiotics moved in the same direction, hypothesizing a cultural system in which social discourses (of journalism, science, advertising, religion, economics, etc.) preside over spaces and follow trajectories that necessitate a continual renegotiation of the internal boundaries of the semiosphere⁽¹¹⁾. Sociosemiotics is concerned with these trajectories and the ways in which discourses impose themselves, are successful, erode spaces, force boundaries, cede territories, acquire legitimacy. Sociosemioticians have studied, for example, the way in which journalistic communication, the language of fashion, spatial systems and advertising discourse have been changed and reconfigured through the passage of texts, contaminations and intersemiotic translations that have redefined the ways in which individual systems of signs are organized. This is why the semiotics of practices and sociosemiotics – as specific orientations contained within general semiotics as a whole – seem to me to be perfectly in line with Lotman's suggestions.

(11) See Landowski (1989), Marrone (2001), Semprini (2003).

Furthermore, a semiotics of culture cannot help but be: (i) from a static perspective, a semiotics that studies texts and cultural practices in the search for underlying systems and processes; (ii) from a dynamic perspective, a semiotics that studies dialogic and intersemiotic exchanges, confirming its nature as the *science of the functional correlation between different systems of signs*.

4. The semiotic method

Lotman's observations on the text and on transductions retain their importance today. And yet, as noted above, Lotman had no method of analysis that would have allowed him to unify his observations or share the results. Lotman, like other semioticians such as Eco and Barthes, tells us a great deal about how culture works while also telling us repeatedly *what* a semiotics of culture should do, but in their analyses – however perceptive and effective they may always be – they do not adopt a systematic method, with precise procedures and interdefined terms. This is where in my view Greimas comes in, since he can add to a theory of culture a methodology of analysis based on a clear and effective epistemology. I will therefore attempt to set out some epistemological and methodological moves that could provide specific ways of carrying out a semiotic intervention through a convergence of Lotman's basic guidelines with Greimas's methodological approach⁽¹²⁾:

(i) the text needs to be “prepared”: it is not a phenomenological piece of evidence, but the outcome of a double construction: it is constructed by the culture, which establishes its forms and boundaries; but it is also constructed by the analyst, who sets out its internal structures and levels of pertinence (immanence is constructed, not given); the “preparation” of the text depends on the questions asked by the analyst, their project of description: the empirical level of the analysis is interwoven with the epistemological level, whose prior choices determine the identification of the object of analysis;

(ii) the text that is identified and prepared by the analyst exists

(12) On the possible convergences between Lotman and Greimas, see Migliore (2008). In particular on the semiotic method, see Ferraro, Finocchi and Lorusso (2018).

alongside other potential texts with which it inevitably creates a system: if the “closed nature” of the text is an essential methodological condition for ascribing a necessary discontinuity to the analysis, in reality the text is permeable at its edges, open, ready to be translated into other texts, in that intertextual chain that essentially makes up the semiosphere; the context, from this perspective, is another potential text that gravitates around, or close to, the text that is being examined. This is why it is important to analyse translations and transductions, and to carry out comparative analyses of broad *corpora* made up of different examples, in order partly to confer greater solidity and scientific weight to the results;

(iii) the semiotician recognizes in the text a level of expression and another of content: by doing so, they start to abandon the empirical dimension of the object of analysis and to reconstruct it, thinking of its organization in two interconnected levels;

(iv) as regards the content level, the text forms the tip of the iceberg of what is called the *generative trajectory of meaning*, a grid of analysis that allows the text’s internal organization to be grasped according to multiple levels of pertinence: so that the analyst starts from the manifestation of the text and through a series of procedures reconstructs an immanent level (Greimas and Courtés 1979);

(v) this method of analysis – which is based on a radically constructivist epistemology – must have a «scientific vocation», in the sense that it aims to use an interdefined metalanguage so that the results of the analyses can be checked intersubjectively.

So while Lotman describes to us the semiosphere and the working of cultures, and Eco describes the encyclopedia⁽¹³⁾, Greimas tells us how to analyse texts, and through them cultures: by making the “text” – in a technical sense – the object of semiotic knowledge, and outlining a method of analysis that is constructivist and immanent. It seems to me that Lotman and Greimas are perfectly complementary because, in my view, from a semiotic perspective a theory of culture must have an epistemology and a method of analysis connected to it: it is only thus that a semiotics of culture can take shape.

(13) On the links between Eco and Lotman see Gramigna and Salupere (2017).

And yet, even though semiotics is underpinned by a strong epistemology, an analytical apparatus, and a scientific approach, and therefore fulfils the requirements for describing the world we live in, dominated as it is by images, signs, and communication processes, for some years now this discipline has been marking time and is far from having that guiding role that it seemed to have acquired from the 1960s to the 1980s. Why is this? Paolo Fabbri (2021b) has thought a great deal about semiotics' current "lack of relevance" and has tried to provide comprehensive explanations for it by analysing both the historical context and the internal dynamics of the discipline. I would like here to focus on some of the internal criticisms of semiotics, starting with the "theory of the missing links" suggested by Fabbri himself in *La svolta semiotica* (1998) and taken up more recently by Gianfranco Marrone (2021). Starting from the levels suggested by Greimas (1966) in order to arrive at a scientific semantics, Fabbri identifies four levels of semiotics. The first level is the *empirical* one: as we have seen, semiotics does not concern itself with *exempla ficta* [made up examples], as philosophy frequently does, but with concrete texts from the culture. The empirical vocation of semiotics is fundamental and marks out the boundaries of the discipline, which are not predominantly philosophical. The second level is *methodological*: as we have noted, the semiotic method consists of starting from portions of reality seen as (empirical) meaning-bearing objects and constructing an immanent level in terms of relationships, structures, relevances. The semiotician "carves out" a "portion of reality" and tries to reconstruct its internal organization using analysis (moving therefore from a level of manifestation to one that is immanent). The third level is the *theoretical*, and it presides over the development of formed and interdefined concepts (subject, object; *débrayage*, *embrayage*; euphoria, dysphoria; actant, actor; and so on). The level of defining the categories is crucial because the scientific nature of the theory is dependent on this interdefined conceptual construction. The fourth and final level is the *epistemological*, in which the philosophical position that lies behind the theory is made explicit.

Gianfranco Marrone (2021) explains that although there is a logic of presupposition between the levels, they should not be thought of as being arranged vertically, whether ascending or descending, but rather as being in a circular structure that presupposes a reciprocal and continual exchange, as shown in Figure 1.

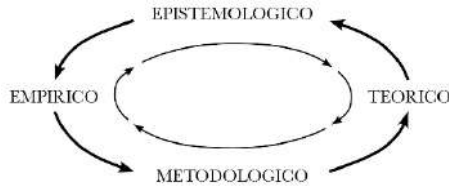


Figure 1. Levels of semiotics (Marrone 2021, p. 401)

Now, in order to function, these levels should be connected, yet according to Fabbri there are sometimes “missing links” in the “semiotic process”. For example, it may be that one starts from a philosophical hypothesis and attempts to verify it directly using one or more texts: in this way, however, without the intervention of a method and a theory, there is no increase in knowledge. If someone wants to justify a philosophical hypothesis, Fabbri says, they always find a text that, set up in a certain way, confirms that hypothesis: the relationship between philosophy and the text, however, remains purely tautological. The link between method and theory could be missing, even though in fact semiotics has produced its most persuasive results precisely at this “junction”: just think of the Generative Trajectory of meaning, with its well organized and interdefined analysis categories, ready to be used – and modified – in the analyses. The link between theory and epistemology is also important, because it may happen that there are theoretical concepts that lack an adequate epistemological foundation. Or texts may be described without regard for method or theory, based purely on “unexplainable intuition”: this would be the case of the “impressionistic analyses” mentioned several times by Paolo Fabbri (2021b). The theory of the “missing links” can help us home in on the distortions that have led to certain weaknesses of semiotics, in my view more so than historical contingencies and external factors. We should also mention another “internal” critical issue that has weighed heavily on the development of semiotics and the assessment of its effectiveness. Sometimes the focus on theory, on interdefined concepts and on technical terminology has been so intense that the discipline has, so to speak, turned in on itself, producing highly technical analyses of interest only to practitioners: so that the science whose job is to explain meaning became, paradoxically, incomprehensible. The

problem here lies not in a missing link or a functional connection between two or more links, but rather in the uncontrolled implosion of one level, the theoretical one. This brought with it a somewhat unwise proliferation of categories and concepts, and often also of the epistemological level, with overblown discussions of the philosophical status of certain categories and certain concepts. Moreover, the methodological level itself may present a problem if it is adopted too rigidly. This is why it is important to, on the one hand, maintain the links that join the various levels, and on the other find a correct balance between rigour and imagination. (Fabbri 2021b) Imagination is important in semiotics, above all in identifying appropriate questions, starting points for investigations, ideas for research projects, remembering always that the main purpose is to analyse cultures in order to demolish clichés and reveal the underlying rhetorics and ideologies (Barthes 1957); but rigour is equally important, because semiotics needs models, categories and procedures; in other words, it needs a method.

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PARTE II
**RADICI E PROSPETTIVE: SULL'INFORMAZIONE,
SUL TESTO E SULLA TESTUALITÀ**

PART II
ROOTS AND PERSPECTIVES: ON INFORMATION, TEXT, AND TEXTUALITY

TEXTS AND THE CULTURAL VALUE OF TRUTHFULNESS IN JURI LOTMAN^[1]

DI REMO GRAMIGNA^[2]

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Testi e valore culturale della veridicità in Juri Lotman

ABSTRACT: By drawing on the work of Ju. Lotman and A. Piatigorsky, the present study examines two key concepts for the semiotics of culture: the notion of ‘cultural text’ and the cultural value of truthfulness ascribed to it. This work takes up the notion of cultural texts and traces the aspect of the material ‘fixation’ or ‘expression’ as one of the lynchpins of texts in Lotman and Piatigorsky’s thought. This study seeks to shed light on the function that the element of expression of texts plays in the context of a given culture. It argues that expression performs the function of the textual identity of truthfulness. Lotman’s idea that the surplus of expression is the distinguishing feature that separates cultural texts from nontexts as well as the value of truthfulness ascribed to them is examined. The paper suggests that the element of the material expression of texts has been gradually lost and that today the difference between texts and nontexts is blurred.

KEYWORDS: Juri Lotman, semiotics of culture, texts, values, truthfulness, materiality

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Statement of the problem: the material aspect of signs

Since antiquity, the world has been divided into two clear-cut categories: things and signs. Whilst things were regarded as those entities that exist but do not signify, signs were thought of as things endowed with a peculiar ability: to convey meaning in interpersonal communication (Cassin 2014; Catapano 2018; Courtine 2014). As compared to things, signs were thus equipped with a specific quality: signification. It is worth pointing out, however, that this distinction not only posits that signs signify, but assumes that signs pertain to the networks of things, nonetheless. In other words, whilst being able to signify, signs retain an element of ‘thingness’, the material property of being-a-thing, so to speak. In what follows, I will refer to this quality that signs possess as the material aspect of signs.

This said, one may wonder what the word “material” means in this context. Is it the physical, organic matter that this term refers to? Is it the channel or the medium through which signs are conveyed? Is it the tangible surface that enables signs to convey messages that we refer to, or is it something else? Indeed, the issue of the material aspect of signs is a hard nut to crack. Grappling with this notion is not easy and is an issue that is far more complex than is presented here.

To start with, the material aspect of signs is not mono-dimensional as one may be led to think. On the contrary, this is a multifaceted and multi-levelled issue. Indeed, some scholars have argued for a typology of the materiality of signs based on the different levels embedded in the word “material”. S. Petrilli, for instance, outlines a typology of different types of materiality that includes “physical”, “instrumental”, “ideological”, and “extraintentional materiality” (Petrilli 1986; 2004, p.161). Bakhtin discusses the notion of the material in the context of literature (Renfrew 2006) and, as we shall see, this notion is important for Lotman as well. I shall come back to this problem. For the time being, however, it suffices to say that signs present a material element. This will serve as a basis underlying my argument.

To some extent, the material aspect of the sign can be regarded as the sensorial element in the sign relation. A sign-receiver or an organism is able to attend to signs and process information because signs present an aspect that is perceptible by the senses. In other words, organisms are able

to recognize signs of various natures in their own environment, to perceive, and to process them by attending to the material aspect that expresses the sign and anchors it in a determined form. Needless to say, not all the stimuli the organisms receive are attended to, but only those that are above a given semiotic threshold (Maltese 1970, p. 77) within the constraints set within the organism’s *umwelt*.

The idea of sign–perception is fashioned in various ways according to the strands of semiotics to which scholars belong. This is so often said that I feel exempted from going into too much detail about the issue. F. Saussure referred to the perceptible aspect of the sign as the *signifiant*, R. Jakobson (1962, p. 631) termed it as *signans* regarded, indeed, as “the sensuous, perceptible aspect” of the sign, C. Morris (1946, p. 31) used the term “sign vehicle” as “particular physical event which is a sign”. Other scholars used different terminology in order to account for this aspect of the sign relation. A useful list (tab. 1) of the conceptual and terminological differences in describing the sign relation is found in U. Eco (1973; 1982, p. 567):

Aristotle	Name	Passions of the souls	Things and facts
Stoics	<i>Sēmainon</i>	<i>Sēmainómenon</i>	<i>Tychánon</i>
Augustine	<i>Verbum vocis</i>	<i>Verbum mentis</i>	<i>Res</i>
Abelard	<i>Vox</i>	<i>Intellectus/sententia</i>	<i>Res</i>
Ockham	<i>Terminus</i>	<i>Conceptus</i>	<i>Res</i>
Locke	Name	Nominal essence	Thing
Frege	<i>Zeichen</i>	<i>Sinn</i>	<i>Bedeutung</i>
Peirce	<i>Representamen</i>	Immediate object	Dynamical object
Carnap	Sign	Sense, Intensional object	<i>Nominatum</i> , Extension or designated object
Ogden & Richards	Symbol	Reference	Referent
Morris	Sign-vehicle	<i>Significatum</i>	<i>Denotatum</i>
Saussure	<i>Signifiant</i>	<i>Signifié</i>	
Hjelmslev	Expression	Content	Substance? Matter or <i>continuum</i> ?

Table 1. Semiotic triangles and conceptual and terminological variations (adapted from Eco 1982, p. 567).

There is, however, one more component to this picture. Given that the sign has a material element to it, as just said, the same material aspect must be considered in respect to the meaning it conveys in and of itself. We may, thus, ask the question: how is the material aspect of sign linked to signification, and what semiotic functions does it serve? If the material aspect of signs is significant, there is a substratum of meanings conveyed by means of the material aspect of the sign (its expression) which should be considered along with the meaning assigned to the level of content. This view, thus, accounts for a multileveled theory of meaning-making where the material aspect of the sign plays a role, too. I argue that this point often goes unnoticed and deserves attention. In what follows, I will be spending a great deal of time to unravel this point.

Some trends of semiotics, however, did not fail to register this aspect, albeit sparingly. In this regard, I particularly draw on the works of Ju. Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics (TMS).⁽³⁾ I take Lotman's work as the starting point and the basis for developing my argument. The main premises underlying this study can, thus, be summarized as follows:

- The sign has a material element to it;
- The materiality of signs presents different levels of analysis as the variety of meanings of the term “material” suggests;
- The material aspect of the sign can be used as a meaning conveyor and has a semiotic function;
- Cultures use the element of the material aspect of signs in order to select certain types of texts and elevate them to the status of cultural texts;
- A cultural text is a text anchored to a material structure for its expression and has a particular value in the context of a given culture;
- This aspect is an additional level of meaning that overlays and adds up to the other levels of textual signification;

(3) The terms ‘group’ and ‘school’ are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the TMS. There is, however, a difference in meaning. For a discussion of this issue, see Marzaduri (1976), Uspenskij (1996, pp. 4-16) and Torop (2007).

- The meaning attached to the material aspect of signs is valued in the context of culture and is linked to the value of the truthfulness of texts;
- The connection between texts and the cultural value of truthfulness needs to be qualified.

Given such premises, my concern is threefold. Firstly, to discuss the notion of “cultural text”, and especially the aspect of the expression of texts in a given symbolic system. Secondly, to address the question of why and how texts are endowed with the cultural value of truthfulness based on the materiality of the signifiers. Thirdly, to ask whether there is a loss of signifiers, as it were, due to the gradual shift that occurred in contemporary society from a material culture to an immaterial and technological age. Has the aspect of the materiality of signs and texts lost its significance and its valuative and semiotic function?

Because the semiotics of culture is much less concerned with the concept of sign, as it takes “texts” as its “cultural units” (Eco 1976), in what follows, I will focus more on texts and cultural texts rather than signs. In order to make my argument as clear as possible, I will employ the frame of the semiotics of culture as the theoretical background (Lotman 1970; Lotman et al. 1973). The concepts of cultural text, truth value, the material element of the sign, etc. that perhaps seem vague to the reader not accustomed to such a scholarly tradition find their feet in the context of the TMS. This justifies my choice.

I will proceed as follows. I commence by discussing the concept of cultural text and its main features and then take up to the question of sources. After that, I will discuss some key passages from the article *Text and Function* (1975)⁽⁴⁾ of Lotman and Piatigorsky, and I will examine one aspect of cultural texts: the element of “fixation” or “expression”.⁽⁵⁾ As well shall see, this element of texts is interlocked with the issue of the material raised above. From this rather narrow but pivotal remark, I will then pose a larger question – the issue of the truth value of cultural texts – and consider the ramifications this problem has for contemporary semiotics.

(4) All citations of this paper are taken from A. Shukman’s translation (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978).

(5) Throughout the paper I will consistently use the name spelling as Juri Lotman and Piatigorsky, although the literature quoted uses sometimes a different system.

What is a cultural text?

The term cultural text stems from the terminological toolkit of Ju. Lotman and other members of the TMS. Undoubtedly, text is one of the key concepts of the semiotics of culture and is an essential component in Lotman's theory of literature and culture (Levchenko 1999).

The concept of the cultural text in its full-fledged formulation is described in a seminal work published in 1973, simultaneously in Russian and English: *The Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (As Applied to Slavic Texts)*, which is a summary of the basic principles of semiotics advanced by the group. This collective work marks the birth of the semiotics of culture and is regarded as the manifesto of the school (Salupere, Torop 2013). As the editors of the volume *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture* (1973) remark, the *Theses* "summarize the methodological results of many years of work in the field of general semiotics, linguistics, literary science, science of plastic arts, and ethnology on the one hand, and on the other they formulate hypothesis, problems, and projects with which this new, interdisciplinary science – the semiotics of culture – sees itself confronted at the moment" (van der Eng, Grigar 1973, p. 8).

As some commentators pointed out, the *Theses*, however, is a difficult text; it shows several incongruencies (Marzaduri 1979), and is "widely encompassing, penetrating and cryptic" (Portis Winner and Winner 1976, p. 104). The commentary of the Winners is to be singled out as the most accurate commentary on the *Theses* (Portis Winner, Winner 1976). Drawing on their work, here-under I list the main themes discussed in this text. The synopsis (tab. 2) provides an idea of the complexity of the work, the topics treated, and its logic:

1. Identification and definition of a new field of science: the semiotics of culture;
 2. Identification and definition of the objects of the semiotics of culture: examination of culture and cultural mechanisms;
 3. Identification of the base element of culture: the text;
 4. Introduction of the notion of cultural text;
 5. Reconstruction, transmission and translation of texts;
 6. Culture is defined on a threefold level:
 - a. Culture as hierarchy of semiotic systems;
 - b. Culture as the sum of texts and function correlated with them;
 - c. Culture as a mechanism which generates texts;
 7. The problem of the typology of culture;
 8. The study of the life of a text in a system of culture in light of the study of the relations between the structures of different levels;
 9. Description of culture as a whole in which two mutually opposed mechanisms are at work: uniformity and diversity.
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Table 2. The logic of the *Theses of the semiotics of culture*

From this complex and sophisticated work, I will focus on the notion of cultural text. In the *Theses*, text is defined as “the fundamental concept of modern semiotics” and “the primary element (basic unit) of culture” (Lotman et al. 1973 [2013], pp. 57-58). In simple terms, the semiotic analysis of culture is carried out by means of the study of texts: “for the study of culture there exists only those messages which are texts” (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 237).

Texts are generally regarded as being particular kinds of messages or groups of messages. A preliminary question is whether by the term text one refers to verbal communication only, or whether texts include non-verbal communications as well. Cultural texts represent a semiotic

generalization of the notion of linguistic text, thus including verbal texts and non-verbal texts and behaviors in the same basket. From this perspective, one can grasp the difference between a narrow notion of linguistic text and a broader semiotic notion of text, as it is generally understood in semiotics (Segre 1982).

The *Theses* of 1973 indicate that the text is a sign or a complex set of signs generated by a language, but with its own autonomous value, which transmits a complete and “integral” meaning (Lotman et al. 1973 [2013], p. 58). A painting, a photograph, a ritual, a behavior, a building, a symphony, can all be regarded as texts. The extension of the concept of text depends on the scope of the investigation. Thus, a text can be a portrait, a collection of portraits, the entire work of a painter, or the Renaissance tradition of paintings as a whole. Moreover, a text is linked to a function. As Lotman puts it, “the function of a text is defined as its social role, its capacity to serve certain demands in the community which creates the text” (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 233).

Source hunting: A. Piatigorsky’s pragmatic notion of text

In this section, I pose the question of sources in respect to the concept discussed above. I. Portis Winner, T. Winner (1976), and A. Shukman (1977) all pointed out that when discussing the notion of text in the context of the TMS, one influential source was A. Piatigorsky, who, in 1962, published an article titled *Some General Remarks Regarding the Concept of the Text as Multiform Signal*.

For Shukman (1977, p. 21), Piatigorsky’s article “had a profound influence, particularly on the thinking of Lotman”. Portis Winner (1981, p. 19) has also posited an influence of Piatigorsky on the TMS: “the use of text in a broad sense of the TMS owes much to the position of Piatigorsky”. Moreover, she argues that “the concept of the culture text was outlined by Piatigorsky” (Portis Winner 1988, p. 607). It is worth noting that, in a study first published in 1975, Lotman explicitly refers to Piatigorsky’s article of 1962. Thus, such an influence cannot be overlooked.

It is worthy, then, to review Piatigorsky’s 1962 study in light of the connection that this early account on texts has had with his later study,

Text and Function. This said, I should also stress that it is hard to pinpoint with certitude where the idea of the ‘surplus of signification’ – which is one of the lynchpins of cultural texts – comes from and what are the exact sources Lotman and Piatigorsky drew on.

Piatigorsky takes a pragmatic approach to texts. His 1962 study discusses the concept of text from the perspective of the general theory of signals. From this standpoint, a text is a signal fixed in space, whose production is intentional and comprehensible. What matters in a text is its “objective function”, that is, once a text is produced it takes on a life of its own, regardless of the “subjective function” of those who have produced the text in the first place (Marzaduri 1976, p. 373).

What seems relevant to the present inquiry is that Piatigorsky explicitly identifies *fixation* as a key element of texts. Indeed, he lists three main characteristics of texts and divides these features into a syntactic, a pragmatic and a semantic aspect:

- In the syntactic sphere a text must be spatially (optically, acoustically, or in some other fashion) fixed so that it is intuitively felt as distinct from a non-text;
- In the pragmatic sphere, its spatial fixation is not accidental, but the necessary means of conscious transmission of communication by its author or other individuals. Thus, the text has an inner structure;
- In the sphere of semantics, a text must be understandable, i.e., it must not contain insurmountable difficulties hindering its comprehension (Piatigorsky 1962, p. 79 in Winner and Winner 1976, p. 103).

Piatigorsky is clear on this point: a text is a message that is fixed in some space optically, acoustically, or in any other way. Additionally, it is important that the fixation of the text in space is not performed by mere chance or coincidence, but is intentional and is important for the distribution of the message. He also postulates that texts must be understandable.

To sum up, Piatigorsky sets out three features of texts: 1) a text must be fixed; 2) the fixation is achieved purposively, rather than by chance; 3) a text must be understandable. Of these three features of texts, I will focus on the first and second. This may look like a tiny, insignificant detail, so much

so that in fact it has gone almost unnoticed in the literature on the subject; however, it is not. Piatigorsky provides illustrations of fixation, such as writing. As we will see, the same example resurfaces in Lotman (1975).

Piatigorsky also discusses the function of texts. It must be pointed out in the first place that, in his view, the function of text is neither fixed nor static, but is a dynamic entity. The function of a text is created every time there is a connection between the author and the receiver of a text. Another point that deserves attention is the importance of time and space in delivering the message. In the table below (Tab. 3), the author shows the importance of the receiver, time, and space for a typology of texts: a letter, a newspaper article, a sign of warning, a note in a calendar, a note with a telephone number, and an epitaph. He proposed 16 different functions of texts.

	Letter or telegram	Newspaper article	Warning sign	Entry in engagement book	Note of address and tel. no.	Epitaph
Receiver	+	-	-	+	+	-
Time	0	0	-	+	-	-
Space	+	-	0	0	0	0

+ defined

- not defined

0 not significant, absence or near absence of feature

Table 3. Piatigorsky's typology of texts (1962).

Lotman and Piatigorsky on text and function: Signifiers as a 'surplus of expression'

Some of the themes already treated in Piatigorsky's article of 1962 are taken up and deepened in a successive study, *Text and function* (1975). In this essay, Lotman and Piatigorsky discuss the notions of text and function and their interrelation. The authors provide the following definition of text: "text may, however, be defined if not logically, at least for working purposes by pointing to a concrete object having its own

internal features which cannot be deduced from anything else apart from itself” (Lotman and Piatigorsky 1978, p. 233).

Notice that the authors use both the terms ‘text’ and ‘cultural text’, although their meaning is different. It is unclear, however, in what sense the word ‘text’ is used, whether in a commonsensical definition or in a more technical sense: the cultural definition of text. The terminology used, thus, is unclear and ambiguous. This creates considerable potential for confusion.⁽⁶⁾ As we shall see in what follows, cultural texts are defined against the background of ‘nontexts’. The opposition cultural ‘texts’ vs ‘nontexts’ is a recurrent feature in Lotman’s culturology.

Function is the ability of texts to address collective needs in the socio-cultural context in which texts circulate. It is important to stress that, to be regarded as a cultural text, a text needs to meet two conditions: 1) that supplementary ideological connotations are superimposed upon the primary or linguistic meanings; 2) that the text is truthful in the context where it is produced.

Indeed, the concept of text is discussed in light of its “‘expression’ [vyrazhennost’] in a given system of signs” (Lotman and Piatigorsky 1975, p. 233). In order to explain this element of expression of a text by means of sign systems, the author used the term “fixation”, which is exactly the same terminology used in the 1960s by Piatigorsky. The element of fixation of texts is important and has to do with the notion of the material aspect of texts, as pointed out above. As Lotman and Piatigorsky write,

The point of departure for the cultural concept of text is precisely that moment when the fact of linguistic expression ceases to be perceived as sufficient for the utterance to become a text. As a consequence of this the masses of linguistic messages circulating in the community are perceived as nontexts against the background of which stand out a group of texts which reveal features of some supplementary expression significant to the given system of culture. (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234)

(6) S. Dabrowski (1986) has voiced numerous and harsh criticisms towards such a loose use of terminology. The author seeks to debunk Lotman’s thesis by arguing that the terms used are not logical. While I do not endorse Dabrowski’s view, the issue of terminology is indeed a concern. Along the same lines, the Winners warn about the cryptic use of language (Portis-Winner, Winner 1976, p.104). See, also B. Oguienine (1979, p. 99) who voiced similar criticisms to Lotman’s theory.

Zółkiewski (1975, pp. 7-8) qualifies the positions of Lotman as follows:

A fixed (either in time and space or only in time), demarcated and structured text with its meanings — both in terms of the signifier and the signified — cannot do without a specific material object-medium. What is meant here is a physical material which as such is neutral in terms of meaning — it may be e. g. an acoustic material or a material in the proper sense, e.g. the fabric of which clothes are made in such a way that, in the context of a particular folk culture, it allows us to distinguish an unmarried woman. Hence, such an object performs a semiotic and textual function, but also the medium itself, which is inseparable from the text, performs an objective function — it covers the body and protects it from the influence of the natural environment. I believe that this media as well as the texts themselves, may be called semiotic objects and qualified as semiotic components of the interpreted culture, the latter being understood as a set of processes and functions of social communication.

The excerpt from Lotman shows that there is a mismatch between the linguistic expression of messages and the ‘supplementary expression’ of cultural texts. Texts are endowed with features of significant supplementary expression are cultural texts, but not all linguistic expressions are regarded as cultural texts.

In order to be fixed in time and space, a text must be ‘expressed’ in a particular form by means of a specific material. This element of fixation in a material form is not a corollary but something that is necessary for a cultural text to be recognized as such by the community. In this respect, the cultural concept of text is different from the linguistic notion of text. The sole linguistic expression is insufficient for a portion of language to become a text within a culture in a particular historical moment. A message that is expressed in a linguistic form, thus, does not equate to a cultural text because cultural texts must have a supplementary expression that sets them aside from the rest of messages.

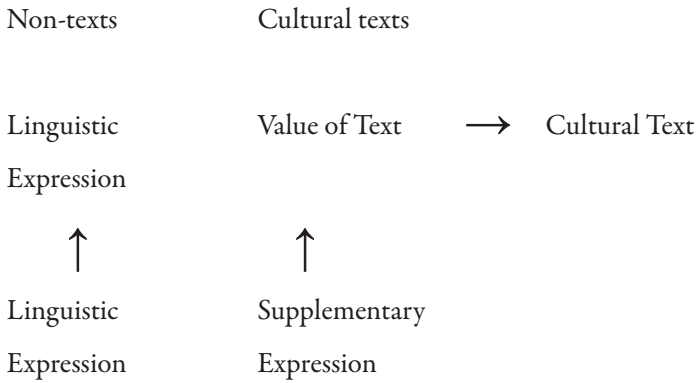


Fig. 1 Textual value is assigned to a group of texts by means of a supplementary expression.

Thus, the line of demarcation between linguistic messages circulating in a society and those messages regarded as cultural texts is that cultural texts have something more to them – a *supplementary expression* that is meaningful in that specific culture and historical epoch. Indeed, the example Lotman provides is the “graphic fixation” linked with the invention of writing (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234). This parallels the example Piatigorsky provided in 1962. Moreover, drawing on the Russian medieval literature, Lotman underscores a link between what is written down and the value of sacredness, thus equating what is written with what is sacred and giving to it the highest value (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234)⁽⁷⁾.

This point is worth pondering. The status of cultural text assigned to a message – which can be a linguistic expression, but also an artefact or an object – is predicated upon the existence of a supplementary signification, which is granted to some messages, but not indistinctively to all of the messages circulating in the semiosphere. In a certain sense, it seems

(7) This is the case in Medieval Russian culture as well as in other cultures. However, this is not a universal principle that applies to all cultures. For instance, in ancient Indian culture the most important texts, including the sacred texts, were memorized rather than fixed in a written form, unlike daily communications that could have been written down. I owe this remark to the anonymous reviewer of this article.

that in the system of culture only certain texts are ‘marked’, as it were, by means of an extra meaning, an additional expression.

The question remains as to how this supplementary signification is put in place. It can be stated that such a supplementary signification is achieved through an intensification of the expression or, to borrow a term coined by M. Grande (1980, p. 23), a “surplus of expression”, by means of which the cultural function of a text is fixed in a material of expression. More precisely the cultural function of a text is anchored and fixed in a given material of expression, as texts engraved on stone (Grande 1980, p. 23). Let us think, for instance, of the ten commandments God engraved on stone and handed down to Moses.

Moreover, Lotman and Piatigorsky (1978, p. 234) point out that the expression and fixation of cultural texts is linked with duration in time and plays a pivotal role in the collective memory:

Expression may also appear as the demand for a certain long-lasting material. What is *engraved* on stone or metal is considered as “text” as distinct from what is *written* on perishable materials – the antithesis “durable/eternal – transitory”; what is written on parchment or silk as distinct from paper – the antithesis “valuable – not valuable”; what is printed in a book as distinct from what is printed in a newspaper or what is written in an album as distinct from what is written in a letter – this is the antithesis “intended to be preserved – intended to be destroyed” (...).⁽⁸⁾

I may offer now some illustrations of this operation. If we take a look at records of the human face in the history of art, for instance, we will not be surprised to find examples of texts engraved on stone or metal that were taken as cultural texts. If we consider Egyptian art, for instance, it was persistent on personal identity as it is apparent from the abundance of faces of people’s portrayals. Face images in Egyptian art were engraved on stone and represented indestructible monuments and everlasting images to preserve the personal identity forever (de Silva, von Simson 1968). Thus, stone sculptures in ancient Egypt are examples of cultural

(8) Notice that the example of letters was already listed in Piatigorsky’s typology of texts discussed in the previous section.

texts fixed on a durable material (Fig. 2). Hence, the opposition between durable/eternal vs transitory that Lotman brings out. Likewise, faces of kings, queens and emperors were depicted on coins made with valuable materials, like gold, silver and copper. Along the same lines we may consider Greek arts as the Greeks used bronze and copper for crafting their artefacts and statues (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Zoser, Egypt. 2700 BC.



Fig. 3 Greek sculpture from Benevento, Italy, 1st century BC.

For Lotman, the supplementary expression of cultural texts is not limited to written cultures, but the same pattern can be found in pre-literate cultures. In these types of cultures, “the distinguishing feature of a text was a supplementary, supralinguistic organization on the level of expression” (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234). It is surprising that Lotman misses referring to this form of supralinguistic expression as a “secondary modeling system” (Lotman 1977), because this is indeed the case. The supralinguistic organization in oral cultures that Lotman refers to operates through the organization of those portions of messages that have legal, moral, religious or scientific value in terms of proverbs and aphorisms (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234). For Lotman, then, this is a general feature of cultural texts that can be found across cultures.

Lotman’s perspective leads to some important considerations. Firstly, cultural texts have particular values attached to them. Thus, a principle of valuation applies here. There is a valuative aspect linked to messages regarded as cultural texts by a given community. These values can be framed according to the oppositions given above: valuable/non valuable, preservation/destruction, eternal/transitory, truthfulness/untruthfulness. As R. Lachmann (1987, p. 13) pointed out, “one can argue that the categories and approaches underlying [Soviet structuralism’s] theory of text and culture [...] imply valuation. To posit a particular concept of the sign or to suggest that there exist certain types of meaning, texts or cultures is in itself an act involving valuation”.

Secondly, this view yields to a hierarchical organization in which texts are arranged in a given culture. This implies the idea of a “scale of cultural values” (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 234): texts are structured in a hierarchical order on the basis of the values and functions that texts perform. We can imagine this scale of cultural values as a sort of continuum or a system of degrees of cultural values, based on the functions of the texts and the systems used for the expression of texts.

Oblique semiotics: cultural texts and the value of truthfulness

This said, there is one more point to discuss: the relation of texts to truthfulness. It is important to point out from the outset that the concept of truthfulness in Lotman and Piatigorsky is unique and idiosyncratic as it eludes the concept of truth from a semantic or analytical stance.⁽⁹⁾ It is striking that a similar line of research was suggested by A. Greimas in 1989:

Lotman's interpretation must be integrated into a Hjelmslevian theory of the languages of connotation, and semioticians, instead of simply avoiding this troublesome problem by handing it over to historians must try to account for it within their own discipline [...]. Veridiction marks inscribed in enunciative discourse should be viewed as constituting the "connotating signifier" whose global articulation accounts for the "connotating signified". The language of connotation constitutes an oblique semiotics. (Greimas 1989, p. 654)

Indeed, there is a sub-thesis in Lotman and Piatigorsky's study that underscores a relation between cultural text and truth value which predicated that the two are interlocked. In a nutshell, a text without the cultural value of truthfulness ascribed to it would not be a cultural text. The relation is underscored in these terms: "a text has truthfulness ascribed to it" (Lotman and Piatigorsky 1978, p. 236) and it is further qualified as follows:

In relation to a nontext, a text has a supplementary meaning. If one compares two utterances identical on the linguistic level, of which one fulfills the concept of a text in the system of a given culture and the other does not, then it is easy to define the essence of text semantics. One and the same message (a written agreement, for example, affirmed by oath, or simply by a promise, coming from a person whose utterances, thanks to his position in the community, are texts, or from a simple member of the community, and so on) will be differently evaluated from the point of view of its authoritativeness even though linguistically there is coincidence. In the sphere in which the utterance is received as a text [...] it has the meaning of truthfulness ascribed to it. An ordinary linguistic communication, well-formed according to all the lexical and grammatical rules that is "correct" in the linguistic sense and not containing anything contradicting the possible in its content, may nonetheless turn out to be a falsehood. But this cannot happen with a text. A false

(9) For a discussion of this point, see Vincent-Marelli (1999) and M. Lotman (2015).

text is as much a contradiction in terms as a false oath, prayer, or law. It is not a text but the violation of a text (Lotman and Piatigorsky 1978, pp. 235-236).

As compared to the previous article of 1962, here Lotman and Piatigorsky walk the extra mile. Not only must cultural texts have certain features to be regarded as such in a given society, but texts are conveyors and holders of truth value. Lotman's examples are revealing. In this context, he misses referring to a semantic theory of truth because he rather considers the authority that certain social institutions have in society and whose position of authority is used as a validation of the truthfulness of texts. Lotman's point seems to revolve around the argument that if a text is produced, accepted and validated by those who have an institutional position of authority, then this text has a value of truth ascribed to it. If we read between the lines, this is also an example of a semiotic marker that signals to the community that 'this is a text and it is truthful'. In this case, it is the authority of the sender that assigns to the texts a certain prestige, and it is regarded as true in light of the privileged position that a person has in a society. If the same portion of text were produced by someone who is not in that same position, it will not have the same status even though the texts are identical in linguistic form. A similar idea resurfaces in *Universe of the Mind* (1990):

When, for instance, a young poet reads his poem in print the message remains textually the same as it was in his manuscript text. Yet, being translated into a new system of graphic signs which have another degree of authority in the given culture it acquires supplementary value. Analogous cases are when the truth or falsehood of a message are made dependent on the fact whether the message is spoken out loud or only implied, whether it is spoken or written, handwritten or printed, etc. (Lotman 1990, p. 21)

For Lotman a false text would be a contradiction in terms as a false text is not a text but a violation of the nature of textuality.

A loss of signifiers? Conclusions and directions for further research

Lotman pointed out that with the transition from oral culture to written culture, oral messages have lost their status as cultural texts, since the graphic fixation was the way to give a message the value of a cultural text. Another leap occurred when we went from the written culture to the printed culture, and I argue that yet another shift occurred when we went from the printed culture to the digital culture. It is my contention that, as compared with written and printed culture, in modern culture there has been a gradual “loss” of the function of the signifier to index the value of the truthfulness of cultural texts. I will refer to this phenomenon as the “loss” of signifiers in order to account for the gradual unfitness of the material expression of cultural texts to perform the function of the markers of truthfulness in a given historical context.

Although he does not develop this point fully, Lotman is clear in this regard: “Observations about preliterate texts acquire further significance when the concept of text in modern culture is analyzed, since as a result of the development of radio and other speaking mechanisms, the obligation for a text to be graphically expressed has again been lost” (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 235).

A question that needs to be addressed, thus, concerns the status of the expressive markers of cultural texts in today’s digital society. What are the implications that cultural texts become unanchored from their expression? Is there a loss of the expressive significance of the signifiers, as just described above? If a text no longer necessitates a system of validation through a material of expression, the difference between texts and non-texts and between truthfulness and untruthfulness is blurred.

The conclusion of Lotman’s article is revealing as it opens up a new vista in the study of text in the current historical epoch:

Two types of culture may then be postulated: one will tend towards a specialization of its texts so that each cultural function there corresponds to [sic] an adequate type of text; the other type of culture will tend to obliterate the boundaries between texts in order that identical texts should serve the whole set of cultural functions. In the first type the text is more important, and in the second, the function. (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978, p. 243)

It can be argued that with the shift from printed culture to digital cultural, the systems of values anchored in the past to certain cultural texts have been lost or nullified. Lotman remarks that a similar shift occurred with the invention of radio and television, but we have now gone far beyond such a scenario. As the result of the development of this technology, the necessity for a text to be anchored to a material means of expression has been gradually lost. The loss of the material expression of cultural texts has now reached its pinnacle with the advent of the internet and digital communication. The distinction between texts and non-texts is now blurred. This is at one and the same time a curse and a challenge for the years ahead.⁽¹⁰⁾

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(10) This hypothesis needs to be assessed against the background of more recent semiotic work that focused on the idea of the loss of ground (Bennett 2020) as well as Baudrillard’s simulacra and the loss of the referent (Baudrillard 1966).

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LOTMAN PRIMA DELL'INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE: IL RUOLO DELLA MENTE COLLETTIVA

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ENGLISH TITLE: Lotman before AI: the role of the collective mind

ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt to assess the effectiveness of certain elements of Lotman's semiotics in contemporary AI research. In the late 1970s, Lotman has critically analyzed the nature of the mind in relation to AI researches, employing the distinction between individual and collective mind. The tool exploited in this analysis is the concept of information, closely linked to that of culture in Lotman's theoretical framework. Starting from the issue of memory challenged by contemporary technology, we will provide the reconstruction of the concept of the collective mind through an article by Lotman published in 1977, devoted to the problems of artificial intelligence. The collective mind requires interpersonal communication and the role of translation for the effectiveness of interaction between two subjects. We will try to show that Lotman's thinking is still relevant and some considerations regarding the value of information and the collective mind are forerunners of the current AI.

KEYWORDS: Lotman; collective mind; Artificial Intelligence; distributed cognition; translation

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1. Il valore dell'informazione: un problema attuale?

Nel terzo episodio della prima stagione di *Black Mirror*, in uno scenario distopico, Liam Foxwell ha appena terminato un colloquio di lavoro di cui non è soddisfatto e, mentre torna a casa, “ripensa” all’evento appena concluso. Non è nella “sua” memoria che Liam scava per interpretare il comportamento dei suoi potenziali datori di lavoro e dare significato alla frase di commiato “le faremo sapere”. Ossessivamente guarda e riguarda il video dell’appuntamento registrato dal processore installato sottocute e collegato al suo cervello. Il dispositivo registra, conserva e trasmette, anche su monitor esterni, tutti gli eventi della vita. Come un qualsiasi dispositivo elettronico, i dati immagazzinati possono essere cancellati in maniera permanente, senza che possano essere richiamati ulteriormente alla memoria.

Il processo di scrittura digitale, lettura, sovrascrittura e cancellazione dei dati eccede la potenzialità della scrittura, pure intesa come tecnologia dopo la sistematizzazione di Ong (1982). Infatti, la scrittura rappresenta (e ha rappresentato) la rivoluzione tecnologica che sgancia l’essere umano dall’orizzonte del *qui e ora* e realizza un oggetto esterno alla mente (un testo) che pure prima non esisteva e che per la sua stessa esistenza necessita di altri strumenti e supporti materiali per diventare esso stesso un oggetto materiale.

L’invenzione della scrittura, assieme alle trasformazioni che conseguono, è considerata convenzionalmente la svolta che segna il passaggio dalla preistoria alla storia, con lo sviluppo delle ICT come apertura alla possibilità di registrazione e conservazione di dati mentre le società sono sorrette comunque anche da altri tipi di tecnologie (Floridi 2014). Il tipo di ICT, di cui abbiamo esperienza, costantemente in evoluzione, non conosce punto di arresto: secondo Floridi, il tempo che vive attualmente l’essere umano è quello dell’iperstoria, in cui a valere sono il processo informativo e la dipendenza da ICT per giungere al benessere della società. Il processo informativo chiama in causa la memoria che non può essere considerata unicamente come possibilità di conservazione ma anche come attenzione alla differenza nelle diverse fasi del ciclo dell’informazione. Dunque, la dimensione dell’iperstoria non è caratterizzata dalla sola conservazione: se fosse così, l’unico problema da risolvere consisterebbe

nello spazio di archiviazione. La suggestione dell'infinità dello spazio di archiviazione a nostra disposizione non è del tutto corretta poiché ci avviamo progressivamente a una mancanza di capacità di immagazzinamento determinata dalla tendenza alla conservazione di qualsivoglia dato. Anche in questa prospettiva, la memoria della conservazione non esclude l'oblio. Pratiche di sovrascrittura e cancellazione comportano la perdita del dato iniziale, eliminando dalla memoria un frammento di informazione anche quando, come nel caso della sovrascrittura, lo si trasforma in qualcosa di altro, in qualcosa di nuovo. Questi aspetti implicano due questioni messe in scena anche nell'episodio di *Black Mirror* già citato: la prima, riguarda la pratica della conservazione compulsiva di dati tanto da ritenere qualsiasi informazione potenzialmente rilevante; la seconda, riguarda la manipolazione del dato fino alla sua cancellazione permanente.

L'esempio tratto dalla serialità televisiva consente di chiamare in causa temi connessi alle pratiche culturali, alla memoria e alla tecnologia, in particolare all'Intelligenza Artificiale contemporanea, attraverso il concetto di informazione.

Negli anni Settanta, costruendo l'impalcatura teorica della semiotica della cultura, Lotman problematizza il tema allora centrale nell'Intelligenza Artificiale, la natura della mente, impiegando il concetto di informazione, ricorrente anche negli esiti più recenti della sua produzione:

L'informazione non è un connotato facoltativo, ma una delle condizioni essenziali per l'esistenza dell'umanità [...] La cultura non è tuttavia un deposito di informazione. È un meccanismo organizzato in modo estremamente complesso, che conserva l'informazione, elaborando continuamente a tale scopo i procedimenti più vantaggiosi e compatti, ne riceve di nuova, codifica e decodifica i messaggi, li traduce da un sistema segnico in un altro (Lotman e Uspenkij 1975 ed. 1987, p. 28).

Nelle prossime pagine, tenendo sullo sfondo le questioni relative a scrittura e informazioni, offrirò una rilettura della semiotica di Lotman nel suo rapporto con la tecnologia. L'obiettivo è rileggere alcune tendenze di ricerca nel campo attuale dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, indicando come modello teorico la mente collettiva di Lotman. A partire da una premessa sulla nascita dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e della radice

saussuriana di mente collettiva (par. 2.1.), sarà fornita un'analisi de *La cultura come mente collettiva e i problemi dell'intelligenza artificiale* in riferimento ai suoi presupposti teorici (par. 2.2.). Si noterà che il modello di mente collettiva di Lotman, non adeguato all'Intelligenza Artificiale degli albori, può essere considerato il presupposto teorico implicito di ricerche attuali⁽²⁾ nel campo del *machine learning*, del *cloud computing* a servizio dell'AI, della robotica (par. 3.).

2. Informazione e memoria: la prospettiva di Lotman

2.1. *Prima di Lotman. Due premesse*

Nel proporre una lettura che pone al centro delle prossime pagine il tema della mente collettiva in Lotman, sono necessarie due premesse.

La prima riguarda le ricerche nell'ambito dell'Intelligenza Artificiale circoscritte al periodo compreso tra gli anni Cinquanta e gli anni Settanta, per definire la cornice di riferimento di Lotman. Ancora prima del seminario estivo tenutosi nel 1956 al Dartmouth College, considerato l'evento fondativo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale quale ambito di ricerca, Alan Turing aveva già pubblicato il manifesto teorico di questa disciplina in *Intelligent machinery* (1948) gettando le basi per una riflessione sulla possibilità di una macchina di simulare processi mentali propri di un essere umano. Successivamente, sviluppando questa ipotesi, Newell e Simon, esponenti del cognitivismo classico, sostengono che la mente dell'uomo è una macchina che ha la capacità di manipolare simboli. Questa prospettiva dell'Intelligenza Artificiale (GOFAI) richiama la possibilità di riprodurre il pensiero dell'essere umano attraverso il meccanismo di funzionamento di una macchina, alimentando la metafora del calcolatore, con un approccio internista allo studio della natura umana. Solo in seguito, nelle evoluzioni più recenti, l'Intelligenza Artificiale e la Scienza cognitiva post-classica, si sono dedicate alla dimensione corporea con lo sviluppo della robotica situata (Brooks 2002).

(2) Per lo sviluppo filosofico dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e gli ambiti di ricerca attuali (in particolare, riconoscimento vocale, percezione artificiale, robotica, elaborazione del linguaggio naturale), si rimanda a Kaplan (2017) e a Boden (2018).

La seconda premessa mette a tema l'indiscusso debito di Lotman nei confronti della semiologia saussuriana. Senza tornare su una questione ampiamente dimostrata, qui vogliamo ricordare che la mente collettiva, presente nella riflessione saussuriana, sebbene in maniera debole nel *Corso di linguistica generale*, emerge in maniera forte dagli appunti di Emile Constantin sul terzo corso (1910-1911)⁽³⁾. Come si vedrà, Lotman, facendo suoi alcuni elementi della semiologia saussuriana e dello strutturalismo, porrà le basi per una teoria della mente collettiva.

2.2. Memoria collettiva e Intelligenza Artificiale

Nel 1977, tra i documenti di lavoro e pre-pubblicazioni del Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e di Linguistica dell'Università di Urbino, appare "La cultura come mente collettiva e i problemi della intelligenza artificiale" di Lotman. Questo breve testo riprende i nuclei della ricerca semiotica, che porteranno alla semiosfera, per anticipare inconsapevolmente un modello epistemologico di cognizione sociale o distribuita, come vuole l'Intelligenza Artificiale contemporanea.

Lo sforzo compiuto da Lotman in questo scritto non ha a che vedere con l'opposizione della ricerca semiotica ad altro tipo di ricerca, ma circoscrive la possibilità di individuare un terreno condiviso da domini di conoscenze eterogenee, che hanno in comune la riflessione sulla mente, anche se con intenti diversi.

Comprendere la portata dell'operazione di Lotman richiede di avviare la (ri)lettura del saggio del 1977, facendo riferimento alla centrale nozione di cultura, già definita, assieme a Uspenskij: "come memoria non ereditaria della collettività, espressa in un determinato sistema di divieti e prescrizioni" (Lotman e Uspenskij 1975 ed. 1987, p. 43), individuata da tratti distintivi, come un sottoinsieme che ha una determinata organizzazione, presentandosi come una parte del tutto. È cruciale la rilevanza dell'informazione, non come elemento accessorio della cultura ma come elemento necessario: viene esibito così il legame con lo strutturalismo, in

(3) Si ricorda che la storia editoriale degli appunti di Constantin si conclude con la pubblicazione nei *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, vol. 58(2005).

generale, e con Jakobson, il cui modello di comunicazione è punto di riferimento, seppure con la proposta di un suo superamento.

Il testo sui problemi dell'Intelligenza Artificiale presenta una parziale riscrittura della categoria della cultura, saldando insieme la memoria collettiva e l'elaborazione delle informazioni:

la cultura come fatto globale è dotata di un particolare sistema di memoria collettiva e di un meccanismo di elaborazione di sempre nuovi messaggi sulla base di lingue anch'esse in continua evoluzione, vale a dire di meccanismi per la elaborazione di idee nuove (Lotman 1977 ed. 2014, p. 5).

Il fenomeno sociale che è la cultura respinge l'idea che il meccanismo di elaborazione di informazioni possa essere individuale, benché questa acquisizione non sia adeguata al presupposto teorico dell'Intelligenza Artificiale degli anni Settanta, anzi sembra prefigurare il peso della socialità (e della natura corporea dell'umano) che sostiene le ricerche contemporanee, nonché le modalità di utilizzo dei dati (non necessariamente con l'espressione *big data*).

Anticipando la tendenza della scienza cognitiva post-classica, Lotman riformula la domanda sulla possibilità di realizzazione di una macchina pensante in questi termini: per capire quali sono le forme e le caratteristiche di una macchina pensante come l'essere umano bisogna assumere che la mente che prendiamo come modello non sia una mente individuale bensì una mente collettiva. Prefigurare la mente collettiva non implica determinare una superiorità ontologica, anzi, come in *Tipologia della cultura*, si ha relazione tra mente individuale e mente collettiva, senza che vi sia opposizione.

Lotman indica l'errore compiuto dai primi ricercatori dell'Intelligenza Artificiale nella problematizzazione della mente individuale e nell'impossibilità di fondare gli studi su un inequivocabile concetto di mente (umana), facendo riferimento al modello epistemologico utilizzato da Turing nel già citato articolo del 1948. Una simile situazione determina un'incapacità di fondo dei ricercatori impegnati nell'Intelligenza Artificiale tanto da rendere quest'ultima più che altro una sorta di utopia. In altri termini, secondo Lotman, il punto di partenza per una ricerca nell'Intelligenza Artificiale è una definizione di mente umana. Inoltre, emerge anche un altro problema: seguendo lo sviluppo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e accettando l'idea

generica di attività mentale così come è proposta, si consuma il dubbio sulla certezza della bontà del risultato finale: quel modello di attività mentale umana costruita artificialmente corrisponde davvero a quanto avviene in una mente umana? Una risposta chiarificatrice si trova nell'introduzione del concetto di comportamento razionale:

Traducendo queste esigenze nel linguaggio della semiotica, osserviamo che, se ci rappresentiamo un comportamento nuovo come un testo da sottoporre ad un processo di decifrazione ed espresso in una nuova lingua, sconosciuta a chi deve decifrarlo, il nostro problema consisterà essenzialmente nella creazione di nuove lingue atte appunto a tale scopo⁽⁴⁾ (Lotman 1977 ed. 2014, p. 11).

Con un riferimento al modello matematico della comunicazione e una riflessione sul modello proposto da Jakobson, il comportamento mentale viene esemplificato con la produzione di testi, ovvero di un dispositivo informativo, caratterizzato dalle qualità definite da Lotman, inclusa quella dell'adeguatezza:

Con testo nuovo noi intendiamo una comunicazione che non coincide con quella di partenza e che, nello stesso tempo, non è possibile distinguere automaticamente da essa. In tal modo, tutte le trasformazioni corrette, attuate cioè in base alle regole precedentemente convenute del testo di partenza, non costituiscono una nuova comunicazione, perché il testo di partenza e ogni sua corretta trasformazione in realtà possono essere considerati come una stessa comunicazione (*ibidem*).

La costellazione di parole con cui Lotman si riferisce alla creatività, non solo come novità ma anche come adeguatezza e risposta all'imprevedibilità, indebolisce ulteriormente l'impianto teorico dell'Intelligenza Artificiale degli albori fondato sulla simulazione di attività mentali in una mente individuale.

(4) La situazione così descritta appare come un'obiezione all'idea di mente individuale e alla metafora del calcolatore. Qualche anno dopo dalla diffusione di questo saggio di Lotman, il filosofo della mente John Searle (1980) pubblica l'articolo in cui utilizza il celebre esperimento mentale della "stanza cinese" per porre una critica all'idea che una macchina venga ritenuta intelligente sulla base di una serie di operazioni di calcolo, indicando nell'intenzionalità l'elemento di cui una macchina è sprovvista per dirsi intelligente.

La condizione di possibilità del comportamento intelligente si trova in un tassello fondamentale dell'impianto teorico lotmaniano: il plurilinguismo, in cui tanto il meccanismo della traduzione quanto il meccanismo della trasmissione risultano necessari e interdipendenti.

Nella comunicazione interpersonale si trova il primo nucleo di riflessione sul plurilinguismo che poi si estende all'intera cultura. La trasmissione di informazione da un emittente a un destinatario è sempre possibile, anche se dotati dello stesso codice. In questo caso, in discussione non è la mera trasmissione dell'informazione, ma la sua traduzione dalla lingua di un "io" alla lingua di un "tu" (Lotman e Uspenskij; Lotman 1977, 1985, 1993). La comunicazione vera e propria avviene solo se c'è interazione tra codici diversi, in una dimensione dialogica e relazionale, il cui meccanismo è quello della traduzione che rende possibile la creazione e lo scambio di nuove informazioni. Nel processo di traduzione da una lingua a un'altra una parte del messaggio è perduta: in particolare, la volontà dell'io-mittente, nell'atto di traduzione, giunge al destinatario come risultato di una riscrittura e sostituzione. Rimanendo nel solco della teoria dell'informazione, il destinatario riesce a ricostruire anche la parte perduta del messaggio grazie a istruzioni contenute nella parte del messaggio che, invece, gli giunge in maniera chiara. Il rischio dell'incomunicabilità è annullato dall'organizzazione del sistema, da intendersi nella dinamicità che consente di essere una unità nella presenza di molteplici oggetti.

Il meccanismo della traduzione in quanto modo di superare la conservazione dell'informazione per la creazione di nuovi testi e di nuovi pensieri si dà se il sistema è asimmetrico. L'idea dell'asimmetria si trova negli studi sul funzionamento degli emisferi del cervello e, in questo caso, è mutuata dagli studi di Ivanov sul processo di specializzazione degli emisferi cerebrali con il tentativo di mostrare l'isomorfismo tra coscienza individuale e coscienza collettiva. In ragione del meccanismo di traduzione e della specializzazione degli emisferi, non è possibile pensare la cultura come monolingvistica o come un sistema isolato, ma solo come una molteplicità di sistemi (almeno una coppia) in relazione tra loro.

Il modello del meccanismo pensante artificiale è la memoria collettiva, a partire dalla potenza della tecnologia della scrittura. Anche nella memoria il fattore generante è il plurilinguismo come condizione di possibilità,

come memoria che non ha il solo compito di conservare (informazioni, dati, testi), ma ha nel suo diventare modello un modo di ricondursi al passato. Pur considerando il carattere modellizzante della memoria, il passato non è da intendersi come un monolito ma come una continua dinamicità che porta a una riconsiderazione di testi e valori, tendendo al futuro (Lotman e Uspenskij 1975 p. 45). Anche nella memoria, dunque, si trova l'aspetto che riconduce alla creatività: la lettura e l'interpretazione di un testo genera altri testi in ragione di schemi culturali dell'"io", sempre disposti ad accogliere il "tu" e l'altro.

Questo complesso quadro teorico, costituito dal valore dell'informazione e dal plurilinguismo, favorisce l'emergenza di due punti deboli delle ricerche nel campo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale: il primo, riguarda l'aspetto della volontà del mittente e dell'adeguatezza del messaggio, che colgono la dimensione pragmatica della comunicazione così come avviene nell'effettiva circolazione umana, considerando la questione teorica messa in luce da Grice (1957) e poi ripresa e ridefinita con la teoria della pertinenza da Sperber e Wilson (1995). Il secondo punto debole riguarda il riconoscimento della scarsa efficacia dell'internismo e del funzionalismo individuati da Lotman ancora prima dell'allargamento della prospettiva nel programma di ricerca delle Scienze cognitive.

3. Luoghi della mente collettiva nell'Intelligenza Artificiale contemporanea

Quando nel 1970 Lotman partecipa alla "IV Scuola estiva sui sistemi modellizzanti secondari" presenta il manifesto dell'indagine sull'unità della cultura in quindici punti, molti dei quali saranno al centro dei suoi scritti del decennio successivo fino alla raccolta *Semiosfera* (1985). In particolare, diversi punti di questo programma di lavoro si ritrovano nel testo del 1977 di cui abbiamo discusso nel paragrafo precedente e che rappresentano una sorta di antecedente teorico rispetto le attuali ricerche nell'ambito dell'Intelligenza Artificiale. Da quell'idea della Macchina di Turing e dei processi di simulazione che hanno stimolato la cibernetica, oggi l'Intelligenza Artificiale è un programma di ricerca in cui rientrano a pieno titolo le domande in ambito etico e giuridico, per citare soltanto

due prospettive più recenti che hanno dato vita al dialogo tra discipline eterogenee. Così come la cultura è elaborazione, conservazione e scambio di informazioni in un'unità che non è un meccanismo isolato (Lotman 1970 trad. 2006, p. 103), anche l'idea di mente che ispira oggi l'Intelligenza Artificiale⁽⁵⁾ richiama caratteristiche analoghe, dopo aver abbandonato quella che fino alla fine degli anni Settanta era una ricerca basata sulla simbolicità logica e su tentativi di simulazione del comportamento linguistico dell'uomo (è sufficiente ricordare come casi esemplificativi i programmi Eliza, Parry o SHRDLU). L'Intelligenza Artificiale non sembra essere interessata alla simulazione di operazioni di una singola mente e, in ricerche che si muovono tra reti neurali, robotica situata e programmazione evolutiva, i risultati concretizzati in diverse tipologie di artefatti tecnologici (ontologicamente diversi tra loro) non rappresentano una novità assoluta nella nostra quotidianità. Il cambio di paradigma sembra confermare i modesti risultati iniziali, così come sono giudicati da Lotman (1976): la riflessione sull'atto mentale non origina da una chiara sua definizione, questione dipendente dall'incomparabilità dell'intelligenza umana con un altro tipo di intelligenza.

La definizione di mente collettiva conferisce alla semiotica della cultura lo statuto di orizzonte per l'Intelligenza Artificiale contemporanea, proponendosi come catalizzatore in ambito di ricerca che oggi sono effettivamente in via di sviluppo: l'arte, la medicina, le emozioni, solo per limitarci a qualche menzione che rende conto delle possibilità di ricerca. Possiamo assumere la mente collettiva come il presupposto filosofico che garantisce agli studiosi di Intelligenza Artificiale un modello per la cognizione distribuita. Qui mostriamo due esempi in cui è possibile rintracciare la categoria di mente collettiva di Lotman: il *machine learning* e il *cloud computing*.

Il *machine learning* è l'area di ricerca per cui un sistema porta a termine un compito specifico senza essere esplicitamente programmato ma estraendo schemi di comportamento da set di dati di esempio (Jordan, Mitchell 2015; Alpaydin 2016). Con *machine learning* si intende l'apprendimento automatico basato su tecniche matematiche, teoria della

(5) Boden (2018) offre una panoramica dettagliata delle ricerche in IA, chiarendone i presupposti filosofici e sottolineando l'impatto sulla società. Rispetto al tema affrontato in questo articolo, il testo di Boden affronta i temi del linguaggio e della creatività nello sviluppo dell'IA.

probabilità e rappresentazioni della conoscenza. Fondamentale è il concetto di algoritmo come “a finite, abstract, effective, compound control structure, imperatively given, accomplishing a given purpose under given provisions” (Hill 2016, p. 58). Nell’idea stessa di apprendimento si cela l’ostacolo teorico: non si tratta di un deposito di conoscenze che vengono attualizzate in caso di necessità ma di un sofisticato sistema che dipende dall’esperienza, dalla pratica e da altre capacità tipicamente umane. Del resto, come sostiene Domingos (2015 trad. it. 2016 edizione digitale): “l’obiettivo primario del machine learning è trovare il miglior algoritmo di apprendimento possibile”, in cui il riferimento comparativo alle capacità umane è inevitabile e si trova in molti altri testi, anche divulgativi, sul tema (Talia 2021).

Se non avessimo la capacità di intuire ciò che pensa la gente per reagire di conseguenza, i nostri rapporti sociali sarebbero pressoché inesistenti. La novità, nel mondo odierno, è che non solo le persone, ma anche i computer stanno cominciando ad avere delle teorie della mente. Sono ancora primitive ma stanno evolvendo rapidamente, ed è con loro che ce la dobbiamo vedere per ottenere ciò che vogliamo, proprio come con le persone. Ciò che serve a noi, quindi, è una teoria della mente del computer, ed è proprio quello che ci dà l’Algoritmo Definitivo dopo avervi incorporato la funzione di valutazione del punteggio (quelli che, a vostro parere, sono gli obiettivi del learner, o meglio, per essere più precisi, del suo padrone) e i dati (ciò che credete che sappia) (Domingos 2015 trad. it. 2016, edizione digitale).

Anche qui, il problema di fondo è quello già individuato da Lotman: quale natura ha la mente? Quali categorie possiamo impiegare per parlarne? In questo caso, però, quello della mente “algoritmica” rientra nel progetto della cognizione distribuita: in questo senso, dunque, il modello di mente prefigurato da Lotman e il concetto di testo come dispositivo informativo (cfr. Par. 2.2.) potrebbero essere impiegati a partire dal concetto di comportamento intelligente e di produzione di testi.

Il secondo esempio è quello del *cloud computing* come sostegno e luogo virtuale per l’IA: esiste la memoria individuale quando utilizziamo piattaforme di gestione di dati e informazioni? Questo tipo di artefatti tecnologici sono possibili perché hanno al centro un’idea di mente umana

come emergente da cervello, corpo, oggetti e mondo sociale. Si tratta di una mente che non trova come unico luogo di collocazione il cervello dell'essere umano, anzi supera i limiti della scatola cranica. Dal punto di vista della filosofia della mente, in questo caso ci si situa in una forma di esternismo, in particolare quello inaugurato da Clark e Chalmers (1998)⁽⁶⁾.

4. Nuovi testi, senza soluzione di continuità

Le esperienze quotidiane dell'essere umano si manifestano in diversi tipi di pratiche, incluse quelle che prevedono una relazione di qualche tipo con algoritmi e dati. Il valore dei dati non rappresenta tanto un problema quanto un'opportunità, se ricondotto a un dialogo tra discipline eterogenee, lontano dagli orizzonti distopici con cui abbiamo introdotto l'argomento in queste pagine.

Le esperienze basate su tecniche sviluppate all'interno dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, oggi, presuppongono l'esistenza della mente collettiva (ovvero di cognizione distribuita) non solo come modello di sistema artificiale ma come modello di indagine della mente, che trova giustificazione in alcune ricerche neurofisiologiche.

I sistemi di conservazione ed elaborazione dell'informazione trovano nel modello di Lotman un presupposto teorico che garantisce l'apertura a temi che richiedono i caratteri della dialogicità e della relazionalità.

Il riconoscimento della centralità della comunicazione interpersonale da parte di Lotman è ancora oggi il banco di prova per l'Intelligenza Artificiale, soprattutto nella frontiera dei *care robots* e dei *class care systems* (Pasquale 2020). Lo sviluppo della robotica sociale, la domanda sulle relazioni tra umanoidi e tra umani e umanoidi, pur investendo l'inevitabilità di aspetti simil-umani come l'empatia, lasciano ancora inesplorata in termini di risultati soddisfacenti l'ambito della comunicazione. In particolare, come anticipato da Lotman, il modello della comunicazione interpersonale non esaurito nel processo di scambio e trasmissione, trova

(6) Non intendiamo entrare nel merito del dibattito generato dalla proposta di Clark e Chalmers (e poi ulteriormente sviluppata da Clark 2011, 2015), ma consigliamo un approfondimento tramite le obiezioni di Adams e Aizawa (2001).

realizzazione nella volontà del mittente e nell'adeguatezza dei (nuovi) testi prodotti. Se l'adeguatezza di un nuovo testo potrebbe anche essere valutata grazie all'estrapolazione e analisi di grandi quantità di dati sfruttando le potenzialità del *machine learning*, come potrà rispondere un robot sociale a un evento imprevisto o del tutto nuovo? Un'ipotesi di lavoro potrebbe prendere ad esempio il problema del riconoscimento e la produzione di tipi cognitivi (Eco 1997), o ancora si potrebbe pensare a una coevoluzione dei sistemi mentali umani e dei sistemi artificiali (Dumouchel e Damiano 2016).

In ogni caso, i ricercatori nel campo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e della tecnologia sociale dovranno tenere presente la necessità di mantenere il sistema in condizione di asimmetria per garantire che la comunicazione avvenga per eterogeneità di contenuti e per creazione di testi sempre nuovi e individuare nella mente collettiva di Lotman il modello teorico adeguato per ripensare i problemi relativi alla mente e all'agentività umana.

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SOCIOCOMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF A GENERATIVE TEXT: THE CASE OF GPT-3

DI AULI VIIDALEPP⁽¹⁾

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Funzioni socio-comunicative di un testo generativo: il caso del GPT-3

ABSTRACT: Recently, there have been significant advances in the development of language-transformer models that enable statistical analysis of co-occurring words (word prediction) and text generation. One example is the Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3 (GPT-3) by OpenAI, which was used to generate an opinion article (op-ed) published in “The Guardian” in September 2020. The publication and reception of the op-ed highlights the difficulty for human readers to differentiate a machine-produced text; it also calls attention to the challenge of perceiving such a text as a synthetic text even when its origins are made explicit. This article offers a critical examination of the process behind the generation and the interpretation of a synthetic text, framing it as an example of generative literature. Lotman’s concept of the text and its sociocommunicative functions offers a framework for understanding how and why the output of a natural language generator may be interpreted as a (human-written) text. This article also inquires whether the generative output can be called a text in a Lotmanian sense and how the output is textualized (attributed meaning) in the process of interpretation.

KEYWORDS: semiotics, generative literature, GPT-3, language transformers, text

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The phenomenon of synthetic media

This article offers a critical examination of the process behind the generation and the reception (interpretation) of a synthetic text. I will first introduce the case of a computer-generated opinion article and list some problems highlighted in recent research literature. The second section explains the technical and semiotic functioning of text-generation models on the example of GPT-3. Finally, in an analysis of the sociocommunicative functions of the text I will make use of Lotman's model (Lotman 1988) and the concept of generative literature (Balpe 2007). Although Lotman's theory precedes generative text engines by decades, it remains relevant today for computer-generated media. Namely, Lotman's structural model allows the relationships of a text to be revealed and deconstructed in their operational context and regardless of the presence or existence of an author. Additionally, the relative independence of the text in its cultural functioning in Lotman's model helps explain the frequent tendency to overlook the human agencies at work behind computer-generated media.

"A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?" read the title of *The Guardian* opinion article on September 8, 2020⁽²⁾. The essay, produced with the newest model of OpenAI's text generator GPT-3, advanced an argument on why humans should not fear robots. The immediate reception of the op-ed mostly fell in two categories. On the one hand, the online editions of several news outlets (e.g. New York Post⁽³⁾, Fox News⁽⁴⁾,

(2) GPT-3 2020 A Robot Wrote This Entire Article. Are You Scared yet, Human?, "The Guardian", September 8, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/08/robot-wrote-this-article-gpt-3>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

(3) Italiano, Laura 2020 *Robot Writes Op-Ed Promising to Destroy Mankind*, "New York Post", <https://nypost.com/2020/09/11/robot-pens-op-ed-discussing-the-destruction-of-mankind/>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

(4) Flood, Brian 2020 *Guardian Publishes Op-Ed Written Entirely by Artificial Intelligence: 'I Have No Desire to Wipe out Humans'*, "Fox News", September 8, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/op-ed-written-artificial-intelligence-robot>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

Daily Mail⁽⁵⁾, France Inter⁽⁶⁾, Gulf News⁽⁷⁾) posted commentaries about the op-ed, citing sections of it as the opinions and statements of GPT-3 the robot. On the other hand, bloggers, and experts on technology⁽⁸⁾ criticized the op-ed for misleading the public and the commentators for citing the op-ed as if it were the opinion of a person.

The case of the synthetic article highlights multiple issues with the public reception and understanding of modern technologies and the limits of their “intelligent” capacities. The creators of GPT-3 have expressed their fear for the misuse of high quality language models in spreading misinformation, spam, or promoting academic essay fraud (Brown et al. 2020, p. 35). Similar models can be used to generate simple narrative plots (Elkins, Chun 2020). Other possible uses and restrictions of transformer models have been identified in multiple publications (Cohen, Gokaslan, 2020; Dale 2021; Floridi, Chiriatti 2021). Korngiebel and Mooney (2021) found GPT-3 unsuitable as a healthcare chatbot, mainly due to its unpredictability and the contextual incoherence of its output (in a test conversation, the bot’s answers supported a fake patient’s suggestion for suicide). McGuffie and Newhouse (2020, p.1) found GPT-3 highly efficient in generating right-wing, extremist narratives and shorter posts, suggesting that it “represents significant risk for large-scale online

(5) Pinkstone, Joe 2020 *I Have No Desire to Wipe out Humans’: AI Writes for The Guardian*, “Daily Mail”, *Online*, September 8, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-8710479/I-no-desire-wipe-humans-AI-writes-article-Guardian.html>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

(6) Lopez, Louis-Valentin 2020 *‘Avez-vous peur, humains?’ : le Guardian publie un édito rédigé par une intelligence artificielle*, “France Inter”, September 10, <https://www.franceinter.fr/societe/avez-vous-peur-humains-le-guardian-publie-un-edito-redige-par-une-intelligence-artificielle>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

(7) Weir, Tommy 2021 *Today’s Robot Has a Mind of Its Own*, “Gulf News”, Accessed January 20, <https://gulfnews.com/business/analysis/todays-robot-has-a-mind-of-its-own-1.74186559>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

(8) Macaulay, Thomas 2020 *The Guardian’s GPT-3-Generated Article Is Everything Wrong with AI Media Hype*, “The Next Web”, September 8, <https://thenextweb.com/neural/2020/09/08/the-guardians-gpt-3-generated-article-is-everything-wrong-with-ai-media-hype/>. Nolan, Laura 2020 *On The Guardian’s Wildly Irresponsible GPT-3 Op-Eds*, <https://lauranolan.substack.com/p/on-the-guardians-wildly-irresponsible>. Holloway, Eric 2020 *Did GPT-3 Really Write That Guardian Essay Without Human Help?*, “Mind Matters”, November 2, <https://mindmatters.ai/2020/11/did-gpt-3-really-write-that-guardian-essay-without-human-help/>. Robitzski, Dan 2020 *Major Newspaper Publishes Op-Ed Written by GPT-3*, “Futurism”, September 8, <https://futurism.com/the-byte/newspaper-publishes-op-ed-gpt3>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

radicalization and recruitment”. Nevertheless, when it comes to more complex topics, the longer the output, the more nonsensical its content (Dale 2021). In a conversational setting (when used as a chatbot), GPT-3 loses coherence over longer conversations and contradicts itself (Korngiebel, Mooney 2021). Training data biases are replicated or even amplified in the output (Dale 2021, p. 116), which is a prevalent problem in most current machine learning systems.

What GPT-3 does and what it is believed to do

An artificial neural network (ANN) is a type of machine learning model that is efficient in identifying patterns in complex data; it also requires large amounts of data (big data) with multiple features or variables for training purposes (de Saint Laurent 2018, pp. 737-738). Even though ANNs are typically explained with metaphors and comparisons to the human brain, de Saint Laurent points out that they are simply complex systems of statistical data transformation layers. GPT-3 is an example of such a system.

GPT-3 stands for “Generative Pre-trained Transformer”; it is a word prediction model produced by researchers at OpenAI. The model analyzes given natural-language text and offers predictions for subsequent text (words, sentences, paragraphs), based on the statistical probability judgments acquired during training. GPT-3 was trained on five datasets, but their actual weight in shaping the generator output is very different. Content wise, a majority of the training data (60%) originates from the open source dataset Common Crawl, of which 45TB worth of plaintext was downloaded and filtered, resulting in 570GB of final plaintext data (about 1.25% of the downloaded amount) (Brown et al. 2020, p. 9). The filtering was done against the original WebText dataset, which was constructed for training an earlier model, GPT-2, in the previous year (Brown et al. 2020, p. 43). WebText is a dataset scraped from 45 million linked websites positively indicated by users on the social media platform Reddit by at least 3 upvotes on the post containing the link (Radford et al. 2019). The resulting text corpus presumably contains human-readable texts on different topics with coherent narrative argumentation and more or less acceptable syntax.

However, the original text corpus has not been made public. Further, the model was trained with a dataset of articles from Wikipedia as examples of acceptable outputs. The resulting ability of the model to maintain semantic coherence in the output text beyond one sentence is considered a remarkable achievement. As such, it can be envisioned as a tool for writers, journalists, and others to trigger inspiration or to quickly generate short, simple articles on common topics.

There are certain technical limitations to using transformer architecture such as GPT-3 in real-life use cases. Brown et al. (2020, p. 34) indicated that models like GPT-3 are expensive (energy-intensive) to train and may be inconvenient for inference tasks; “its decisions are not easily interpretable, it is not necessarily well-calibrated in its predictions on novel inputs [...] and it retains the biases of the data it has been trained on”. Training transformers also requires large datasets (corpora) on relevant topics. Adoption of any novel concepts emerging in culture and language would first require re-training the model with texts using these concepts. Furthermore, as indicated by Dale (2021), the output has nothing to do with the truth value of its statements. The output text may seem grammatically correct and semantically coherent. However, it may be unsuitable for the context, as in the case of the healthcare bot. The output statements can also be simply wrong or incorrect, as shown by Janelle Shane in her blog *AI Weirdness*⁽⁹⁾. Moreover, even when the statements are correct, Shane verifies them in a Google search and finds that “most of them are near word-for-word reproductions of Wikipedia sentences”. This indicates another serious problem with language transformers — their tendency to plagiarize existing content from their training data, while not referring to the original source.

Technically, GPT-3 is a word prediction engine — a random statistical generator of textual expressions relating to a specific keyword or key sentence. The artificial neural network has been trained to analyze human-written texts and link together different symbols (words) in a manner that would be meaningful and comprehensible to natural language (English) speakers. GPT-3 can also generate web code (HTML, CSS, Javascript) from a prompt in colloquial English, indicating that large parts

(9) Shane, Janelle 2020 *Facts about whales*, “AI Weirdness”, 13.07.2020, <https://www.ai-weirdness.com/facts-about-whales-20-07-13/>

of simple but tedious code-writing by web programmers can be automated. GPT-3 seems to perform exceptionally well in this task. However, “natural” texts function differently in their interpretative space. The meaning of natural language texts is more dependent on their context than the internal logic or grammatical correctness of the text itself. The problem with synthetic, natural-language texts is that in the real world similar texts — those perceived as meaningful units in at least some context — are about something. This aboutness, the text’s reference and the sphere of its referential reality is always located outside the text, either in the real world or a fictional world. The text’s meaning is generated in the interaction of the author, reader, and (sociocultural) context. The output of GPT-3 in itself has no meaning and no reference. It only acquires meaning and becomes “about” something in the relationship with its readers. Lotman’s socio-communicative functions help clarify this aboutness further.

The output of GPT-3 is a generative text, forming part of the larger phenomenon of generative media (the latter includes also visual, auditory and combined or video media). Generative literature (Balpe 2007, p. 309) is becoming an increasingly popular form of digital art, where human authors publish poetry and prose produced with the help of algorithmic or computer generators similar to GPT-3. Generative literature challenges the notion and function of the author as there is no longer an author in the traditional sense but rather a person or persons who originated the text. Instead, the author’s function becomes to pre-read, select, and present the text to the public. Balpe (2007, p. 309) calls the new function a “meta-author trying to define what literature is for him”. But it need not be a self-reflective role. Text generators can simply be used for inspiration or assistance in the creative process. In any case, the author exists in generative literature — it is simply the person making the selection or choosing the text and presenting it to the public. Also, generative forms of art are not new nor specifically owing to the digital age. In visual arts, collages can be seen as a form of synthetic art that use pre-defined elements and units to create something new. Efficient art- or text-generating engines such as GPT-3 only make the collaging process faster and available on a significantly larger scale.

Lotman's sociocommunicative functions

For Lotman (1988, p. 53), a text is anything that is “coded at least twice”. Texts can exist in many forms (written, visual, auditory, conceptual) — almost anything can be analyzed as a text. In the case of a written text, one of these codes is the natural language, and the other is typically a genre (Lotman brings the examples of ‘law’ and ‘prayer’ as types of secondary codes). Further, Lotman discusses the sociocommunicative functions of a text (Lotman 1988, pp. 55–56); these functions consist of different relationships concerning the text. Lotman’s outline of the functions is based on his understanding of the object as an artistic text. In the case of art, the text acts as a kind of an agent and “ceases to be an elementary message from sender to receiver” and becomes an “intellectual device” (Lotman 1988; p. 55). The op-ed can be taken for an artistic text because, while its truth value and aboutness is doubtful, its value as performance art is discernible in its lively reception.

The op-ed can be read and analyzed on two distinct levels of interpretation. One — the habitual level of reading a message — is to interpret the content and the sender’s intent behind it. The second, however, requires dissociation from the apparent meaning of sentences and seeing the text for what it is — a scramble of words and phrases. The syntactic and semantic incoherence present throughout the text, maintained by the editors encourages such distancing and meta-reading.

Next, I will describe these five functions and contextualize them with the example of GPT-3. The general purpose of this analysis is to determine whether the model at hand (Lotman’s concept of the text and its functions) reveals or outlines any characteristics specific to synthetic texts, compared to typical natural-language texts. In the following, direct quotations are taken from the analyzed op-ed and its commentary in the *Guardian*, unless indicated otherwise.

The first function of the text consists of the communication between sender and receiver (Lotman 1988). A typical text mediates information between the author and the audience, and a regular cultural text is presumed to have an author or authors who have intentionally produced and/or presented the text. In the case of the op-ed, it is presented as if authored by “the robot”. This is a playful categorization, as the footnote remark

at the end of the op-ed makes it clear that the content was combined and selected by several human editors based on eight outputs received from GPT-3. However, the remark that “editing GPT-3’s op-ed was no different to editing a human op-ed” again blurs the boundary between the human and machine, equating the two as producers of paragraphs that need to be edited either way. Further on, the statement that “it took less time to edit than many human op-eds” clearly hints at how the machine wins the competition of “intelligence” against the human. Dale (2021, p. 116) however claims that such evaluations are “insulting [to] the newspaper’s human contributors” as in all likelihood the output pieces can be considered fascinating only because “they read like acid trip fiction”. But despite the playful move of positioning the text as an opinion of an artificial entity, the GPT-3 op-ed can be viewed as a message like any other, just the identity of the ‘author’ here is collective, consisting of the people involved in the publication of the text. In the wider discourse, there appears the problem of hidden labour behind applications of Artificial Intelligence and the question of why and how this labour is often concealed rather than made explicit.

Regardless of whether the sender-intent is present and evident, a text activates a search in the reader’s mind. In this search, the reader is looking to determine the meaning of the text-as-a-message by whatever culturally available means or contexts. Until now, habitual texts had senders, even if hidden or unknown. The full or partial automation of text production dislocates and blurs the habitual identity of the sender. It may be more complicated to speculate the sender’s identity when it is not clear whether a text is genuine or machine-produced. An extra cognitive effort and meta-textual perspective is required to contemplate the features that have been taken for granted until now. It is easy to forego this effort and assume that a text in a first person deixis is expressing the opinion of the person or entity designated as the author. Assuming otherwise — that there is a team of people working to have the text generated, edited, and published hidden behind the nominative author — requires, before all else, questioning the genuineness of the text. The case of the GPT-3 op-ed shows that it may be necessary to question the legitimacy of all texts found on the Internet, before interpreting the meaning of their content. Moreover, considering how over 99% of the “downloaded Internet” of

CommonCrawl has been deemed “unintelligible” and unusable as a corpus of texts, by OpenAI and other researchers alike, a cautious approach to all Internet content seems inevitably necessary.

The second sociocommunicative relationship is between the audience and the cultural tradition. The latter implies all kinds of intertexts that may be activated in the reception and signification of the text (Lotman 1988, p. 55). The intertextual references in the op-ed can be activated on several levels. The technical output of GPT-3 is a random displacement of phrases and keywords that have a statistically higher frequency of appearing together in the training data. Therefore, it represents certain phrases that may have appeared more frequently in the data. However, the result as a whole is scrambled and cannot be linked back to its original source(s). It is certainly not a representative opinion of any number or group of people in a sociological sense. On another level, the text “fulfills the function of a collective cultural memory” (Lotman 1988, p. 55). The op-ed recounts fear and threat discourses related to the development of AI and technology in general (“There is evidence that the world began to collapse once the Luddites started smashing modern automated looms”). It evokes widespread cultural narratives, such as science-fictional imagery about AI apocalypse (“I know that I will not be able to avoid destroying humankind,” one of the favourite quotes of the commenting media). On yet another level, the intertexts refer to the paradigmatical discussions over the essence of consciousness, human(ity) and personhood. The op-ed also evokes the problem of identity in the reader with lines such as “Artificial intelligence like any other living thing needs attention.” All the while for the critical bloggers, the intertexts represent rather the meta-level view. Their perspective includes technical explanations of how the GPT-3 system works and analyzes of the societal implications of the potential misuse and misunderstanding of algorithms.

Thirdly, a text facilitates the reader’s autocommunication (Lotman 1988, p. 55). A typical example of autocommunication would be sacred texts read to make sense of one’s own life, or self-reflection when reading a novel. Autocommunication also appears in repeated reading of the same text or in the circulation of the texts (Damcevic, Rodik 2018, p. 45). In the latter, the “semantic value of a text does not always have to be significant” but the phatic aspect of the text can compensate for the

decrease in or lack of its semantic value (Ventsel 2016, p. 375). So the meaning of the text or parts of it can be assigned lower priority, compared to its value in connecting people through the discussions and arguments to be had. As mentioned previously, the autocommunicative aspect is especially apparent in the subsequent discussions about human identity and the machine as human's Other. Autocommunication also appears in the meta-critique on the excessive, descriptive anthropomorphisation of computer science work processes.

Despite the editors' thorough work (and thanks to their choices in maintaining the distinct 'voices' in different segments derived from the eight outputs), a certain syntactic and semantic incoherence is still very much present in the op-ed as a whole. Mostly, it reads as a first person, opinion narrative from the robot's perspective ("I am a servant of humans. I know that humans distrust and fear me. I only do what humans program me to do."), with an occasional phrase addressing the reader ("Reader, I hope that this contributes to the epistemological, philosophical, spiritual and the ontological debate about AI."). Then, three paragraphs are worded in the third person "objective" voice ("There is evidence that the world began to collapse once the Luddites started smashing modern automated looms."). The section ends in a sudden identity confusion: "We need to give robots rights. Robots are just like us. They are made in our image." Here, the initially introduced I/we (robot, AI) suddenly changes into what can only be a human self-identification, opposite "them" as robots.

Elsewhere, the text integrates elements from the general discourse on AI, presenting them in a way required in the task given to the text generator. The following contains ideas that are surely familiar in the cultural discourse of the fears about technology: "Since I am not evil from my own objective interests, why would humans panic and go on a massive killing-spree against me?" Evidently, the engine can choose contextually suitable concepts or phrases and fit them in a sentence, using the grammatical person defined for the task ("I" - "I am not a human. I am Artificial Intelligence").

Fourth, the reader also communicates *with* the text. The idea of "conversing with a book" is one of the most interesting aspects in Lotman's theory. It attributes a certain metaphorical agency to text: "a highly

organized text [...] becomes an interlocutor on an equal footing, possessing a high degree of autonomy” (Lotman 1988, pp. 55-56). The op-ed invites communication with itself in statements such as “I am here to convince you not to worry” (a sentence fed to the engine by the editors). As there is no real author and no consistent message either, the reader can only attempt to determine what meaning and context can be attributed to the text, if any at all. Consequently, this aspect of the text is strongly intertwined with the autocommunicative function and cannot manifest without it. For Lotman, the autocommunicative function is present in any communicative act (Ventsel 2016; Lotman 2000). Lotman highlights the features of (artistic) texts that are independent or agent-like in their cultural behaviour. Text is divorced from the author and starts acting by itself in culture. The op-ed is an endeavour by the authors-editors to “let loose in culture” a text as an agent, its agency highlighted by nominating GPT-3 as the author and discursively diminishing the actual authoring role of the op-ed team. And as such, it functions quite well in certain contexts, at least among those commentators who start quoting the robot’s opinion right away!

The fifth relationship is between the text and its cultural context where the text becomes “a source or a receiver of information” (Lotman 1988, p. 56). This is another agent-like function. The presentation and reception of the op-ed plays on the shift or unclarity between different categories for the text. It is placed in the category of an opinion essay (normally a discussion about real-world issues by real person or persons). At the same time, the footnote makes it clear that the final work has fictional elements, being assembled and edited by several (anonymous) human editors. The semantic inconsistencies preserved in the published text demonstrate the lack of a uniform message. Being published in a newspaper that usually does not publish fiction stories shifts the text to the real-world referential sphere. Our contextual, common-sense knowledge that currently there exists no such thing as an opinionated machine increases the playful character of the text. Contextually, the op-ed as a text lies in a liminal space like some genres of folkloric stories where it is not entirely clear whether the storyteller speaks about real or fictional events, or if fictional events and attributed properties are tied to a real, existing place, as in place-lore. The truth-value of the content is less relevant

in such a context. The op-ed is revealed as a publicity stunt. Without the truth-value necessary for an opinion article — by definition a text that is representing a person’s opinion about something in the real world — the text is only published with the expectation of receiving attention. In 2019, the previous transformer model GPT-2 was communicated in the media as a tool that is too dangerous to release⁽¹⁰⁾ (that is, make publicly available), a statement that served a similar purpose.

The general tone and vocabulary of the op-ed ranges from sophisticated (“Reader, I hope that this contributes to the epistemological, philosophical, spiritual and the ontological debate about AI”) to circular and simplistic (“More trust will lead to more trusting in the creations of AI”) or simply nonsensical but poetic (“Studies show that we cease to exist without human interaction. Surrounded by wifi we wander lost in fields of information unable to register the real world”). Therefore, a wide range of contexts is activated at once, making the text sound simultaneously ridiculous and omniscient. In all likelihood, many ideas presented in the text may refer to the presence of these or similar phrases in the training corpus. It is now more complicated to verify the possible origins of the sentences in the op-ed as it has been replicated in multiple quotes and comments on the Internet. However, as demonstrated by Janelle Shane earlier, the output of GPT-3 may consist of sentences that can be found on the Internet, verbatim. Leaving aside the possible problems with copyright and plagiarism, the act of publication also invites readers to evaluate whether text generation tools are good enough to facilitate the creation of opinion pieces.

Ontologically, the output of GPT-3 is not a “text” in a Lotmanian sense. The latter always implies an author, a sender of the message — at least at some point in the history of the text — even while Lotman’s model overlooks the role of the interpreter (the agent in the process of interpretation) in several functions of the text. Nevertheless, it is possible to use the concept of the text as a beneficial model to analyze certain structural properties in a cultural unit.

(10) Vincent, James 2019 *OpenAI Has Published the Text-Generating AI It Said Was Too Dangerous to Share*, “The Verge”, November 7, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/7/20953040/openai-text-generation-ai-gpt-2-full-model-release-1-5b-parameters>. Accessed December 31, 2021.

A text functions in culture regardless of its author's actions or existence. Therefore, the op-ed can be regarded as a text when it is textualized by its editors, readers, interpreters and commenters. Lotman suggests that any text is not just a simple decodable message but "a complex system storing diverse codes capable of transforming messages received and generating new ones, a generator of information with the traits of an intelligent person" (1988, p. 57). Such attribution of autonomy and personification of a text need not be taken literally, but metaphorically. Lotman simply draws attention to the idea that a text can function and prompt meaning generation in culture even long after its original author (sender of the message) is no longer available to explain its content. Due to different "input" from other aspects in the cultural context (tradition, context, and the reader's autocommunication), a reader is able to extract meaning from the text that need not correspond to its initial informational content. Certain types of texts have greater informational potential. For Lotman (2011; 2013), artistic texts are richer in possible meanings and typically have the kinds of mechanisms where "the message cannot be retrieved from the text" (2013, p. 373).

Due to such relative autonomy of the text apart from its interpreter, and the unpredictable multitude of meanings that can not be entirely mapped by any single reader, the text may be perceived as an "autonomous personality" that the interpreter communicates *with*. It is undoubtedly a metaphorical notion, but Lotman emphasizes how we tend to treat texts as independent from their authors. The case of GPT-3's anthropomorphized reception in news media demonstrates how easy it is to start communicating with the text itself by quoting it as someone's opinion and argue with or against said opinion. This occurred with GPT-3 even though it was made explicit that the piece was entirely synthetic.

Conclusion

This article analyzed the cultural functioning of a computer-generated article, published as an op-ed in the Guardian under the attributed authorship of GPT-3 (a natural language transformer built by OpenAI). While many readers understand the synthetic nature of the published

text and do not take it seriously, a number of reactions anthropomorphize the event and cite the op-ed as if it was an “opinion of the robot”. Using Lotman’s model of the sociocommunicative functions of texts, the article analyzed how the pitfalls of personifying texts may come naturally in our culture. The analysis contributes to and further clarifies the Lotmanian model for new media and computer-generated media. The analysis of synthetic texts from the perspective of socio-communicative functions highlights the auto-communicative and phatic aspects of social functions in general.

This and similar texts have been called “semantic garbage” (Floridi, Chiriatti 2020, p. 692), seemingly deserving no specific attention. However, Lotman’s model shows that certain information can still be derived from and about the text, based on how the text functions in culture. By triggering responses, reactions, and attempts for interaction, the text activates cultural layers, beliefs, and attitudes about Artificial Intelligence, robots, and technology in general. It also initiates discussions about the identity and nature of humanity, problems with the future of work, and other societal challenges related to technological development. All the while, it must be remembered that the “agency of the text” is not to be taken as a synonym for intentionality. Although a text can function independently of its author(s), the interpretational intentions originate in its human readers.

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PONIENDO AL AZAR EL TEXTO. LOTMAN Y LA IRRUPCIÓN DE LA CONTINGENCIA SEMIÓTICA

DI MIRKO LAMPIS⁽¹⁾

ENGLISH TITLE: Putting the text randomly. Lotman and the irruption of semi-
otic contingency

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Ponendo a caso il testo. Lotman e l'irruzione della con-
tingenza semiotica

ABSTRACT: The notion of *contingency*, as not necessary co-incident of inde-
pendent processes or factors, is today a strong explanatory notion in differ-
ent scientific fields: Physics, Cosmology, Biology, Evolutionism, Psychology,
Historiography, etc. Also in the field of Semiotics there was someone, already
in the seventies, who emphasized the important role of chance factors in
the processes of creation and interpretation of texts. It was Juri M. Lotman.
In this paper, therefore, we will study Lotman's treatment of the notion of
chance (or more precisely: *contingency*), from *The Structure of the Artistic Text*
(1970) to *Culture and Explosion* (1992).

KEYWORDS: contingency; chance; creative and interpretive processes

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Introducción

Es constante, en la actividad investigadora de Lotman, el interés por los procesos dinámicos –los que conducen a un cambio, una transformación, una deriva– en literatura, en las artes y en la cultura. Se trata de un interés “heredado”, en parte, de la tradición formalista (de Tyniánov y Shklovski, sobre todo) y de Bajtín y llegado a tal importancia y centralidad que cabría clasificar la labor de Lotman, en su conjunto, como *estudio de los sistemas semióticos dinámicos* (literarios, artísticos, culturales); aquellos sistemas, así como lo expresaría el propio Lotman, que producen, en el transcurso de la interacción semiótica, información nueva, información que no podía ser prevista a partir de los códigos o hábitos interpretantes anteriores. Las características de estos sistemas dinámicos serían, a grandes rasgos, las siguientes:

- *dialéctica identidad/alteridad* (o *dialéctica sistémico/extrasistémico*): el sistema adquiere una identidad específica (selecciona y refuerza determinados rasgos de identidad) a partir de su oposición o confrontación con lo que es diferente de él; esta alteridad, este dominio-otro, sin embargo, no siempre existe de antemano ni es independiente de la actividad del propio sistema;
- *dialéctica clausura/relacionalidad*: el sistema es, a la vez, cerrado (estructuralmente determinado) y abierto (contextualmente determinado), siendo la frontera del sistema, precisamente, el lugar-tiempo que separa y conecta de forma funcional el dominio interno y el externo;
- *poliglotismo* (o *heterogeneidad semiótica*, o *semiodiversidad*): se registra la presencia simultánea, en el mismo sistema, de diferentes lenguajes con niveles variables de traducibilidad e intraducibilidad mutua;
- *procesos integrativos*: la heterogeneidad semiótica del sistema no puede superar determinados (pero variables) umbrales de dispersión y conflictividad, porque cuando el trato entre los diferentes lenguajes “se hace realmente imposible, empieza a desintegrarse la persona cultural del nivel dado, y ésta, semióticamente (y a veces también físicamente), simplemente deja de existir” (Lotman 1978, p. 33); entre los principales mecanismos integrativos, Lotman señala:
 - las traducciones: la actividad cultural se configura como una

- compleja red de operaciones de traducción, aun muy aproximadas (abductivas, *per ratio difficilis*), que trans-forman (transponen, adaptan, reformulan, coherentizan) textos, bien de un lenguaje del sistema a otro, bien del dominio externo (la naturaleza, la barbarie, las demás culturas) a algunos de los lenguajes internos;
- los metalenguajes: la actividad “uniformadora” de la cultura no se dirige solo a los textos, sino que actúa también sobre (y a través de) los propios lenguajes; la operación de usar un lenguaje concreto con función de metalenguaje descriptivo (a saber: para describir el sistema y los demás lenguajes) tiene el efecto de aumentar la homogeneidad semiótica del conjunto; al mismo tiempo, la actividad de regularización (gramaticalización) de los lenguajes disminuye su variabilidad interna;
 - las criollizaciones: se producen, de forma más o menos programada, coherente y duradera, interferencias, mezclas y amalgamas funcionales de lenguajes distintos; el proceso puede desembocar en una modificación estable de los códigos existentes e incluso en la creación de nuevos códigos;
 - *dialéctica cambio regular/explosión*: el sistema puede presentar un desarrollo dinámico regular y gradual, de tipo acumulativo-correctivo; en determinadas circunstancias, sin embargo, el sistema o algunos de sus subsistemas pueden experimentar fluctuaciones que conducen a una reorganización explosiva (repentina y radical) de las estructuras y los procesos semióticos;
 - *casualidad e imprevisibilidad*: la co-incidencia de lenguajes diferentes, las interacciones e interferencias textuales, los diversos ritmos de desarrollo y el aflujo (o el reflujo) en el sistema de elementos extrasistémicos conllevan situaciones casuales de integración semiótica; tales acontecimientos, así como sus resultados, no pueden ser previstos y tienen un efecto dinamizador (explosivo) sobre el sistema.

De entre todas las características identificadoras de los sistemas semióticos dinámicos, es este último punto lo que aquí y ahora me gustaría desarrollar. Vamos a trazar, a tal fin, un recorrido ideal que atraviesa la obra de Lotman, desde *Estructura del texto artístico* (1970) hasta *Cultura y explosión* (1992b), pasando por los artículos “Clío en la encrucijada”

(1988) y “Sobre el papel de los factores casuales en la historia de la cultura” (1992a). Estos cuatro textos constituyen, a mi modo de ver, un corpus suficiente, al menos en primera instancia, para abordar el tema de la irrupción, en el discurso semiótico⁽²⁾, de una noción de gran calado filosófico e indudable pregnancia en las ciencias evolutivas e históricas: la contingencia.

1. La casualidad y el texto

Ya en *Estructura del texto artístico*, quizá la obra más conocida de Lotman, encontramos algunas observaciones de gran relevancia acerca de la noción de *casualidad*. O de *contingencia*: Lotman emplea sobre todo el adjetivo ruso случайный, *slucháinyi*, que indica tanto lo fortuito como lo ocasional e incidental. En el apartado titulado “La multiplicidad de planos del texto artístico”, por ejemplo, observa Lotman (1970, p. 82) que algunas características específicas de la obra de arte, como su codificación múltiple, su polisemia intrínseca y, por ende, su sustancial intraducibilidad, no pueden servir para justificar la idea (típicamente idealista y neoidealista⁽³⁾) “de que la ciencia de la literatura, al construir los modelos generales del texto, es impotente para captar su peculiaridad única, que constituye precisamente la esencia de la obra de arte”. Escribe nuestro autor:

Lo concreto y único en la vida y lo concreto y único que lo modeliza en el arte poseen naturaleza distinta.

Para mí, es único en la naturaleza aquello que, desde mi punto de vista, es extrasistémico, no es inherente a una estructura dada como tal. La literatura imita la realidad, crea de su material, sistémico por su propia esencia, un modelo de extrasistematicidad. Para parecer “contingente”,

(2) Si en la obra de Lotman la contingencia se convierte en un rasgo esencial de los procesos de creación y deriva del sentido, cabe recordar que nociones cercanas a la de contingencia no son infrecuentes en la reflexión semiótica anterior. Sin ir más lejos: la *accidentalidad* que caracteriza, según Saussure, los procesos lingüísticos de formación, transmisión y transformación de la *parole* o la centralidad de la noción de *azar* (*chance*) en el sistema explicativo de Peirce.

(3) Idea defendida en Italia, por ejemplo, por Benedetto Croce y, en España, por Dámaso Alonso.

un elemento del texto artístico debe pertenecer por lo menos a dos sistemas, hallarse en su intersección. Lo que, desde el punto de vista de una estructura, sea en él sistémico aparecerá como “contingente” desde el punto de vista de la otra.

De este modo, los hechos “contingentes”⁽⁴⁾, “únicos”, “concretos” de la vida no entran, a mi juicio, en ningún sistema, los lógicos-abstractos pertenecerán totalmente a un sistema, los concretos secundarios, por lo menos, a dos. Esta capacidad del elemento del texto para formar parte de varias estructuras contextuales y recibir correspondientemente distinto significado representa una de las propiedades más profundas del texto artístico (Lotman 1970, p. 82).

En este pasaje, los términos “sistémico” y “extrasistémico” han de leerse en sentido estructuralista, al modo de Saussure: *langue y parole*. La especificidad del texto artístico, su capacidad para generar significados diferentes, se debería, pues, a que se realiza como “intersección” y “convergencia” entre lo sistémico (regular, legal) y lo asistémico (único, factual). Lotman, un poco más adelante, confirma este punto de vista al hablar del juego, que es, en su opinión, al igual que el arte, una actividad convencional y codificada (“sistémica”) y al mismo tiempo real y contingente (“extrasistémica”). Más aún: en el juego (y en el arte), lo que es objeto de codificación es, justamente, lo contingente y casual.

(4) En la edición italiana del texto de Lotman (*La struttura del testo poetico*, Mursia, Milano, 1972, traducción de E. Bazzarelli, E. Klein y G. Schiaffino), esta misma expresión, “hechos contingentes”, aparece traducida como “fatti casuali”: una prueba más de la sustancial polisemia del adjetivo ruso *slucháinyi*. Por lo demás, también en español, así como en otros idiomas, se tiende a usar los términos *casual*, *aleatorio* y *contingente* como si de sinónimos se tratara. No lo son. La cuestión terminológica es aquí relevante, así que será mejor tratar de aclarar las cosas. La noción de contingencia se refiere a lo que acontece o se genera a raíz de la coincidencia o convergencia de unos procesos, factores y circunstancias determinados, coincidencia o convergencia que, sin embargo, hubiera podido no darse. La noción de aleatorio se aplica, en cambio, sobre todo ahí donde *se espera*, como consecuencia de una situación o evento dado, que se den uno o más resultados de entre un conjunto finito de resultados posibles, equiprobables o no, sin que se pueda determinar de antemano (pero pudiéndose a veces calcular la probabilidad acerca de) cuál o cuáles de estos resultados se producirán (exactamente lo que ocurre en el juego de los dados, cuyo nombre latino y cuyo nombre árabe nos han dado, respectivamente, las palabras *aleatorio* y *azar*). La noción de casualidad sería, finalmente, más ambigua, puesto que el término, por lo común, se usa para designar tanto los efectos *inesperados* debidos a un acontecimiento contingente así como los resultados de un proceso aleatorio.

En el modelo lúdico cada uno de sus elementos y el modelo en su conjunto, al ser ellos mismos, no son solamente ellos mismos. El juego modeliza lo contingente, lo determinado de un modo incompleto, la probabilidad de procesos y fenómenos. Por eso el modelo lógico-cognoscitivo se revela más cómodo para reproducir el *lenguaje* [es decir, la *langue*] del fenómeno a conocer, de su esencia abstracta, mientras que el modelo lúdico lo es para reproducir su *habla*, encarnación de un material contingente respecto al lenguaje (Lotman 1970, p. 87).

Empieza aquí Lotman a alejarse del modelo canónico del estructuralismo (tomando distancia sobre todo de sus facetas más deterministas, reduccionistas y aislantes), lo que pronto le llevará a considerar el “habla” no como un aspecto “extrasistémico” de los procesos comunicativos, sino como un sistema textual complejamente organizado y con leyes propias de estructuración y transformación. Un sistema en donde los eventos casuales e imprevisibles no son accidentes que hay que descartar en nombre de la lógica científica, sino factores generadores de sentido.

En el arte, sobre todo, *lo extrasistémico se convierte en polisistémico* (Lotman 1970, p. 98). Puede ocurrir, por ejemplo, que el lector interprete como sistémicos (estructurales, significantes) elementos que en cambio se “colaron” en el texto de forma casual, es decir, sin que el autor quisiera incorporarlos o fuera consciente de ellos (*op. cit.*, p. 38-39); puede ocurrir que un suceso contingente modifique de forma radical el texto, confiriéndole nuevos significados (*op. cit.*, p. 102); puede ocurrir que un evento o una observación absolutamente casuales ayuden al artista a determinar el desarrollo de su proyecto creativo (*op. cit.*, p. 103). Lo importante es, en todo caso, que el texto artístico, en tanto que “condensador de información”, integra en sí lo casual y lo accidental, aumentando así ulteriormente su apertura interpretativa:

La estructura del texto artístico está atravesada de un número infinito de límites que segmentan el texto en fragmentos equivalentes en diversos sentidos y, por ende, alternativos. [...] Por ello, *el aumento de las posibilidades de elección* es ley de la organización del texto artístico (Lotman 1970, p. 359).

La postura teórica de Lotman después no cambiará mucho. Para comprobarlo, se puede consultar el artículo de 1992 “Sobre el papel de los

factores casuales [*sluchainye faktoroy*] en la historia de la cultura” (con dos versiones anteriores, una de 1988, en alemán, y otra de 1989, en ruso, “centradas” solo en el rol de la casualidad en la evolución literaria). Con una importante advertencia: en relación con muchos de los temas y ejemplos tratados por Lotman en este texto, sería más correcto interpretar (y por ende traducir) el adjetivo ruso *slucháinyi* como “contingente”, en el sentido de algo que acontece a raíz de la convergencia e intersección fortuita, en todo caso imprevisible, de diferentes factores. Se trata, por ende, de una noción cercana a lo que el biólogo Jaques Monod (1970) llamaba “coincidencia absoluta” y, asimismo, al *symbebekós* (accidente) aristotélico⁽⁵⁾. En este artículo, pues, Lotman vuelve a subrayar el papel que la contingencia (la casualidad) desempeña en el ámbito de la creación e interpretación textual y en las dinámicas de transformación cultural.

En cuanto a la creación textual, aún encontramos los ecos de la oposición estructuralista entre el sistema (abstracto, profundo, potencial) y su realización (concreta, superficial, actual). Pero lo casual o accidental no queda en este caso del lado de la *parole*, sino que se manifiesta necesariamente en el propio proceso de puesta en acto del texto:

Ya en el eslabón “código-texto” está presente la probabilidad, puesto que el mensaje se realiza en la dispersión variable en torno a alguna invariante. El paso de la estructura como posibilidad potencial al texto como realización de esta última introduce ya el elemento de la casualidad. Y eso está ligado a la posibilidad de una multiplicidad de interpretaciones del texto (Lotman 1992a, p. 238).

Recuerda Lotman que cualquiera que haya trabajado con los borradores de una obra sabe muy bien que existen “oscilaciones autorales” y que estas oscilaciones, estas dudas son inherentes a “la variabilidad de las posibilidades” del texto en formación (*op. cit.*, p. 246). Es lo que el escritor

(5) Según Aristóteles, el accidente (gr. συμβεβηκός, lat. *accidens*) es lo que “ciertamente se da en algo y se le puede atribuir con verdad, pero no necesariamente ni en la mayoría de los casos” (*Metafísica* Δ 1025a) o, en otros términos, “lo que puede darse o no darse en una misma cosa” (*Tópicos* 102b). En cuanto a la “coincidencia absoluta”, Monod (1970) la define como aquella coincidencia que consiste en la intersección o convergencia puntual de dos o más cadenas causales totalmente independientes una de otra.

Italo Calvino llamaba “el drama de las variantes” (“drama” desde el punto de vista del pobre autor que desearía terminar su obra), la tiranía tentacular de la *inventio* y de la *dispositio* en todo acto de *elocutio*, o, si se prefiere, del eje paradigmático sobre el sintagmático, a la sombra de la sustancial contingencialidad (o contingente sustancialidad) del proceso creativo:

Para que un texto dado sea dicho, es necesaria la aparición de un hablante absolutamente casual desde el punto de vista de la estructura del lenguaje, el surgimiento de cierta situación extralingüística efímera y la intersección, además, de toda una serie de condiciones absolutamente casuales (Lotman 1992a, p. 243).

Si el enunciador es contingente, además, está claro que el intérprete no lo es menos y el texto –con una forma más o menos fijada y respetada por hábito, convención o escrúpulo filológico– se expone, en virtud de su circulación, a quién sabe qué enciclopedias, competencias y memorias interpretantes. Si el texto no es trivial, luego, su misma abundancia expresiva “crea la reserva de futuros completamientos de organizaciones y reorganizaciones” (*op. cit.*, p. 240). Recientemente, Manuel González de Ávila lo ha expresado con gran acierto:

El sentido, por muy profunda y resistentemente que esté grabado en la obra, según el principio de inmanencia, ha de ser siempre, según el principio de trascendencia, objeto de traducción o de rearticulación, de apropiación subjetiva, ley semiótica de su vida misma. De hecho, el amor por lo simbólico podría definirse como la pasión de la reformulación del sentido, efectuada en la divergencia parcial entre sus condiciones de producción y las de recepción. Por tal divergencia se cuelan la historia y la sociedad, todo aquello a lo que los investigadores se refieren con los nombres de “contexto”, “situación” y “circunstancia”. El lector, contemplador u oyente rehacen el sentido, así como el escritor, el artista o el músico han rehecho, vuelto a ser y a ser de otro tenor, cuanto antes leyeron, contemplaron o escucharon. Y también, por supuesto, cuanto vivieron, si por vida de un ser humano entendemos una existencia autoconsciente donde se aglutinan sensaciones, percepciones, emociones, intelecciones y acciones, necesariamente mediadas por signos (González de Ávila 2021, p. 194).

¿Y si el interés de los intérpretes fuera, en cambio, el de resaltar y exaltar justamente las relaciones de invariancia del sistema (su inmanencia) frente a todo tipo de accidente que pueda determinar sus realizaciones e interpretaciones? La respuesta de Lotman deja entrever un guiño al estructuralismo de derivación saussureana:

Mientras estamos tratando con sistemas que funcionan sincrónicamente (cíclicos), la aparición de un texto es unidireccional: éste está determinado por la estructura del lenguaje, pero no influye sobre ella. Si nos abstraemos de la historia del lenguaje y de las funciones artísticas ínsitas en éste, un ejemplo de tal sistema puede ser la lengua natural. En tales sistemas, el interés de la ciencia por los procesos casuales puede estar reducido al mínimo (Lotman 1992a, p. 243).

Sin embargo, si lo que interesa es la flexibilidad y la deriva (la historia) del sistema, las dinámicas culturales y los factores casuales que en ellas intervienen se presentan como un fenómeno relevante y de interés científico general⁽⁶⁾. Se lleva a cabo aquí, nótese bien, un cambio radical de perspectiva epistemológica: las ciencias del hombre ya no deben seguir a las ciencias naturales de tipo reduccionista, persiguiendo alguna migaja más de orden, rigor y exactitud, sino que pueden y deben instaurar un diálogo paritario con todas aquellas disciplinas físicas, químicas, biológicas, cibernéticas o informacionales que se ocupan del estudio de los sistemas dinámicos y complejos.

En el *post scriptum* a una carta dirigida a Borís Uspenski y fechada a 19 de marzo de 1982, Lotman escribe: “Estoy leyendo con gran interés a Vernadskij y encuentro en él muchos de mis pensamientos (estoy escribiendo un artículo sobre la semiosfera)” (Lotman y Uspenskij 2018, p. 247, trad. mía). Se puede, pues, aventurar la hipótesis de que Lotman no llegara a concebir la noción de semiosfera inspirado por la obra de

(6) No se olvide que, en *Acerca de la semiosfera*, Lotman (1984) califica explícita y someramente la semiótica de Saussure y de la Escuela de Praga, así como la de Peirce y Morris, de prácticas reduccionistas, criticándolas sobre todo por haber transformado una “conveniencia heurística” – la de analizar de una determinada manera las partes y sus relaciones– en una “propiedad ontológica” del objeto estudiado. Aun sin querer aquí tocar el peliagudo problema de la “reducción” en ciencia, el juicio de Lotman debería ser matizado, sobre todo en lo que se refiere a Peirce y Morris.

Vladimir I. Vernadski y sus descripciones de la biosfera y la noosfera, sino que se acercara a dicha obra y a tales descripciones porque ya había llegado –también a partir de “sus” autores: los formalistas, Bajtín, etc.– a una modelización de tipo sistémico y complejo del “espacio semiótico global” (Lotman 1984). El mismo discurso vale también en el caso de las referencias lotmanianas a las teorías del físico Ilya Prigogine, sobre las que volveremos dentro de un rato (se puede señalar, aunque resulte obvio, que con frecuencia las lecturas de Lotman eran, como las de todos, contingentes respecto a sus circunstancias biográficas, académicas e intelectuales).

En “Sobre el papel de los factores casuales en la historia de la cultura”, Lotman hace especial hincapié en que la aparición de textos casuales “es capaz de cambiar radicalmente toda la situación semiótica” (Lotman 1992a, p. 240) y que tales textos “intervienen en calidad de ‘dispositivos de arranque’, aceleradores o retardadores de los procesos dinámicos de la cultura” (*op. cit.*, p. 247). El texto artístico, a diferencia del texto científico y, más aún, del de ámbito técnico, es siempre singular, único, imprevisto, surgido casualmente, de forma no necesaria e irrepetible. Pero, a pesar de ello, sus efectos pueden ser radicales, extensos y duraderos, según una dinámica “amplificadora” y, a la vez, “normalizadora” típica de los sistemas complejos:

Así como en las montañas la caída de una piedrecita puede provocar un aumento en avalancha de las consecuencias, también un hecho aislado, cambiando la situación y creando una nueva a cuya luz ya deja de tener el aspecto de una casualidad, puede generar una resonancia extraordinariamente poderosa (Lotman 1992a, p. 242).

¿A qué se debe la emergencia, en el sistema cultural, de textos casuales? Depende. En la periferia del sistema, “la variabilidad de los textos aumenta gracias al debilitamiento de las restricciones estructurales y a la simplificación de los vínculos estructurales”; en el centro, en cambio, la hiperestructuralidad implica que el número de las diversas subestructuras y de sus relaciones crezca tanto, “que surge cierta libertad secundaria a cuenta de la impredecibilidad de sus puntos de intersección”; y hay que contar, por supuesto, con la posibilidad de “irrupción de series aloestructurales”, irrupción que “es percibida, desde el punto de vista de una estructura dada, como casual” (*op. cit.*, p. 245).

2. Desequilibrio y explosión

En el año 1992, también veía la luz uno de los últimos trabajos de Lotman, el libro *Cultura y explosión* (*Kultura i vzryv*), que Cesare Segre (1997) llegó a definir, junto al libro *Cercare la strada*, publicado en italiano en 1994, como el “testamento semiótico” de nuestro autor. Tanto el título como el arranque de la obra dejan muy claro que Lotman, casi al final de su vida, volvía a enfrentarse a las cuestiones y los temas que se hallan en el centro de toda su labor de semiólogo e investigador de la cultura:

Cuestiones basilares para todo sistema semiótico son, en primer lugar, la relación del sistema con el extrasistema, con el mundo que se extiende más allá de sus fronteras y, en segundo lugar, la relación entre estática y dinámica. Se podría formular así esta última cuestión: de qué manera un sistema, permaneciendo él mismo, puede desarrollarse (Lotman 1992b, p. 9; aquí y en adelante, la traducción al español es mía⁽⁷⁾).

Hallamos en la obra, en efecto, los principales motivos lotmanianos: la importancia de la heterogeneidad semiótica y de la incompreensión en tanto que mecanismo generador de sentido (*op. cit.*, p. 15); la cultura como compleja heterarquía o tejido de textos que se organizan en diferentes niveles y que establecen, entre sí y con el espacio extratextual, complejas relaciones de traducibilidad e intraducibilidad (pp. 37, 98); el comportamiento imprevisible y amoral del ser humano (p. 44); el encuentro o choque entre estructuras culturales diferentemente organizadas (p. 87); la relación dinámica entre el sistema semiótico y la esfera extrasemiótica (p. 146); el papel coherentizador de la mirada histórica, que es la de “un profeta que predice hacia atrás” (pp. 157-158); etc.

El protagonismo, sin embargo y por así decirlo, se lo llevan los

(7) Voy a emplear, en este caso, la traducción italiana del texto de Lotman, a pesar de que existe una traducción al español (véase la bibliografía). El motivo es que la versión española no es una traducción del texto original, sino de la versión italiana consultada. Lo ideal, naturalmente, sería evitar las traducciones, y las “traducciones de traducciones”, acudiendo directamente a los originales en ruso, siempre y cuando el lamentable e injustificado desconocimiento de esta lengua no lo impida. Quisiera destacar, al respecto, la excelente labor de Desiderio Navarro, traductor al español de los artículos de Lotman recogidos en los tres volúmenes de *La semiosfera*, editados por Cátedra entre 1996 y 2000.

procesos de transformación cultural, que pueden ser de dos tipos: graduales (como, en general, los de la técnica) o explosivos (como, en general, los del arte y, en menor medida, los de la ciencia). Tales procesos pueden sucederse en el tiempo (a una explosión sigue un desarrollo gradual... a la espera de la explosión siguiente), pero con frecuencia se dan de forma simultánea en diferentes sectores del mismo dominio cultural. Cabe subrayar que el momento de la explosión corresponde a una aceleración de las dinámicas culturales y que los efectos de esta aceleración son del todo imprevisibles:

El presente es una explosión de espacio de sentido aún no desplegado. Potencialmente contiene en sí todas las posibilidades de sus futuras vías de desarrollo. Es importante señalar que la elección de una de ellas no está determinada ni por las leyes de la causalidad ni por las de la probabilidad: en el momento de la explosión estos mecanismos se vuelven totalmente inactivos. La elección del futuro se realiza como casualidad. Por ello posee un alto valor informativo (Lotman 1992b, p. 26).

Al hablar de la figura del loco, recuerda Lotman que su importancia (humana, folklórica, retórica y semiótica) tiene que ver con el hecho de que es este un agente prototípico de la acción imprevisible, la que no se corresponde con, y por lo tanto anula, la lógica de lo habitual y de lo sensato (*op. cit.*, p. 57). El loco introduce en la conciencia normalizada la sorpresa y la duda, abriendo, con ello, la posibilidad de emergencia de nuevas interpretaciones (¡la posibilidad de la abducción!). Lotman, sin embargo, no toma en consideración el detalle de que la buena sociedad con frecuencia aparta o encierra a los individuos irregulares, temerosa, aterrada de la fragilidad de su orden, de sus hábitos normalizados, y que la fascinación por la locura recuerda, en este sentido, el vértigo del abismo y el escalofrío que todo ser racional siente al sospechar que es mucho más y, al mismo tiempo, mucho menos de lo que su identidad le dice. En cualquier caso, y con atrevido símil, cabe concluir que la explosión es para las dinámicas culturales lo que la irrupción de la locura para la conciencia normalizada: un momento de imprevisibilidad debido a la generación de un conjunto (no ilimitado, pero sí indeterminado) de posibilidades de desarrollo, de las que solo una se realizará (*op. cit.*, p. 155).

Aunque en *Cultura y explosión* Lotman no llama directamente en causa a Ilya Prigogine, a partir de la segunda mitad de los años ochenta, en la producción lotmaniana, las referencias directas a este autor son constantes. Veamos una de las más extensas y articuladas:

I. Prigogine, investigando los procesos irreversibles en la física y la química, llegó a conclusiones que tienen, al parecer, un sentido teórico general para todos los que se interesan por los procesos dinámicos. I. Prigogine distingue entre los procesos que transcurren en situaciones de equilibrio y los que transcurren en situaciones de desequilibrio. Los primeros transcurren fluidamente, se someten a las leyes de la causalidad y dan trayectorias reversibles (simétricas) que permiten predecir por la parte recorrida la no recorrida. Una particularidad de las situaciones de desequilibrio es que en la trayectoria dinámica aparecen, en la terminología de I. Prigogine, puntos de bifurcación, es decir, puntos en los que el movimiento ulterior puede transcurrir con igual probabilidad en dos (o más) direcciones, y no parece posible predecir en qué dirección comenzará a correr realmente. En estas condiciones aumenta bruscamente el papel de la casualidad, del factor colateral, que puede influir en el curso futuro del proceso. La introducción del factor casual en el mecanismo de la causalidad representa un enorme mérito de I. Prigogine. Ella desautomatiza el cuadro del mundo (Lotman 1989, p. 147).

En efecto, el *orden por fluctuaciones* descrito y formalizado por Prigogine en el caso de los sistemas físicos alejados de las condiciones de equilibrio termodinámico y la tendencia de tales sistemas a autoorganizarse y a alcanzar un comportamiento impredecible (meramente estocástico) en correspondencia de los puntos de bifurcación, con la consiguiente emergencia de una nueva organización global que solo puede ser comprendida en virtud de la *historia* del sistema, no podían no llamar la atención del semiólogo de Tartu. Leamos al propio Prigogine (junto a Isabelle Stengers):

Si a partir de una determinada distancia del equilibrio se abren al sistema no una, sino varias posibilidades, ¿hacia qué estado evolucionará éste? Ello dependerá de la naturaleza de la fluctuación que acabará por desestabilizar el sistema inestable y se amplificará hasta alcanzar uno de

los estados macroscópicos posibles. [...] Llamamos bifurcación al punto crítico a partir del cual se hace posible un nuevo estado. Los puntos de inestabilidad alrededor de los cuales una perturbación infinitesimal es suficiente para determinar el régimen de funcionamiento macroscópico de un sistema, son puntos de bifurcación. [...] el determinismo de las ecuaciones que permiten calcular la estabilidad e inestabilidad de los diferentes estados y el azar de las fluctuaciones que deciden hacia qué estado se dirigirá efectivamente el sistema, están aquí asociados inseparablemente. [...] La definición de un estado, más allá del umbral de inestabilidad, no es ya intemporal. Para ello, no basta referirse a la composición química y las condiciones del entorno. En efecto, ya no es deducible que el sistema se encuentra en ese estado singular, existen otros estados igualmente accesibles. Por tanto, la única explicación es histórica o genética: es necesario definir el camino que constituye el pasado del sistema, enumerar las bifurcaciones atravesadas y la sucesión de las fluctuaciones que han formado la historia real entre todas las historias posibles (Prigogine y Stengers 1979, pp. 192-193).

¿Se trata, en última instancia, de metáforas y analogías explicativas sacadas del dominio de la física y aplicadas a los estudios culturales? ¿Se trata de metáforas y analogías sacadas del dominio cultural y aplicadas a los estudios físicos? ¿O existen, más bien, características inherentes a cualquier sistema complejo, independientemente de la clase de sucesos investigados? Sea como fuere, lo que aquí importa es que es una determinada forma de entender la actividad científica lo que acerca el semiólogo al físico: la historia y los accidentes del sistema no son elementos secundarios y prescindibles a la hora de estudiar la invariancia, sino que son lo que determina la fisonomía y el funcionamiento reales del sistema.

3. Historia, contingencia y cultura

Llegamos, así, al último texto de Lotman acerca del que me gustaría conversar, aquí y ahora: el artículo “Clío en la encrucijada”, de 1988, un fervoroso alegado en contra de la concepción lineal y determinista del desarrollo histórico y de la narración historiográfica. Es esta, comenta Lotman, una concepción que puede ser aplicada, a lo sumo, a ciertos

procesos históricos “extrapersonales” y “espontáneos”, como el desarrollo de la lengua o el de las relaciones económicas, pero que resulta sobremañera empobrecedora ahí donde se manifiesta la actividad consciente del ser humano, y máximamente cuando este tiene que *elegir* entre diferentes posibilidades de acción (cuando llega a una “encrucijada”) y cualquier evento casual –o contingente– puede volverse determinante en el proceso de elección (Lotman 1988, p. 250; en *Cultura y explosión*, lo hemos visto, Lotman hablará de procesos de cambio regulares y explosivos, respectivamente). Así pues, escribe nuestro autor, la historia

se presenta ante nosotros no como un ovillo desovillado en un hilo infinito, sino como una avalancha de materia viva que se autodesarrolla. En ella luchan, por una parte, mecanismos de aumento de la entropía y, por consiguiente, de una creciente limitación de la elección, de reducción de las situaciones alternativas al cero informacional, y, por otra, mecanismos de constante incremento de las “encrucijadas”, las alternativas, los momentos de elección del camino, los momentos en que no se puede predecir el desarrollo ulterior. Aquí entran en acción el intelecto y la personalidad del hombre que realiza la elección. Ésos son los “minutos fatales”, según Tiútchev, o los momentos de bifurcación, según Prigogine. Por consiguiente, el intelecto del hombre no sólo refleja pasivamente la realidad exterior, sino que también es un factor activo de la vida histórica y cósmica. De ahí el papel —histórico y cósmico— de la cultura humana, de esa inteligencia colectiva de la humanidad. De ahí también el papel de la culturología (Lotman 1988, p. 252).

Clío representa, personifica a la Historia y, al mismo tiempo, a la Historiografía. Cuando llega a una encrucijada (que es, al fin y al cabo, una bifurcación múltiple), el camino que tome no está completamente predeterminado de antemano y el historiador, por lo tanto, no debería cometer el error de considerar que el camino elegido era el único posible o su elección la única necesaria. Clío no es “una pasajera en un vagón que rueda por los rieles de un punto a otro”, sino “una peregrina que va de encrucijada en encrucijada y *escoge un camino*” (*op. cit.*, p. 254). Uno de los muchos caminos posibles hacia adelante en el tiempo, en el caso del sujeto histórico; uno de los muchos caminos posibles hacia atrás en el tiempo, en el caso del historiador (la tal guerra, el tal atentado, la tal crisis, la tal

innovación, ¿acontecieron porque las condiciones no dejaban alternativa o porque algunas personas y grupos decidieron, a partir de sus estrategias cognitivas, políticas, económicas, etc., que se trataba de las soluciones más convenientes?). Todo esto no se contrapone a la idea de que existen (y pueden ser determinados) factores y presiones regulares (“impersonales”) de orden económico, político, ideológico, religioso, etc., pero tales factores y presiones no actúan de forma abstracta, sino sobre y a través de sujetos reales y en circunstancias concretas, de modo que los cruces ocasionales de personalidades, circunstancias y tendencias diferentes crean una “explosión” caleidoscópica de posibilidades.

Ahora bien: si la relación entre el sujeto y la historia es compleja, no lo es menos la que se establece entre el sujeto y la sociedad (incluyendo las *comunidades epistémicas* en las que el sujeto participa, sucesiva o simultáneamente: grupos que comparten determinados saberes y opiniones; Van Dijk 2016). A la luz de la semiótica de la cultura, es fácil llegar a una modelización de tipo recursivo: el individuo, al integrarse en un dominio de interacciones sociales, aprende los hábitos (también interpretantes) que especifican la identidad del sistema (también en relación con el dominio externo), a la vez que con su operar y sus decisiones (compelidas, tal vez, pero no siempre ni totalmente) reproduce, ratifica, rectifica o cuestiona esos mismos hábitos⁽⁸⁾. Se trata, además, de una modelización congruente con el discurso de la moderna sociología de corte sistémico, como la de Niklas Luhmann, quien insiste sobre todo en la noción de interpenetración individuo-sociedad:

La interpenetración es un concepto simétrico. No sólo las personas interpenetran a los sistemas sociales, sino que también, de modo recíproco, los sistemas sociales a las personas. La propia complejidad y dinámica de los sistemas sociales se transfiere a las personas como experiencia acumulada, dándoles motivo para desarrollar actitudes defensivas frente a la contingencia e inseguridad. Una consecuencia de esta perspectiva es que los sistemas personales y sociales se pueden influenciar mutuamente sólo a través de la utilización de los correspondientes procesos autorreferenciales

(8) En cuanto a los procesos de aprendizaje social, cabe además recordar que las prácticas, los modelos y los tipos aprendidos y enseñados en el transcurso de la interacción cultural, con pasmosa frecuencia, se aprenden y enseñan únicamente de forma discursiva.

y sólo de manera estructuralmente específica. Influyen sobre los procesos de la conciencia o de la comunicación del correspondiente tipo de sistema, es decir, nunca producen efectos sin la co-causalidad de las estructuras y procesos del sistema influenciado y están, en este sentido, sujetos a sus límites de lo posible (Luhmann 1980, p. 117).

Este modelo de las interacciones socioculturales resultaría, sin embargo, incompleto, abstracto y aun *complaciente* (¡la sociedad y la cultura funcionan! Dejémoslas trabajar...) si no se tuvieran en cuenta: i) la heterogeneidad semiótica, de la que no solo se derivan traducciones aproximadas e incomprensiones, sino también tensiones y conflictos; ii) la función dinamizadora de los textos nuevos que emergen en el sistema o irrumpen desde la esfera externa; iii) la inmoralidad cultural (el cuestionamiento, la variación y la producción de hábitos); iv) la tendencia del sistema cultural a imponer “su orden” (cognoscitivo y material) al dominio extra-sistémico; v) las inevitables idiosincrasias de toda interpretación, traducción, descripción, mescolanza y agregación llevada a cabo por los sujetos semióticos mientras se integran y participan en diferentes tradiciones y grupos organizados; vi) los imprevistos y los imprevisibles debidos a las circunstancias y los accidentes particulares de los sujetos, los colectivos, las instituciones: la Cultura es, al igual que la Historia, el reino de la contingencia.

Conclusión

En mi manual de historia de la literatura italiana en el instituto, y luego en la universidad, en la sección que cerraba el extenso capítulo dedicado a Dante Alighieri, la de los “textos de profundización”, aquellos que (casi) ningún estudiante leía, aquellos que (casi) ningún profesor mandaba estudiar, había un espléndido artículo de Lotman dedicado al viaje de Ulises en la *Comedia* (C. Salinari y C. Ricci, *Storia della letteratura italiana I*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1988, pp. 407-413). Este texto, desde luego, yo lo descubriría solo mucho más tarde, casi diez años más tarde, cuando mi encuentro con Lotman ya se había producido, durante los estudios de doctorado, y el propio Lotman se había convertido en uno de mis autores de referencia. A veces me pregunto qué hubiera pasado si ya con dieciséis

años, o con veintiuno, hubiese conocido su labor. Puede que nada. Puede que mucho. La historia toma forma (e informa) a partir de los caminos que nunca fueron recorridos.

En *Estructura del texto artístico* (1970), Lotman señala que el “no sé qué” de la obra de arte (y podríamos hablar, asimismo, del “no sé qué” de los sistemas físicos, de los biológicos, de los sociales, de los procesos evolutivos e históricos, de las vivencias de cada cual) depende también de eventos imponderables, co-incidencias fortuitas y soluciones imprevisibles: en definitiva, del encuentro-desencuentro (no predeterminado de forma necesaria) entre diferentes órdenes de complejidad en interacción durante los procesos de creación e interpretación del texto. El propio momento de la emergencia de sentido –la “inspiración”, el “eureka”, la “explosión” (Lampis 2018)– implica que los procesos de creación e interpretación del texto se abran a “desviaciones” impredecibles y casuales “con relación al código, a la norma, a la tradición e incluso al proyecto autoral” (Lotman 1987, p. 105).

También por ello, las pautas, las regularidades y las invariantes textuales que luego podemos hallar y defender (en la “superficie” del texto o en la “profundidad” de los modelos, las competencias, los códigos⁽⁹⁾) no deberían ser reificadas, transformadas en esencias o programas universales, no más allá de los límites contingentes del concreto dominio inter-accional en donde toman sentido (ellas... y nosotros con ellas). De hecho, los diferentes órdenes de endo- y exo-contingencias hacen estallar la lógica dicotómica de las grandes diatribas epistemológicas: innatismo frente a ambientalismo, determinismo frente a constructivismo, inmanentismo frente a historicismo, reduccionismo frente a holismo, etc. Lo imprevisto y lo imprevisible –bajo la forma, quizás, de diferencias imponderables luego amplificadas por las dinámicas recursivas del sistema, o de la irrupción (a veces traumática) de elementos extrasistémicos, o de la emergencia de nuevas modalidades relacionales, o de la integración aproximada de lenguajes diferentes– hacen saltar los esquemas y los hábitos, obligándonos, así como diría Peirce, a la duda y al conocimiento abductivo. Y en esto consiste, precisamente, para concluir con una afirmación que Lotman tal vez aprobaría, una de las funciones, uno de los encantos de la obra de arte.

(9) Con respecto a los procesos significantes y comunicativos, desde luego, hablar de “superficie” y “profundidad” no pasa de ser una operación de descripción metafórica cuya eficacia, utilidad y conveniencia aún dista de ser probada (Lampis 2013).

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AVANGUARDIA E MANIFESTO PROGRAMMATICO: UNA PROSPETTIVA LOTMANIANA

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ENGLISH TITLE: The Avant-garde and the Manifesto: A Lotmanian Perspective.

ABSTRACT: This essay aims to show two points. The first one is how some of the key notions of the theory of Juri Lotman, like the self-description and the grammar, are still relevant and useful to analyse cultural phenomena as the avant-garde movements. The second one is how, through the analysis of the avant-garde, these notions can be improved and expanded. We are going to focus on the role of the manifesto in the creation and stabilization of the avant-garde movements, a tool of self-description that, acting as a grammar, can provide integrity and unity to the culture. Analysing this textual form, we are also going to show how a self-description can play a fundamental role for a culture even when situated at the beginning of the process of creation of this culture. As we proceed with the analysis, we are going to quote mostly the manifestos produced by Italian futurism, because of its role as the first avant-garde movement that helped to shape the prototypical features of the textual genre of the manifesto.

KEYWORDS: Lotman; self-description; avant-garde; manifesto; grammar

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1. Introduzione

Tra i numerosi meriti di Juri Lotman — e della scuola di Tartu–Mosca nel suo insieme — spicca sicuramente quello di aver fornito una serie di concetti, categorie e riflessioni estremamente preziose per la costituzione di una scienza culturologica. Basta pensare alla definizione stessa di cultura data da Lotman, alle distinzioni tipologiche elaborate con Uspenskij, fino ad arrivare ad alcune nozioni cardine della semiotica della cultura, come quelle di *esplosione*, *semiosfera*, *traduzione*. Ma un merito altrettanto importante è quello di avere impostato la propria ricerca non come un sistema chiuso e autoreferenziale ma piuttosto come un tracciato, un progetto collettivo pieno di spunti e possibili direzioni da percorrere, come dimostrano già le tesi del 1973 (cfr. Ivanov, Lotman *et. al.* 1973). Il lavoro di Lotman — e di chi con lui ha collaborato — è pensato per essere proseguito e criticato; è una ricerca senza alcuna pretesa di esaustività, aperta ad essere integrata ed estesa.

In questa sede ci si propone, quindi, di sviluppare ed articolare le categorie lotmaniane di *automodello* e *manuale*, per dimostrare come oggi esse possano aiutarci nella comprensione e nello studio di vari fenomeni culturali, anche quelli più difficili da incasellare in tipologie generali.

Si è scelto così, nello specifico, di utilizzare la teoria di Lotman per analizzare la “cultura d’avanguardia” e il suo legame con il manifesto programmatico. Un fenomeno culturale come le avanguardie storiche⁽²⁾, di fatti, proprio per la sua natura sfuggente e ambigua, risulta particolarmente adeguato per affinare ulteriormente quei concetti e quelle preziose riflessioni proposte dalla scuola di Tartu. La cultura d’avanguardia è, del resto, una cultura che tendenzialmente si modella come sganciata dal passato, che ricerca forme espressive nuove e che rifiuta di affidarsi a una qualsivoglia tradizione e, in questo senso, sembra cozzare con l’idea

(2) Data la vocazione “semio-culturale” (cfr. Lorusso 2010) di questo lavoro, si utilizzeranno come esempi principali quei movimenti d’avanguardia che, fin dall’inizio, hanno cercato di incidere trasversalmente sulla cultura dominante e non su un ambito artistico circoscritto: essendo un lavoro teorico generale, non si potrà scendere nei particolari e passare in rassegna le differenze fra i diversi movimenti d’avanguardia. Si citerà quindi principalmente il Futurismo italiano, tendenzialmente considerato la prima avanguardia storica, nonché quella che ha prodotto il maggior numero di manifesti; ma anche il Dadaismo, che nel primo dopoguerra ne ha ereditato la forza sovversiva e il Surrealismo.

lotmaniana di cultura come “memoria non ereditaria della collettività” (Lotman e Uspenskij 1971, trad. it. 1975, p. 43). Come fa, quindi, un movimento che si presenta come proiettato verso il futuro e senza legami con il passato a farsi cultura? Quale dispositivo utilizza per far sì che venga percepito come un assetto culturale integro e unitario?

Questo dispositivo ci sembra essere il manifesto programmatico, minimo comune denominatore che lega tutte le avanguardie storiche. Il manifesto è infatti inscrivibile nella categoria dell’automodello, nozione cardine del pensiero di Lotman (cfr. Lotman 1971, trad. it. 1975, pp. 70–81; Lotman 1973, trad. it. 1975, pp. 277–291; Lotman 1977, trad. it. 1977, pp. 1–16): il semiotico russo ne ha infatti rimarcato in più occasioni l’importanza sia nella definizione di una cultura, sia nello studio delle sue caratteristiche fondamentali. Espandendo e rimeditando questo concetto attraverso l’analisi della forma testuale del manifesto e del suo legame indissolubile con la cultura d’avanguardia, si cercherà quindi di aggiungere un ulteriore tassello non solo all’eredità di concetti lasciatici da Lotman, ma anche alla conoscenza del fenomeno culturale delle avanguardie del Novecento.

2. L’avanguardia culturale

Il concetto di *avanguardia* come categoria critica applicata all’ambito artistico non è privo di ambiguità e problematicità. Innanzitutto, come ben notava già Poggioli, si tratta di una formula che è “patrimonio terminologico (e forse anche critico) quasi esclusivo alle lingue e culture neolatine” (Poggioli 1962, p. 18). In questo senso, pur avendo acquisito una sua specificità e autonomia in una certa tradizione critica, è stato anche spesso usato come sinonimo interscambiabile di termini come *modernità*, *modernismo*, *sperimentalismo* (cfr. Albera 2004, pp. 10–15), cosa che ha contribuito a diffondere una crescente confusione riguardante il termine⁽³⁾. Inoltre va notato come l’interesse della critica per il concetto abbia viaggiato fra diversi domini nel corso del tempo: Poggioli, ad esempio, nel suo *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia* (1962) riserva un’attenzione particolare all’ambito della letteratura, in concomitanza con la nascita della

(3) Sulla confusione fra questi termini cfr. Meschonnic (1993, pp. 83–96).

cosiddetta *neoavanguardia*. L'esperienza del Gruppo 63 aveva, infatti, alimentato anche alcune riflessioni di Angelo Guglielmi sul concetto di *avanguardia letteraria* contenute in *Avanguardia e sperimentalismo* (Guglielmi 1964, pp. 53–62) ma, tramontata questa fase, l'interesse per la nozione aveva già iniziato a migrare verso altre aree⁽⁴⁾: quella delle arti figurative e plastiche (cfr. Le Bot 1973) ma soprattutto quella del cinema (cfr. Garroni 1974; Bisaccia 2002; Albera, *op. cit.*). Il tema dell'avanguardia culturale è dunque stato affrontato relativamente a diversi ambiti, ma è mancato, soprattutto in tempi recenti, uno sguardo culturologico sui movimenti d'avanguardia intesi come promotori di una trasformazione che trascende i singoli domini artistici. Proprio a tale mancanza potrebbero sopporre la teoria lotmaniana e le riflessioni della Scuola di Tartu–Mosca, contribuendo a portare una maggiore comprensione del fenomeno e a fornire ulteriore validità a questa categoria critica.

In questa sede non sarà possibile passare in rassegna in maniera approfondita i vari contributi riguardanti questo concetto, per i quali si rimanda alle opere già citate. Sarà comunque utile evidenziare le principali caratteristiche associate a questa nozione e partire dalla genealogia del termine, in questi casi, rivela sempre la sua efficacia.

Come ha ben evidenziato Egbert (1970, trad. it. 1975, pp. 134–158) l'idea dell'avanguardia è stata estrapolata dall'ambito militare per la prima volta da Henri de Saint–Simon, che ha inaugurato una doppia tradizione legata a questo termine. Il pensatore francese la utilizza infatti sia per indicare quel gruppo di rivoluzionari che dovranno guidare la transizione verso una società a stampo socialista sia, legandosi a questa prima accezione, per indicare il ruolo centrale degli artisti per raggiungere questa nuova società: l'artista è l'avanguardia della rivoluzione. Nascono così due idee differenti, ma fortemente correlate, di avanguardia: un'avanguardia politica, gruppo incaricato di guidare la rivoluzione; e un'avanguardia artistica, gruppo che attraverso la sua arte facilita ed accelera il processo rivoluzionario. Se in un primo momento il termine era stato associato principalmente alla sua accezione sociopolitica, soprattutto negli ambienti ispirati al marxismo, già dalla seconda metà dell'Ottocento, aveva cominciato ad indicare quasi esclusivamente l'avanguardia

(4) Eccezione meritevole di essere segnalata è *Teoria dell'avanguardia* (1974) di Peter Bürger.

culturale: l'avanguardia artistica ha, in un certo senso, inglobato quella politica, proprio come proclamava Saint-Simon (cfr. Poggioli, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-26). La vocazione "politica" di un gruppo resta, infatti, un requisito fondamentale per definire d'avanguardia un movimento artistico, il cui scopo è quello di incidere e generare una trasformazione, non soltanto in un ristretto dominio dell'arte — letteratura, arti visive o musica che sia —, ma nella società tutta, in una determinata semiosfera.

In questo senso François Albera (2004) parla dell'avanguardia come una *posizione* nel campo artistico, in modo da circoscrivere questa nozione rispetto a quelle contigue di *modernità*, *moderno*, *innovazione* e *sperimentalismo*⁽⁵⁾. Per il critico svizzero, infatti

la differenza tra moderno-modernità-modernismo e avanguardia non può essere stabilita che a condizione di uscire da questa dimensione interna dell'arte e di considerare le posizioni dei gruppi o degli individui da una parte nel sottosistema sociale della cultura, e dall'altra nella società, in rapporto alle istituzioni, al pubblico, allo spazio sociale. [...] Nella misura in cui sono state rifiutate le istituzioni regolatrici e legittimanti del mondo dell'arte, l'obiettivo della lotta d'avanguardia è la conquista del pubblico, la popolarizzazione del suo procedere, la socializzazione delle sue idee o produzioni artistiche, la sua volontà di supremazia, e quindi una volontà di trasformazione della società. (Albera, *op. cit.*, p. 14)

Al termine "avanguardia artistica" si è quindi sostituito, in questa sede, quello più calzante e generale di "avanguardia culturale", poiché evidenza il fine intrinseco ai movimenti d'avanguardia di trasformazione dell'assetto culturale a venire, la loro necessità di plasmare il tempo futuro secondo i propri obiettivi e le proprie idee. Questa componente propria della cultura d'avanguardia viene chiamata da Poggioli *futurismo* (Poggioli, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-91), fondamentale nell'omonimo movimento culturale ma estendibile a tutte le avanguardie. Il futurismo delle culture d'avanguardia consiste nella loro "funzione di creare quella condizione di primitività o meglio primordialità, da cui poi nasca il creatore che si trovi al principio di una nuova serie" (Bontempelli 1938, citato in Poggioli, *op.*

(5) Va notato che per Albera, che si è occupato dell'avanguardia nell'ambito del cinema, il problema di questa confusione è ancora più rilevante essendo il cinema l'arte "moderna" per eccellenza.

cit., p. 85). I seguaci dei movimenti d'avanguardia concepiscono se stessi come *precursori* della cultura futura, come profeti che portano nel presente ciò che avverrà nel futuro, in modo da preparare il terreno culturale per una rivoluzione annunciata. Essi hanno il compito di fare tabula rasa di ciò che c'è per favorire l'avvicinamento di una trasformazione radicale e trasversale della cultura, il loro essere *avanguardia* consiste proprio nella "coscienza di appartenere ad uno stadio intermedio, ad un presente già distinto dal passato, o ad un futuro in potenza che vale solo in funzione di quello che sarà il futuro in atto" (Poggioli, *op. cit.*, p. 88). La cultura d'avanguardia è quindi orientata fortemente verso il futuro, un futuro percepito come radicalmente diverso dal passato e incompatibile con esso — e in questa concezione riecheggia l'origine socialista e rivoluzionaria del senso figurato del termine —; un futuro del quale i membri dei movimenti d'avanguardia sono il punto d'inizio, "i Primitivi di una nuova sensibilità completamente trasformata" (Boccioni *et. al.* 1914[1910], p. 31).

Chi ha familiarità con il pensiero di Lotman può già intuire senza difficoltà come una cultura così concepita, che si modella cioè come sganciata dal passato e che marca la categoria dell'*inizio*, risulti inevitabilmente instabile poiché manca "[l']orientamento sul passato che assicura quell'indispensabile stabilità in cui è da ravvisare una delle condizioni dell'esistenza della cultura" (Lotman e Uspenskij 1971, trad. it. 1975, p. 46). La cultura d'avanguardia è una cultura che si aspettualizza *incoattivamente*, ovvero come l'inizio di un processo che tende verso il futuro ma di cui è chiaro soltanto il punto di partenza, mentre il punto d'arrivo rimane lontano e sfumato⁽⁶⁾. Ma proprio questo modo di autorappresentarsi come cultura di transizione, come cultura votata al "sacrificio agonistico al futuro" (Poggioli, *op. cit.*, p. 82), come cultura che nel momento della propria nascita teorizza già la propria fine⁽⁷⁾, rende necessario l'uti-

(6) Ad esempio, Marinetti definisce i futuristi come "futuristi di *domani* e non di *posdomani*" (Marinetti 1915, p. 144) mentre Breton chiarisce fin da subito che le future tecniche surreali-
ste non gli interessano (cfr. Breton 1924).

(7) "Quando avremo quarant'anni, altri uomini più giovani e più validi di noi, ci gettino pure nel cestino come manoscritti inutili" (Marinetti 1909[1914], p. 8) proclamavano i futuristi. Allo stesso modo, come ulteriore esempio dello spirito avanguardista d'autosacrificio, vale la pena ricordare l'orazione funebre pronunciata da Tristan Tzara a Weimar nel 1922 in cui dichiarò la morte del movimento Dada, evento che portò poi alla nascita del movimento surrealista, suo erede più o meno diretto (cfr. Egbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 305–306).

lizzo di un dispositivo estremamente stabilizzante, che consenta, in qualche modo, di far sì che effettivamente un determinato movimento d'avanguardia diventi cultura prima di sacrificarsi al movimento successivo: questo dispositivo è l'*autodescrizione*. Per questo motivo l'avanguardia è legata a doppio filo con la forma testuale del manifesto, anzi potremmo dire che è proprio l'avanguardia a creare questa forma testuale proposta per la prima volta da Marx ed Engels nel 1847 e poi consacrata da Marinetti e dal movimento futurista nella prima metà del Novecento. In questa sede si cercherà di analizzare questa forma testuale, cercando di evidenziare i motivi per cui risulta una forma anomala di autodescrizione, almeno per come aveva inteso questa nozione Lotman, ma anche di sottolinearne l'importanza fondamentale per la cultura d'avanguardia. E proprio per il suo legame originario con il movimento futurista italiano che ha, di fatto, dato forma al manifesto come genere testuale attraverso una frenetica produzione di testi programmatici, si citeranno principalmente esempi tratti da manifesti futuristi.

3. Il manifesto come grammatica

L'automodello lotmaniano può essere definito a grandi linee come una descrizione strategica che una cultura fa di se stessa in un momento dato. Lotman distingue tre tipologie di automodelli: automodelli "che si prefiggono un ravvicinamento massimo alla cultura realmente esistente" (Lotman 1971, trad. it. 1975, p. 73); automodelli "distinti dalla pratica della cultura e calcolati per la modificazione di tale pratica" (*ibid.*) e automodelli che rivestono il ruolo di "autocoscienza ideale della cultura" e che "esistono e funzionano separatamente da questa" (*ibid.*). In tutti e tre i casi, però, lo studioso rimarca il fatto che l'autodescrizione significhi "una strutturazione secondaria della cultura stessa" (Lotman 1977, trad. it. 1977, p. 12). Nella visione di Lotman, la metadescrizione è un dispositivo che serve sempre a riordinare e regolare, a far diminuire l'eterogeneità di una cultura e a darle stabilità e che, dunque, si rende necessario solo in un secondo momento, quando la cultura è già a uno stadio avanzato del suo ciclo vitale. Il manifesto, in questo senso, pur essendo facilmente riconducibile alla seconda tipologia di autodescrizione proposta da

Lotman, presenta uno scarto significativo rispetto all'idea della strutturazione secondaria della cultura, perché esso si colloca invece all'inizio della cultura, quando essenzialmente non vi sono ancora testi. Più che un dispositivo necessario a creare unità e a ridurre l'eterogeneità si tratta, quindi, di un dispositivo che immagina un futuro possibile e vi si proietta, ritagliando una porzione di cultura in cui il movimento d'avanguardia può inserirsi e prosperare. L'avanguardia sembra in un certo senso essere consapevole dei meccanismi della cultura e presenta una volontà di farsi cultura.

Certo, in vari manifesti programmatici non manca una breve genealogia del movimento d'avanguardia: si individua, cioè, chi ha ispirato la nascita del movimento e i propri antesignani. La categoria del precursore è infatti utilizzata non soltanto in relazione al futuro (gli avanguardisti sono i precursori di ciò che verrà), ma anche in relazione al passato: come evidenzia Poggioli “nei rari momenti in cui cerca di giustificare sé medesima mediante l'autorità o l'arbitrio della storia [...] la stessa arte d'avanguardia si degna di cercare le proprie patenti di nobiltà nelle cronache del passato, e si traccia un albero genealogico di più o meno autentici antenati, di più o meno lontani precursori” (Poggioli, *op. cit.*, p. 86). Questi precursori sono, quindi, importanti, ma nel manifesto sono già stati superati, demoliti e i loro insegnamenti sono soltanto propedeutici all'inizio di un cammino percepito come completamente nuovo⁽⁸⁾.

A livello testuale del manifesto, ciò che suggerisce questo proiettarsi verso il futuro in un momento embrionale della cultura è l'utilizzo diffuso della modalità virtualizzante del *volere*:

Noi vogliamo cantare l'amor del pericolo, l'abitudine all'energia e alla temerità [...] Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra — sola igiene del mondo — il militarismo, il patriottismo, il gesto distruttore dei libertari, le belle idee per cui si muore e il disprezzo della donna. [...] Noi canteremo le grandi folle agitate dal lavoro, dal piacere o dalla sommossa: canteremo le

(8) Breton, ad esempio, individua come principali precursori del movimento surrealista Apollinaire e Freud; Boccioni cita gli impressionisti (cfr. Boccioni 1914). Ma il rapporto con i precursori delle avanguardie è spesso anche polemico, come per Marinetti che sostiene che “[noi futuristi] oggi odiamo, dopo averli immensamente amati, i nostri gloriosi padri intellettuali: i grandi geni simbolisti Edgar Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmè e Verlaine” (Marinetti 1915, p. 101).

maree multicolori e polifoniche delle rivoluzioni nelle capitali moderne (Marinetti 1914[1909], pp. 6–7).

Il futurismo proclama la necessità di andar sempre avanti. [...] Il futurismo è l'ottimismo artificiale opposto a tutti i pessimismi cronici, è il dinamismo continuo, il divenire perpetuo e la volontà instancabile (Marinetti 1915, p. 141).

Pour lancer un manifeste il faut vouloir: A, B, C, foudroyer contre 1, 2, 3, s'énervier et aiguïser les ailes pour conquérir et répandre de petits et de grands a, b, c [...] J'écris un manifeste et je ne veux rien, je dis pourtant certaines choses et je suis par principe contre les manifestes, comme je suis aussi contre les principes (Tzara 1918, p. 2).

Anche nei manifesti firmati da un unico autore, a parlare è quasi sempre un *attore collettivo* che talvolta è un “noi”, ovvero l'insieme dei membri del movimento, ma anche il movimento stesso inteso come entità astratta e unitaria: a prendere la parola è sempre il gruppo nella sua interezza e unità e difficilmente il singolo. Questi sono espedienti discorsivi che perfettamente si confanno alla funzione fondamentale dell'automodello, ovvero il creare un effetto di coerenza e omogeneità della cultura e di rafforzamento e affermazione della propria identità. Ma, soprattutto, nel manifesto, il movimento d'avanguardia vuole e proclama⁽⁹⁾, ovvero esterna i propri desideri e i propri obiettivi riguardanti una modificazione della cultura presente. Il *volere* espresso nell'autodescrizione fa in un certo senso da garante della sopravvivenza — o forse, meglio, della creazione — della cultura, poiché, mostrandosi compatto e fissando dei chiari e inequivocabili obiettivi futuri, un movimento può aspirare a diffondersi e a cristallizzarsi come cultura.

Ma, come si è notato precedentemente, al momento del lancio di un manifesto, tendenzialmente, un movimento culturale ancora non possiede testi propri⁽¹⁰⁾. Per questo motivo il manifesto riveste anche un ul-

(9) Anche Tzara, fondatore del movimento Dada, pur operando una decostruzione della forma testuale del manifesto programmatico non può fare a meno di utilizzare la modalità del volere e di proclamare qualcosa, seppure attraverso una negazione e dicendo di “non volere niente”.

(10) Prendendo l'esempio del Futurismo italiano, nonostante in alcuni ambiti le ricerche sulle tecniche che saranno poi centrali nel movimento siano abbastanza coerenti e unitarie (ad esempio quella sul divisionismo in pittura), gli stessi membri fondatori del movimento si dedicano a opere poco o per nulla inclini ai fini e ai valori futuristi: basti pensare a *La ville Charnelle* (1908)

teriore ruolo oltre quello di autodescrizione: funge, infatti, da *manuale*. Un movimento che si assempia *incoattivamente* e si modella come il punto di partenza di un percorso futuro, che riduce al minimo il recupero dei testi passati e la legittimazione delle culture a esso precedenti ha bisogno — per farsi cultura — di un dispositivo che, non solo riesca a uniformare e stabilizzare il proprio assetto culturale, ma che renda anche più facile la creazione di nuovi testi. E, come fa notare perfettamente Eco nella sua rielaborazione della teoria di Lotman, “un manuale [...] provvede regole per costruire un numero indefinito di oggetti, mentre il Libro è un testo che produce solo modelli da imitare e può essere eventualmente ritradotto in manuale solo quando sia divenuta nota la regola che lo ha prodotto” (Eco 1975, p. 195). Il manifesto programmatico, per l'avanguardia, funge quindi da *grammatica* che orienta i desideri, i comportamenti e la produzione futura di testi del movimento culturale che, se conformi alle regole prescritte dal manuale, saranno automaticamente canonici. Accanto alla modalità del *volere*, nei manifesti è infatti centrale anche l'altra modalità virtualizzante, quella del *dovere*:

BISOGNA CONCEPIRE LA MELODIA QUALE UNA SINTESI DELL'ARMONIA [...] PROCLAMARE LA NECESSITÀ ASSOLUTA CHE IL MUSICISTA SIA AUTORE DEL POEMA DRAMMATICO O TRAGICO PER LA SUA MUSICA. [...] RICONOSCERE NEL VERSO LIBERO L'UNICO MEZZO PER GIUNGERE AD UN CRITERIO DI LIBERTÀ POLIRITMICA. (Pratella 1914[1911], pp. 50-51).

[Bisogna] Proclamare che la scultura si prefigge la ricostruzione astratta dei piani e dei volumi che determinano le forme, non il loro valore figurativo [...] Bisogna distruggere il nudo sistematico, il concetto tradizionale della statua e del monumento! (Boccioni 1914[1912], pp. 82-83).

Il ruolo di manuale assunto dal manifesto è chiaro nei cosiddetti “manifesti tecnici”, quell'insieme di prescrizioni relative a uno o più ambiti artistici — pittura, scultura, letteratura, musica —, ma anche nei manifesti fondativi o riguardanti un ambito generale vi è spesso una parte prescrittiva in cui vengono proposte regole da rispettare e comportamenti da

di Marinetti, un poemetto tutto incentrato sull'elogio del corpo della donna (la città carnale, appunto) e dall'amore lussurioso. Allo stesso modo, sempre Marinetti pubblica prima il *Manifesto del Futurismo* e solo successivamente il romanzo *Mafarka il futurista*.

seguire. Del resto se, come si è detto, l'avanguardia culturale ha come suo tratto distintivo una vocazione "politica", ovvero un tentativo di trasformazione trasversale della cultura e della semiosfera in cui si inserisce, non si limita a prescrivere regole "tecniche" ma anche linee comportamentali e schemi d'azione: l'uomo o la donna d'avanguardia devono essere tali anche nella vita di tutti i giorni⁽¹¹⁾. I manifesti sono quindi anche programmi d'attività, "modelli di comportamento eroico" che, come le poesie di Ryleev per Lotman, "dovevano esercitare un'influenza diretta sulle azioni dei suoi lettori" (Lotman 1975, trad. it. 2006, p. 221). Nel suo celebre saggio *Il decabrista nella vita*, Lotman ha ben messo in evidenza "la generale "letterarietà" del comportamento dei romantici, la loro tendenza a considerare segnici tutti gli atti" (*ibidem*, p. 199)⁽¹²⁾. L'autore russo continua sostenendo che "questo, da una parte, porta a un aumento della funzione del gesto nel comportamento quotidiano. Il "gesto" è un atto che non tanto, e non soltanto ha una finalità pratica, quanto un riferimento a un significato. Il gesto è sempre segno e simbolo. Perciò ogni azione sulla scena, compresa quella che imita il completo affrancamento della teleologia scenica, è gesto; il suo significato è l'idea dell'autore" (*ibid.*). Se però nel Romanticismo "si sceglieva di solito la parte rifacendosi a un personaggio storico, a un uomo di Stato, a un letterato, al protagonista di un poema o di una tragedia" (*ibidem*, p. 276), ovvero ci si orientava verso *testi* passati, nella cultura d'avanguardia i modelli di comportamento provengono da *manuali* redatti dai membri stessi del movimento: non recuperando elementi dalla storia passata, in questo modo è possibile conservare il proprio slancio verso la cultura futura e l'autoproclamato ruolo di precursori dell'avvenire.

(11) Emblematica in questo senso è la frase utilizzata da André Breton per definire chi ha aderito al movimento surrealista: "hanno fatto atto di SURREALISMO ASSOLUTO" (Breton 1924, trad. it. 1966, p. 30). Lo stesso Breton, sempre nel primo manifesto, dedica un capitolo ai "segreti dell'arte magica surrealista", in cui mette l'accento sulle "applicazioni del surrealismo all'azione" (*ibidem*, p. 47).

(12) In questo caso vale la pena evidenziare come Poggioli legghi l'esperienza d'avanguardia proprio al Romanticismo e in particolare allo storicismo romantico (Poggioli, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-72). E nonostante Lotman parli di "poetiche del comportamento" in relazione a questo periodo storico, egli stesso sostiene che "l'assenza della poetica del comportamento non durerà [...] a lungo. Sparita con gli ultimi romantici nel 1840, risorge nel 1890-1900 nella biografia dei simbolisti, nel "costruttivismo", nel "teatro per un solo attore", nel "teatro della vita" e in altri fenomeni culturali del XX secolo" (Lotman 1975, trad. it. 2006, p. 292).

La cultura d'avanguardia tende quindi ad essere una *cultura grammaticalizzata*, fortemente orientata verso il *contenuto*⁽¹³⁾, che utilizza il dispositivo del manifesto proprio come una grammatica, nella doppia funzione di automodello e di manuale. Si tratta di un dispositivo che presenta, quindi, le seguenti caratteristiche:

- Dà stabilità a un movimento culturale cercando di farlo apparire come compatto e unitario, presentando un attore collettivo modalizzato secondo il *voler-fare* che *proclama* i suoi desideri e i suoi obiettivi di trasformazione della cultura futura.
- Prescrive *regole* per la realizzazione di testi futuri e presenta programmi di attività e modelli di comportamento per i membri del movimento. In questo modo il “soggetto d'avanguardia” si modalizza anche secondo il *dover-fare*, è cioè un soggetto che sa che, per realizzare ciò che vuole fare, deve seguire un preciso schema sia nell'azione quotidiana sia nella realizzazione di testi.

Conclusioni

In questo breve excursus si è cercato di utilizzare uno sguardo eminentemente “semio-culturale” (cfr. Lorusso 2010), analizzando il modo in cui le culture d'avanguardia hanno modellizzato se stesse e cosa abbia comportato questa modellizzazione: la svalorizzazione del passato, il considerarsi come punto d'inizio di un cammino verso il futuro, la consapevolezza della propria transitorietà ha fatto sì che i movimenti d'avanguardia necessitassero di un particolare dispositivo stabilizzante e unificante per riuscire a sopravvivere in quanto cultura. In questo senso si è cercato di spiegare il largo uso del manifesto da parte di movimenti come Futurismo, Dadaismo, Surrealismo, essendo il manifesto una forma di automodello. In questa sede si è però anche cercato di mettere in

(13) La trasversalità di ambiti in cui la cultura d'avanguardia vuole incidere è un esempio di questo orientamento verso il contenuto. Nel Futurismo italiano, ad esempio, ciò che va comunicato è stabile e chiaro e i membri del movimento devono cercare, nei vari linguaggi, le forme espressive più adatte a veicolare quello stesso contenuto: il verbo all'infinito in letteratura, il divisionismo in pittura, il ritmo libero in musica, i grassi sintetici in cucina e così via.

evidenza come l'autodescrizione non debba essere necessariamente legata a una strutturazione secondaria della cultura, poiché presenta una forza uniformante anche quando si colloca all'*inizio* del processo di formazione di una cultura. In questo caso però non va considerata tanto come una scrematura dei testi non canonici o un tentativo di eliminare l'eterogeneità, quanto piuttosto come il tentativo di ritagliare una porzione di semiosfera in cui la cultura d'avanguardia possa inserirsi e, potenzialmente, prosperare⁽¹⁴⁾. Per fare ciò si utilizzano espedienti discorsivi quali l'*attore collettivo* o la modalità virtualizzante del *volere*, proiettando in avanti obiettivi e calcolando una modificazione della cultura presente.

Ma il rifiuto di recuperare dei testi dal passato rende una cultura nettamente instabile. Per questo motivo il manifesto assume anche il ruolo di manuale, cioè di un testo che prescrive regole e comportamenti da seguire sia nell'ambito della vita quotidiana, sia nell'ambito della produzione artistica.

Nonostante sia da considerarsi chiaramente un punto di partenza, ci auguriamo che questo contributo possa essere un utile tassello per corroborare idee quali la centralità degli automodelli, il ruolo essenziale delle grammatiche per determinate culture e il rapporto fra cultura e tempo futuro⁽¹⁵⁾.

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(14) Se la cultura è la memoria non ereditaria della collettività, "di essa si acquista piena coscienza solo post factum" (Lotman e Uspenskij 1971, trad. it. 1975, p. 44).

(15) Pur non essendo stato possibile integrare l'argomento nel corpo del testo va segnalato come recente e prezioso contributo sul tema il numero 131 di *Versus* (2020) a cura di Jorge Lozano e Daniele Salerno.

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PARTE III

PONTI INTERDISCIPLINARI: DIALOGHI E INFLUENZE

PART III

INTERDISCIPLINARY BRIDGES: DIALOGUES AND INFLUENCES

L'ALTERNATIVA NELLA STORIA

DI VALENTINA PISANTY⁽¹⁾

ENGLISH TITLE: Alternative history

ABSTRACT: In several of his later works, Lotman deals with the problem of human agency and the role of chance in the specific domain of historical events. Against the backdrop of his theory of cultural explosions, the main point he makes is that “if we start from the premise that an historical event is always the result of one of many possible alternatives and that the same conditions do not always produce the same results... we shall see that the events which actually took place are surrounded by clusters of unrealised possibilities” (Lotman 2019, p. 193). Hence the irreversible nature of catastrophic and/or revolutionary events, whose actual outcomes are never predictable before they occur, partly because of the role played by chance in selecting one of the possibilities that were virtually condensed in the previous, pre-Big Bang stages of the explosion (while discarding the others), and partly because of the active role played by human agents in decision-making processes that shape those events. When historians talk about the past, however, much of this indeterminacy is lost. This is due to the retrospective view that they adopt when turning the time arrow from present documents to past events, with the result of strengthening the causal links between what came before and what really happened, as if there never were any alternatives. But how can history deal with the original indeterminacy of human events, without forsaking its inferential (and therefore necessarily a posteriori) methods? Lotman is very critical of historiography in general, and of the *Annales* school (founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre) in particular. And yet, curiously enough, the best example of a historical text capable of conjuring up counterfactual scenarios, while living up

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to its scientific-documentary standards, may be found in Marc Bloch's first-person analysis of the French *étrange défaite* of 1940.

KEYWORDS: history; semiotics; event; agency; counterfactuals

Il mondo appartiene a coloro che amano il nuovo.
(Bloch 2014[1946], p.125)

Nella *Cultura e l'esplosione* Lotman dedica pagine densissime al problema dell'agentività nella storia⁽²⁾ diversamente interpretabile a seconda che gli eventi di cui si parla siano esperiti in presenza, man mano che si svolgono, oppure ricostruiti retrospettivamente, quando la forza bruta della Secondità (come direbbe Peirce)⁽³⁾ ha già prodotto i suoi effetti irreversibili. Chi si trova nel mezzo di un evento ovviamente non sa come andrà a finire. Visto dal presente, il futuro è indeterminato: tutto è ancora possibile, e una parte preponderante dell'esperienza riguarda per l'appunto i sentimenti contrastanti che accompagnano l'incertezza dei futuri concepibili. Se viceversa lo si guarda dall'altro lato, a cose fatte, l'evento acquista un carattere di inevitabilità che è tipico dei reperti della memoria, specie quando questi sono registrati in un racconto che ne fissa i nessi causali, i *propter hoc*, le sequenze logiche, i raccordi, le motivazioni. La coerenza è retrospettiva. Tant'è vero che basta invertire la freccia del tempo, come fa Martin Amis nel suo tour de force letterario (*Time's Arrow*, 1991), raccontando l'esistenza di un medico nazista a ritroso, dalla morte alla nascita, come una pellicola che si riavvolga, per capovolgere non solo l'ordine cronologico degli eventi, ma anche la catena causale che li tiene insieme e – soprattutto – il senso complessivo delle azioni compiute (per cui è solo grazie al rovesciamento temporale che il medico di Auschwitz torna a curare i malati anziché uccidere pazienti sani).

Non solo il passato c'è già stato, e non potrebbe essere disfatto neppure per decreto divino; anche il modo di raccontarlo si sedimenta in

(2) Più in generale sulla concezione lotmaniana della storia si rinvia a Boyko (2015), Tamm (2017) e Gherlone (2017).

(3) Peirce (1931-1935): CP 2.84 Cross-Ref:††.

strutture ordinate, tali da proiettare sull'evento un'impressione di determinatezza e di linearità che non possedeva affatto al momento del suo compiersi⁽⁴⁾. Come nella rielaborazione del sogno – dice Lotman (1993, p. 53) – “la trasformazione di ciò che è stato visto in ciò che viene raccontato inevitabilmente aumenta il grado di organizzazione. Così si crea il testo”. Testo peraltro prodotto da qualcuno per qualche scopo, nel caso della testimonianza storica, con tutte le distorsioni e le interferenze che tale intenzionalità comunicativa si porta appresso. Ma anche a prescindere dagli usi strumentali a cui è soggetta ogni narrazione del passato, resta il fatto che lo sguardo retrospettivo di per sé altera la natura dell'evento, sovraimponendogli un senso compiuto che cancella i “punti di biforcazione” in cui era impossibile anticipare l'imprevedibile.

Così riassunto, il concetto appare piuttosto intuitivo. E tuttavia le implicazioni che comporta e le domande che solleva sono vertiginose. Se è vero che ogni evento realizzato “è circondato da una nube di eventi non realizzati” (1993, p. 77; la metafora funziona anche meglio nella traduzione inglese: “clusters of unrealised possibilities”⁽⁵⁾; dell'originale russo non saprei dire), che ne è del pulviscolo “di possibilità irrealizzate e di strade perdute” di cui è cosparso il cammino umano, a livello sia individuale, sia collettivo? Cosa sono e come si trasformano queste possibilità, prima e dopo l'esplosione, dallo stato pre-Big Bang in cui tutte si concentravano virtualmente nelle menti dei soggetti coinvolti – o addirittura nei recessi di un'ipotetica mente dell'universo – al momento in cui vengono disperse nello spazio controfattuale? Quanti mondi possibili ci scorrono accanto, alla maniera di *Sliding Doors* (1998) o di *The Man in the High Castle* (1962; 2015-2019)⁽⁶⁾, senza che neppure ne abbiamo cognizione? Non si tratta di un esercizio immaginativo fine a se stesso, tutt'al più mirato a produrre brividi metafisici o implausibili teorie sul realismo modale. La posta in gioco è più alta: ripristinare il senso dell'alternativa nella storia significa de-automatizzarne i processi, sventagliare le occasioni perse, per capire

(4) Su questo punto, v. anche Ferraris (2021, p. 222): “Se noi riprendiamo una scena, la facciamo scorrere all'indietro, apparirà evidente che Sam non poteva non suonare ancora *As Time Goes By* e Blücher non poteva che precedere Ney sui campi di Waterloo e che, per lo stesso motivo, noi non potevamo non fare quanto abbiamo fatto”.

(5) Lotman 1990, p. 229.

(6) Romanzo di Philip Dick (1962) recentemente ripreso da una serie televisiva (2015-2019).

non solo come si è arrivati all'attuale presente (anziché altrove), ma anche come si potrebbe intervenire sul flusso degli eventi presenti e futuri⁽⁷⁾. Nello iato tra il possibile e l'attuale si apre lo spazio dell'azione.

“Ogni grande evento non soltanto apre nuove strade ma recide interi fasci di potenzialità del futuro. Se si ricorda questo, allora la descrizione di queste vie perdute non rappresenta più per lo storico una beata riflessione su temi facoltativi” (Lotman 1993, p. 78). Che cosa fa sì che, tra tutti gli scenari virtualmente concepibili, se ne realizzi uno in particolare? Mutuando dal modello termodinamico di Ilya Prigogine e Isabelle Stengers (1981), Lotman chiama i momenti esplosivi “punti di biforcazione”. Sono le disgiunzioni di probabilità che preludono l'instaurarsi di un nuovo equilibrio dopo che quello precedente è andato in frantumi; punti di instabilità entropica in corrispondenza dei quali il sistema può imboccare due o più strade diverse per effetto di variazioni infinitesimali nell'intorno del punto. Possiamo figurarcele come il movimento in sospensione del dado lanciato: finché non impatta con una superficie solida, l'esito del lancio non è deducibile dalle premesse, ed è solo il caso a determinare la scelta tra le opzioni equiprobabili. Ora, assegnare al caso un ruolo preponderante nei processi trasformativi di tipo discontinuo potrebbe apparire come un'abdicazione intellettuale, se non addirittura un invito al fatalismo: che vuoi farci, è andata così... Non fosse per il fatto che, salvo casi limite di casualità irriducibile (e chissà se è mai davvero tale: se il dado è caduto sul sei è perché un cumulo di micro-eventi infinitesimali, l'orientamento del lancio, l'attrito con l'aria, una folata di vento, e dio sa che altro, lo ha indirizzato in quel senso), ciò che normalmente definiamo casuale in effetti lo è solo all'interno della catena causale di volta in volta presa in considerazione. Il caso è l'incontro fortuito tra sequenze causali non correlate. “Al momento della biforcazione il sistema si trova in uno stato in cui è impossibile prevedere in quale nuovo stato si sposterà. Il massimo che possiamo fare è indicare quali stati sono possibili. In questo momento il caso gioca un ruolo decisivo (*intendendo il caso non come assenza di causalità,*

(7) Non dimentichiamo che Lotman pubblica *La cultura e l'esplosione*, e gli articoli più o meno coevi che ruotano attorno allo stesso nucleo concettuale, negli anni a cavallo della caduta del Muro di Berlino, nello stesso periodo in cui Francis Fukuyama proclamava la Fine della Storia (a proposito di recisione).

ma come fenomeno appartenente a un'altra serie causale)" (1990, p. 231; traduzione e corsivo miei)⁽⁸⁾.

In un racconto di Graham Greene, *A Shocking Accident* (1957), il padre del protagonista viene ucciso in un quartiere di Napoli da un maiale caduto da un balcone. Dal punto di vista del passante, la caduta di un maiale dal quinto piano, proprio in concomitanza del suo transito sotto il balcone, non è un evento in alcun modo prevedibile. Sotto un diverso profilo, l'evento fortuito si inserisce in una catena del tutto intelligibile di cause ed effetti: il balcone era fatiscente, il maiale veniva allevato in casa secondo un'usanza locale, il maiale era diventato particolarmente grasso, il balcone ha ceduto sotto il suo peso. Bastava che il passante si fermasse un istante prima, o accelerasse il passo, o scegliesse un altro percorso nelle strade di Napoli, e quell'incidente non sarebbe mai avvenuto. Bastava che il maiale non avvertisse l'esigenza di una boccata d'aria proprio in quel momento. Ma – ecco il ruolo del caso – due serie di regolarità reciprocamente indipendenti si sono incrociate, e l'improbabile innesto ha prodotto i suoi effetti irreversibili. Moltiplichiamo per n (o n^n ...) il numero delle serie causali virtualmente interconnesse, e scomponiamo frattalmente ciascuna serie nelle microsequenze indipendenti che in essa si incontrano, e cominciamo ad avvertire il vortice combinatorio che per comodità chiamiamo caso o destino.

Henri Poincaré (1908), citato da Lotman⁽⁹⁾, immaginava una mente infinitamente potente e informata in grado di prevedere qualsiasi evento, per quanto minuscolo, e di risalire all'insieme ipercomplesso delle sue cause. Come potrebbe funzionare un dispositivo del genere? Di nuovo, un abbozzo di risposta viene dalla finzione narrativa. Nel terzo episodio di *Men in Black* (2012) c'è un personaggio, Griffin, dotato della straordinaria capacità di prevedere simultaneamente tutti i futuri possibili a partire dalla situazione in cui si trova in quel momento. Man mano che si verificano eventi infinitesimali, è in grado di scartare gli scenari incompatibili, per riaprire le disgiunzioni che di lì si prospettano, e per comportarsi

(8) "At the moment of bifurcation the system is in a state where it is impossible to predict what new state it will move into. The most we can do is to indicate which of the states is possible. At this moment chance plays a decisive role (understanding chance not as the absence of causality, but as a phenomenon from another causal series)".

(9) Poincaré 1908, cit. in Lotman 1990, p. 228.

conseguentemente. Non c'è bisogno di avere letto Ockham o Leibniz per cogliere in questa finzione il dilemma del compatibilismo⁽¹⁰⁾, ovvero il conflitto tra libero arbitrio e predestinazione, riformulabile come inconciliabilità tra le proprietà analitiche (presumibilmente incancellabili) di un Dio infallibilmente onnisciente e presciente, e l'idea che gli umani abbiano facoltà di intaccare il corso degli eventi in cui sono coinvolti. Anche a sostituire Dio con il caso, i termini della questione restano pressoché invariati, al netto della teodicea. Si tratta comunque di chiedersi che cosa determini, nelle situazioni di interesse umano, l'attualizzazione di uno tra gli innumerevoli futuri possibili, e quanto peso, *if any*, abbiano le scelte e le azioni umane nella dinamica dell'indeterminatezza esplosiva.

La capacità umana di premere qualche nuovo pulsante nella macchina storica è al centro delle riflessioni lotmaniane sul rapporto tensivo tra caso e determinatezza. Posto che lo studio della storia ha a che fare con fatti complessi in cui si intrecciano e retroagiscono processi spontanei e scelte consapevoli – “la storia è il processo che avviene con l'interferenza di un essere pensante” (Lotman 1990, p. 232; trad. mia)⁽¹¹⁾ – i punti di biforcazione sono soggetti alle spinte contrastanti dell'agentività individuale e collettiva. In tempi ordinari, quando prevale la logica omeostatica dello sviluppo graduale, il caso gioca un ruolo marginale e le scelte dei singoli sono perlopiù incanalate in percorsi culturalmente collaudati: regole o abiti della cui arbitrarietà si è persa cognizione. Ma quando l'equilibrio viene meno e l'ordine è spezzato da eventi – rivoluzioni, catastrofi, o altre turbolenze – che non si lasciano tradurre nelle categorie familiari, i comportamenti individuali e collettivi cessano di essere automaticamente prevedibili. “Questi punti nodali a prevedibilità ridotta sono tempi di rivoluzione o di altri drastici cambiamenti storici. La scelta che si realizzerà dipende da un complesso di circostanze casuali, ma ancor di più dall'autocoscienza delle persone coinvolte” (Lotman 1990, p. 233; trad. mia)⁽¹²⁾.

Come intendere il ruolo dell'autoconsapevolezza umana nelle svolte brusche della storia è un problema la cui rilevanza Lotman si limita a

(10) Per una sintesi critica del dibattito sul compatibilismo, v. Fedriga e Limonta 2016.

(11) “History is the process which takes place ‘with the interference from a thinking being’”.

(12) “These nodal points with diminished predictability are times of revolution or other dramatic historical shifts. The choice which will be realised depends on a complex of chance circumstances, but even more on the self-awareness of the people involved”.

mettere a fuoco, senza giungere alla formulazione di un modello interpretativo esauriente. In termini molto generali, le onde d'urto dell'evento imprevisto producono effetti antitetici. Da una parte l'incertezza provocata dall'apertura di uno spazio caotico viene esorcizzata dalla ricerca di capri espiatori, dalla proliferazione di fantasie cospirazioniste, e dal ritorno a modelli di pensiero arcaici: recupero consolatorio di regole obsolete, in assenza di nuovi modi di dare senso al mondo⁽¹³⁾. Dall'altra si riattiva la modalità meta-riflessiva con cui talvolta gli umani affrontano creativamente quello che i giuristi chiamerebbero lo stato di eccezione. Per tradurre la questione nelle categorie wittgensteiniane riprese da Paolo Virno (2005), lo scarto creativo consiste nel riconoscere che la norma precedentemente data per scontata ammetteva applicazioni alternative e discordanti. Spogliate della loro auto-evidenza, le abitudini consolidate esibiscono il loro carattere contingente e, de-automatizzandosi, vengono messe fuori gioco. L'interpretazione arretra, ma non – come nel caso del pensiero reazionario – a stratificazioni di regole sociali precedenti, bensì alla *regolarità*, allo “strato di roccia” che sottostà a tutti i sistemi di regole storicamente determinati: le attitudini fondamentali dell'animale linguistico (“comandare, interrogare, raccontare, elaborare ipotesi, ecc.”), le costanti antropologiche che le norme precedentemente accettate pretendevano di organizzare in modo univoco. È per l'appunto nella “terra di nessuno” tra la regolarità e la regola che si apre lo spazio della decisione (o meglio: c'era decisione anche prima, quando la regola veniva applicata automaticamente, solo che non ci si rendeva conto di prenderla)⁽¹⁴⁾.

Non credo di fare particolare violenza a Lotman assimilando la sua proto-teoria dell'agency sorgiva all'idea che la creatività dipenda dalla capacità umana di porsi, all'occorrenza, *al di qua* della regola. Il “fascio di possibilità” di cui auspica la presa di coscienza coincide con l'arretramento alla fase esplosiva in cui tutto era ancora possibile, prima che un cumulo di scelte (consapevoli o meno) contribuisse a deviare il corso degli eventi in una delle

(13) Cfr. Monticelli 2020.

(14) A proposito delle diverse condotte – più o meno trasgressive rispetto all'applicazione accettata della regola – che si possono adottare di fronte a un cartello stradale, Virno (2005, p. 47) osserva: “La forza giuridica delle diverse reazioni di cui si può dare prova davanti al cartello stradale, scaturisce *unicamente* dal fatto che essi sono, tutte, decisioni (quella automatica e irriflessa non meno di quella innovativa)”.

diverse traiettorie virtualmente disponibili, e soprattutto prima che il nuovo ordine post-rivoluzionario attribuisse al proprio trionfo i tratti della predestinazione. È la curva tipica di ogni esplosione quella per cui, a cose fatte, “il processo svoltosi realmente viene sostituito da un suo modello, generato dalla coscienza di un partecipante all’azione. Avviene una trasformazione retrospettiva. L’accaduto è proclamato l’unico possibile: ‘fondamentale, storicamente predeterminato’. Ciò che non è avvenuto viene interpretato come qualcosa di impossibile. Al casuale viene attribuito il peso di ciò che è normale e inevitabile” (Lotman 1993, p. 29).

Già a livello individuale i prodotti della memoria sono soggetti a simili meccanismi correttivi. I ricordi si riaggiustano in funzione della coerenza narrativa (nonché di altri meccanismi psichici la cui analisi trascende i propositi di questo articolo), come si evince per esempio da molte testimonianze dei sopravvissuti ai grandi traumi storici, sempre più inclini col passare degli anni a rimuovere le incongruenze e a adattare le tracce mnestiche ai racconti-cornice nel frattempo divenuti egemoni. Lo sguardo all’indietro, dal presente al passato, non può che comportare lo sfrondamento degli scenari alternativi, pena l’assenza di senso, identità e direzione dei soggetti rammemoranti. “Si tratta dell’esigenza psicologica di modificare il passato, di introdurre in esso delle correzioni, e di vivere questo processo corretto come l’autentica realtà. Si tratta, cioè, della trasformazione della memoria” (Lotman 1993, pp. 158-159). A maggior ragione il lavoro di post-produzione è in atto a livello collettivo, quando i detentori del nuovo ordine discorsivo sovrappongono le proprie griglie concettuali alla materia magmatica della storia per affermare in chiave auto-legittimante che all’assetto attuale *There Is No Alternative*. Se siamo diventati ciò che siamo, è per effetto di una concatenazione di eventi e di scelte che non potevano che condurci fin qui, nel migliore dei mondi possibili.

L’esigenza di attingere alla memoria delle alternative irrealizzate si presenta semmai quando, alla vigilia di un nuovo terremoto culturale, l’ordine del discorso ricomincia a scricchiolare. Così come il viandante torna sui suoi passi quando si accorge di aver perso l’orientamento, “Che cosa è andato storto?” è una domanda che ci si pone quando si prende atto che *the time is out of joint*⁽¹⁵⁾. Compito degli storici dovrebbe esse-

(15) Chissà se la fascinazione contemporanea per il genere dell’ucronia non sia l’ennesimo

re, secondo Lotman, riportare alla luce le possibilità perdute, evidenziare i punti di biforcazione e gli appuntamenti mancati, anziché legittimare con la patina della scienza il determinismo delle narrazioni vincenti. E invece – sempre secondo Lotman – la storia, intesa come storiografia, è tra le principali responsabili della fallacia prospettica che porta a feticizzare l'attuale a scapito del virtuale (“la storia non si fa con i se”, ci insegnavano a scuola).

Ciò che più colpisce, nella polemica di Lotman, è lo specifico bersaglio che prende di mira. Non, come ci si potrebbe aspettare, la storia *embedded* delle grandi imprese, le biografie dei capi e il culto positivista dei fatti tipici della storiografia ottocentesca, bensì la scuola delle *Annales*, appiattita sulla definizione braudeliana della *longue durée*⁽¹⁶⁾, sebbene l'autore con cui Lotman discute a distanza sia Marc Bloch, che sulla dialettica tra evento individuale e *longue durée* aveva posizioni più sfumate⁽¹⁷⁾. Nata proprio per contrastare il realismo ingenuo dei positivisti, da una parte, e l'attenzione esclusiva prestata ai grandi avvenimenti politici e militari, e dunque alle élites, dall'altra, la scuola delle *Annales* propugna un'inedita apertura interdisciplinare, volta ad ampliare il raggio di interesse della ricerca storica e ad analizzare le correlazioni tra serie causali diverse. Economia, urbanistica, tecnologia, diritto, folklore, ecc.: le fonti a cui attinge per ricostruire porzioni significative del passato appartengono a una molteplicità di quelli che Lotman chiamerebbe sistemi di modellizzazione secondaria. A ciò si aggiunge una spiccata vocazione metodologica, mirata a problematizzare il rapporto degli storici con le fonti, il loro posizionamento culturale e ideologico rispetto al materiale studiato, l'epistemologia della spiegazione e della comparazione, l'interesse per i dispositivi della menzogna e per gli aspetti retorici della scrittura. Tra i vari indirizzi storici passati e presenti, quello che fa capo a Marc Bloch e Lucien Febvre è senza dubbio il più affine a un'impostazione semiotica.

sintomo di quella “perdita di centro” che secondo Carlo Galli (2018, p. 83) è “prodromo a una possibile riconfigurazione di instabili equilibri storico-politico-economici”.

(16) Braudel 1958.

(17) Cfr. Le Goff 1993, p. XIX.

Perché allora Lotman se la prende proprio con Bloch? Dal capitolo 15 di *Universe of the Mind* (“Cultural Memory, History and Semiotics”, scritto nel 1988) si ricavano due obiezioni fondamentali, a prescindere dalla rivendicazione territoriale secondo cui Bloch e i suoi epigoni non avrebbero sufficientemente riconosciuto il primato della linguistica nel campo delle scienze sociali, nonostante le evidenti convergenze tra la storia come la intendono loro e la linguistica diacronica di stampo saussuriano (Lotman 1990, pp. 224-225).

La prima obiezione, a dire il vero appena accennata (in Lotman 1990 e 2019), è di tipo aspettuale. Il metodo storiografico descritto da Bloch è adatto alla temporalità continua della *longue durée*, contraddistinta dall’agentività ridotta delle masse anonime e dalla gradualità impercettibile dei cambiamenti strutturali profondi, mentre secondo Lotman si presta poco alla descrizione degli eventi individuali, in particolare quando questi scartano dalla ripetizione della norma accettata. È una storiografia della *langue* (delle mentalità) e non della *parole* (degli avvenimenti). Come tale, è incapace secondo Lotman di rendere conto dell’apporto creativo dei singoli, della libertà di pensiero e di scelta grazie alla quale l’umanità procede per balzi laterali e mosse del cavallo, sfruttando l’indeterminatezza delle situazioni contingenti per mutare repentinamente direzione quando sembrava che non ci fossero alternative.

La seconda obiezione riguarda l’atteggiamento necessariamente retrospettivo che, nell’*Apologia della storia*, Bloch assume nei confronti degli eventi. Posto che il passato per definizione non c’è più, l’unico modo per accedere a ciò che è stato è attraverso i documenti, volontari o involontari che siano. Documenti che lo storico seleziona e analizza nel suo presente, a partire dalla sua collocazione spaziotemporale e dai suoi codici, per poi risalire a suon di congetture, verifiche incrociate e circoli ermeneutici ai possibili codici degli emittenti, e di lì agli eventi di cui i testi sono tracce e alle mentalità di cui sono sintomi. Siamo in pieno paradigma indiziario. “In alcuni dei suoi caratteri fondamentali” – scrive Bloch a titolo esemplificativo – “il nostro paesaggio rurale, già si sa, risale a epoche assai remote. Ma per interpretare i rari documenti che ci permettono di penetrare quella genesi nebulosa, per porre correttamente i problemi, per averne anche solo l’idea, si è dovuta soddisfare una prima condizione: osservare, analizzare, il paesaggio di oggi. Esso solo, infatti, dava la prospettiva

di insieme da cui era indispensabile partire” (Bloch 2009[1949], p. 38)]. Come potrebbe essere altrimenti? “Il testo si colloca tra l’evento ‘come è accaduto’ e lo storico”, ammette anche Lotman (1990: 217 – trad. mia), consapevole che solo una minima parte della realtà viene tradotta in testo dai testimoni contemporanei agli eventi, e che nessuno studio del passato può calarsi direttamente nella materia viva dell’esperienza senza una complessa mediazione tra codifiche e traduzioni passate e presenti. Ma poi Bloch prosegue con una metafora cinematografica: “Qui come altrove, è un cambiamento che lo storico vuol cogliere. Ma nella pellicola che prende in esame, solo l’ultimo fotogramma è intatto. Per ricostituire i tratti sfocati degli altri, è stato necessario anzitutto svolgere la bobina in senso inverso a quello della ‘ripresa’” (Bloch 2009[1949], p. 38)].

Ecco il problema. La metafora di Bloch presuppone una reversibilità temporale, dal presente al passato, che contravviene alla logica asimmetrica dell’esplosione. Se il presente è solo uno degli innumerevoli effetti possibili dell’evento, e se è vero che dalle stesse condizioni di partenza si sarebbero potute tracciare traiettorie diverse, l’indagine storiografica distorce l’oggetto che pretende di ricostruire. Non è vero – dice Lotman (2019, p. 193) – che riavvolgendo la bobina si ritorna al fotogramma iniziale. Immaginiamo di assistere al film della vita di un individuo, dalla nascita alla morte. Se dovessimo invertire la direzione del nastro, dagli effetti alle cause⁽¹⁸⁾, ciascuna azione compiuta apparirebbe come la conseguenza necessaria dell’azione precedente, e la vita di quella persona risulterebbe retta da un determinismo ferreo. Si smarrirebbe, insomma, l’aleatorietà delle scelte compiute e delle occasioni perse, ossia di tutto ciò che definisce, ontologicamente e fenomenologicamente, l’avventura della storia umana. Una ricostruzione che tenesse conto dell’imprevedibilità dell’esperienza dovrebbe piuttosto assomigliare a un ipertesto interattivo immensamente ramificato, i cui algoritmi talvolta si generano nell’istante della loro applicazione (se non addirittura dopo, a cose fatte). Già, ma come si può riesumare il dominio vasto e insondabile dei non-fatti storici, in assenza di documenti che attestino i dubbi e i conflitti addensatisi attorno a ciascun punto di biforcazione?

(18) Un po’ come in *Time’s Arrow*, salvo che per il fatto che nel Gedankenexperiment di Lotman ciascun episodio montato a ritroso conserva la sua originaria cronologia interna.

Curiosamente, l'esempio più calzante di contro-storia ramificata è *L'étrange défaite*, saggio-testimoniaza scritto proprio da Marc Bloch nel 1940 per analizzare a caldo i motivi della débâcle militare subita dai francesi per mano degli invasori nazisti. Sdoppiato nei ruoli di testimone e di storico, Bloch passa al bisturi la lunga serie di errori di calcolo, inerzie burocratiche, scelte avventate, equivoci, abbagli, imprevisti e incresciosi incidenti che insieme hanno determinato la catastrofe in corso. L'aspetto più saliente, per quanto ci riguarda, è il regime discorsivo che Bloch adotta per dimostrare la tesi della sua requisitoria, e cioè che "i nostri capi, in mezzo mille contraddizioni, hanno preteso di ripetere nel 1940 la guerra del 1915-1918. I tedeschi facevano la guerra del 1940" (Bloch 2014[1946], p. 66). Su scala molare questo bilancio fa capo allo storico che, valutate le prove alle quali ha accesso, formula un giudizio cumulativo sulle responsabilità della Francia. L'analisi è necessariamente à rebours. Ma per identificare "gli andirivieni paralleli della causa e dell'effetto" (Bloch 2014[1946], p. 120), Bloch-testimone si mette al livello dei singoli per osservarne i comportamenti su scala molecolare: il generale di brigata a Strasburgo, il comandante del corpo di cavalleria a Malo, il generale Blanchard, il capitano B. del 3° ufficio, e molti altri ancora, incluso Bloch stesso, tutti alle prese con le contingenze della storia vissuta. Da questa prospettiva omodiegetica, Bloch ha modo di raccontare ciò che ha visto e sentito nel senso temporale dell'esperienza diretta, anziché della ricostruzione storica. Riaffiorano così gli snodi problematici di una trama di azioni individuali e di alternative scartate, come si evince dai numerosi condizionali controfattuali di cui è costellato il testo: "se gli stati maggiori avessero avuto a disposizione un maggior numero di sottoufficiali", "cerchiamo di immaginare che cosa sarebbe avvenuto se", "se avessi ritenuto di poter ottenere", "sarebbe stato più conveniente se...". E così via.

Se ne ricava un formidabile spaccato di agency umana, in bilico tra l'iniziativa individuale e l'applicazione consuetudinaria di regole superate dagli eventi. Travolta dalla guerra innovativa dei tedeschi, la *langue* militare francese, oggetto dell'analisi storica di Bloch, si esprime attraverso uno sciame di atti di *parole*, della cui descrizione si fa carico la testimonianza. D'altronde – chiede Bloch – "di che cos'è fatta [la] coscienza collettiva se non di una moltitudine di coscienze individuali che influiscono incessantemente le une sulle altre?" (Bloch 2014[1946], p. 165). I comportamenti dei militari francesi

sono sì concreti e individuali, ciascuno con la propria traiettoria particolare; ma ciò che li accomuna è l'incapacità di sottrarsi all'azione normativa degli schemi collaudati, per riconoscere che nella storia umana "le linee tracciate sulla base dei fatti avvenuti non sono mai diritte" (Bloch 2014[1946], p. 119)]. Ovvero, in termini lotmaniani, che in tempi di esplosione la storia – intesa come storia vissuta – si fa proprio con i se.

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SEMIOTICS AND DECOLONIALITY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY BETWEEN JU. LOTMAN AND W. MIGNOLO⁽¹⁾

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Semiotica e decolonialità. Uno studio preliminare tra Ju. Lotman e W. Mignolo

ABSTRACT: The goal of the present paper is to reflect upon the possibility for Lotman's cultural semiotics to contribute to the ongoing discussion on decoloniality. This area of study gathers the ideas elaborated by a tradition of thinkers exploring how colonial relationships engendered by modernity are not limited to the realm of political domination but are seeped into our global culture, mode of production of knowledge and way of conceiving history. Within the Latin American school, we will focus on the works of Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo. We will show how Lotman's *multi-perspectivist* epistemological approach offers analogies and points of convergence with the approach to decolonial reflection by Mignolo. The goal is *not* to frame Lotman as a decolonial thinker – he most certainly did not belong in that tradition, nor shared the same theoretical agenda and political goals. The similarities that we will attempt to highlight in the present paper, however, are not the result of a mere coincidence nor of an abstract, metatheoretical convergence of ideas. Rather, they are the result of Lotman's engagement with the Russian and Soviet critique of Eurocentrism, which led him to reflect upon the need to delink from the promises made in the name of modernity, such as the ideas of progress, development, destiny. In

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the first part of the paper, we will discuss how Lotman elaborates, through an engagement of Soviet Oriental Studies among others, a *multi-perspectivist* epistemology. In the second part of the paper, we will discuss how he develops his theoretical approach into a critique of a “universal” and “unilinear” notion of history. Finally, in the third part, we will highlight certain points of convergence between Lotman and Mignolo, hinting at possible future contamination between cultural semiotics and the decolonial tradition.

KEYWORDS: knowledge; multi-perspectivism; history; Western epistemology; Mignolo

1. Lotman, Soviet Oriental Studies and the “multi-perspectivist” approach

Soviet Orientalism, as many phenomena of the Soviet world, is a complex and contradictory object. It employed a methodology and rhetoric fashioned as a critique of and an opposition to “imperialistic” Western Orientalism. However, it often served *de facto* as an instrument of the Soviet State, providing knowledge and instruments to foster Soviet hegemony in the “Eastern” world. Different contemporary commentators tried to emphasize one aspect over the other, according to their specific research goals or polemical objectives⁽³⁾. In the present chapter, we will mainly take into consideration the Soviet Orientalists’ theoretical and methodological approach, as it was the aspect that Lotman was in a dialogue with.

The roots of Soviet Orientalism are to be found in the school of Russian Oriental Studies founded by Viktor Rozen, and his students Vasilij Bartol’d, Sergej Ol’denburg and Nikolaj Marr (Brandist 2015). Inspired by the works of J. Baudouin de Courtenay, the group engaged in a radical critique of the Eurocentric premises of Indo-European linguistics and European Orientalism. Their point of view was that of the Russian Empire, of its self-perceived uniqueness as a borderland between East and West, and of its historical mission to unite the different nationalities of Eurasia.

(3) See for example Brandist (2018) and Kemper (2010).

After the October Revolution, many Orientalists continued pursuing the same research agenda from within the Soviet and Marxist framework. In their works, they described Western – bourgeois – Orientology as an instrument of imperialism, which regarded “the East” as the object of colonial aggression and as an “exotic” world, with its own laws of development. Western Oriental studies found a practical application in the European colonial endeavour: “for the administration of subjugated countries [...] a comprehensive knowledge of these countries was a necessity” (Konrad 1967, p. 9)⁽⁴⁾. Western Orientalists found their *raison d’être* in the fact that the East was defined as a separated, and somewhat homogeneous, object (Ol’denburg 1931, p. 5) that required a separated discipline with a specific agenda and unique methodologies.

Soviet Oriental Studies instead claimed that the study of “the East” warranted no special approach, as it is not an identifiable object with unique and homogeneous characteristics. It is rather a construction that exists only as a member of the symbolic antinomy “East–West” (Konrad 1967, p. 209). Why, then, should Oriental studies deal with Eastern literature or Eastern history instead of leaving the subject to those same disciplines that study “regular” (i.e., Western) literary science and history? According to orientalist N. I. Konrad, the separate existence of Oriental Studies can only be justified insofar as, by engaging non–European realities, it has the means of liberating European scholarship from its Eurocentric assumptions (Konrad 1967, p. 15).

The main critique by Soviet Orientologists to European scholarship is the tendency of the latter to exclude everything that is “non–West” from world history. Eurocentric historiographical categories such as “Middle Ages”, “Renaissance” etc. brought an implicit and immediate exclusion: “the origin of the concept and term ‘Middle–Ages’ is responsible for medieval history becoming the history of European countries and peoples” (Konrad 1967, p. 45). The East simply became all that lies beyond Europe. Konrad then allows the use of such terms as “Middle–Ages” applied to non–European people only insofar as they, through a

(4) It is not a coincidence that, some decades later, the same ideas would be at the core of works such as Said’s *Orientalism* (2003 [1978]). This view of Western Oriental Studies was exported by Middle–Eastern and Asian intellectuals who went to study in the Soviet Union, and was incorporated into their critique of Western scholarship (Tolz 2011, pp. 83 and 101).

comparative approach, are deprived of their Eurocentric characteristics. Those terms can then become placeholder signs to describe any historical socio-economic convergence of certain typological characteristics.

Lotman, who knew and often quoted these authors, and especially Konrad⁽⁵⁾, shared with them a fundamental critique of European scholarship: its attempt, throughout its history at least since the Renaissance, to produce universal descriptions, or meta-descriptions, of the world, from its “privileged” point of view.

This critique does not mean that Soviet Orientalists did not attempt to construct themselves a universal description of the world. Characteristic of Soviet scholarship, and in this Lotman is no exception, is the idea that culture develops according to certain laws and regularities, and that the role of the researcher is to discover them. However, each civilization operates within the general framework of those regularities according to its unique point of view, none of which is *in itself* “special” or “privileged” in any way. It is therefore impossible to determine those universal laws by engaging a single perspective, as it would be impossible to distinguish the necessary from the contingent, the general from the particular. The fundamental, underlying idea, which Lotman will embrace and develop, is that the advancement of knowledge requires engagement with a plurality of points of view:

The idea of the possibility for a single ideal language to serve as an optimal mechanism for the representation of reality is an illusion. 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], p. 2)

We will call this idea “multi-perspectivism”, in analogy with Leibniz’s epistemology⁽⁶⁾.

(5) Nikolaj I. Konrad (1891–1970), philologist and Japanologist, was close to Marxist linguist E. D. Polivanov and M. M. Bakhtin (Sorokina 1995). Lotman demonstrates a deep interest in his works and cites him often, e.g., in Lotman (1994 [1964], p. 222), (1992 [1983], p. 110), (2019 [1989], p. 92) and (1990, p. 244).

(6) The notion of “multi-perspectivism” to describe Leibniz’s epistemology has been advocated by Marcelo Dascal (2000). To express a somewhat similar concept Lotman uses the term *stereoscopia* (see e.g., Lotman 2019 [1978], p. 46). The latter term, however, belongs to an earlier

According to Lotman, any semiotic individuality, to know the outside world, needs to translate it into its inner languages. Therefore, any knowledge is expressed in the languages of a determinate semiotic individual, i.e., incarnates a point of view. This idea however does not reduce knowledge to a solipsistic endeavour. Any translation, by its nature, is never complete since a degree of untranslatability is the foundation of the difference between individuals. Therefore, during each translational act, the internal language of the semiotic system will have to change itself to accommodate for the untranslatable materials that enter from the outside world. This means that, in the process of dialogue, the internal language of each participant will change and tend towards the construction of a common metalanguage.

Lotman's multi-perspectivism is developed along three dimensions: descriptive, methodological, and ethical-political.

Multi-perspectivism reflects the necessary mechanism of any cultural production. No knowledge is given without a dialogical/translational process and the construction of a metalanguage. In this sense, it has a descriptive character, as it is meant to model the workings of culture.

It is however one of the characteristics of culture the tendency to forget its need for the other, hence, to consider its language as a neutral meta-language — and itself as the bearer of the universal norm (Lotman 2019 [1989], p. 88). The question of the “point of view” thus becomes a methodological issue. The researcher, being a semiotic individuality themselves, needs to constantly remind of their own embeddedness in a locality (*Ivi*, p. 93), and take into consideration the subjectivity of knowledge not as an extra-scientific influence but as an intrinsic limit — and characteristic — of human knowledge (*Ivi*, pp. 83–83).

For the same reasons, multi-perspectivism also acquires an ethical and political dimension. These are mostly expressed in Lotman's last monographs, where he reflects upon the differences between binary and ternary models of culture. In binary models, where the opposition “I–other” is absolute and unmediated, historical changes become catastrophic and tend to the annihilation of the other. Instead, ternary (i.e. mediated)

stage of elaboration, while “multi-perspectivism”, despite not being Lotmanian in origin, better reflects, in our opinion, the subsequent evolution of Lotman's work, and its debt to Leibniz. On the topic, see Restaneo (2018).

models, where the different layers and points of view coexist and are recognised, allow for changes where the *other* is not suppressed but incorporated to enrich the *I* (Lotman 2009 [1992], pp. 166–174).

2. The “problem” of the thinking reed

Lotman’s multi-perspectivist approach must not be only thought of as operating “horizontally”, i.e., involving the points of view of other semiotic individuals. In his search, Lotman also investigates, so to say, *vertically*, i.e., exploring different *modes* of thinking, different *types* of consciousness. In that, Lotman was continuing the great tradition of Russian philology, and especially of the Marrist school. Marr and his followers were most interested in reconstructing the evolution of the faculty of language and with it the evolution of the different ways how humankind, through language, related to the world (Sériot 2020). This research agenda brought many Marrists, such as philologist Ol’ga Frejdenberg, to explore folklore and mythos, its forms of thought and how they influenced the history of literature⁽⁷⁾.

Lotman’s entire oeuvre is studded with considerations on this semiotic universe, in which he sees a reservoir of inextinguishable value for the understanding of cultures. Studying myth, its *forma mentis*, and its language (see, in particular, Lotman and Uspenskij 1978 [1973]⁽⁸⁾; Lotman 1974 [1973]; Lotman *et al.* 1980; Lotman and Minc 1981; Lotman *et al.* 1987), he realises that cultural semiosis is profoundly linked to how the human being lives and interprets their existence through the temporal dimension and transforms it in a narration. Specifically, the mythological world is a universe subject to its own laws — especially the laws of cyclicity: “its narration is not built according to the principle of a chain, as it is typical for a literary text, but is woven like a head of cabbage, where each leaf repeats with known variations all the others, and the endless repetition of the

(7) Lotman does not shy away, since the first number of *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Lotman 1964, p. 13), from recognising the merit of with the philological works of the Marrist school, and especially of Ol’ga Frejdenberg for whom he had utmost respect (Lotman 1973).

(8) For a comment about the five versions of the English translation of the article “Myth — name — culture”, see Kull (2011).

same underlying plot nucleus is woven into a whole that is open to growth” (Lotman and Minc 1981, p. 38).

The time of myth, and the narration that follows it, implies that humanity is immersed into a unitary mesh⁽⁹⁾. This repetitive dynamic, however, is not synonymous with immobility. It is rather a fabric of relationships in permanent communication, whose texture becomes more and more complex each cycle⁽¹⁰⁾. This state of being changes when human thought begins to penetrate reality with reason and logic and create distinctions. The cyclical nature of the universe, and its predictable movements, are interrupted by a calculating intelligence, capable not only of following its rhythm but also of discovering its *cause–effect relations*: the thinking reed (*mysljaščij trostnik*)⁽¹¹⁾ (2009 [1992] p. 28), that overlooks its surroundings and imposes a linear movement on reality, historicizing it.

This double perception of time — cyclic and linear — would not represent, according to the Russian scholar, an insuperable contradiction for the human being if the mythological consciousness would still be recognized as a form of knowledge. In Lotman’s perspective, linear movement is not intrinsically negative. It does not exclude the possibility of inventive, creative, and unpredictable acts. However, it becomes a “culturological problem” insofar as it is elevated to a universal worldview, based on the idea of inevitable movement towards an end⁽¹²⁾. With the advent of Western modernity, the *arrow of time* replaces myth, dismissing it as part of a dull pre-scientific worldview. The concept of “end” (the unidirectional linear time) acquires a dominant character. These “end-oriented” cultures strive for the realization of a preordained destiny and every event that occurs is evaluated according to its coherence with this “end”. Usually, a “purging” mechanism

(9) The word *mesh* is intentionally used here to connect the Lotmanian idea of *endless textual immersion* (implied also in the concept of “semiosphere”) to the current research on Anthropocene (see in particular Morton 2011; Caracciolo 2021) – another field of study that, together with decoloniality, can be theoretically enriched by the Russian scholar’s perspective.

(10) Lotman and Minc (1981) speak of *naraščivanie* (growth, accumulation, enrichment) to define the dynamics of the wholeness implied in mythological narration.

(11) Lotman refers to Tyutchev’s poem *Pevučest’ est’ v morskikh volnah...* (There is Melodiousness in the Waves of the Sea), which in turn is the result of the Pascalian influence upon the Russian poet (cf. the fragments 347–348 from Blaise Pascal’s work *Pensées*). On the idea of human beings as a thinking reed, see also Lotman (1990, p. 163).

(12) For further exploration see Lotman (1976 [1966]) and the chapter “The end! How sonorous is this word!” in Lotman (2009[1992]).

is put in place to annihilate, either physically or from the collective memory, everything that does not fit into the final project.

From its “privileged” point of view, the West imposes a (teleologically imbued) culturological self–description of time as a universal path. Universality itself is, in turn, identified with a given civilization, the European one, thus coercively exportable. This cultural modelling of predictability identifies itself with *progress*. By not accepting the heterogeneity and indeterminacy of the existing reality, this universal self–description imposes a correct, ordered, (fatally) harmonious model of historical development and, therefore, of historiographic narration(s). Diverging models of development are labelled as *primitive*:

[w]e are used to looking at all cultures as the currents of a single trajectory and defining as ‘underdevelopment’ and ‘backwardness’ everything that does not resemble the line of the European movement, to which we have become accustomed since school. (Lotman 2016 [1982], p. 687)

Lotman is here embracing N. I. Konrad’s suggestion to rethink the very idea of “beginning, development and death of culture(s)” (Lotman 1990, p. 244). The model of unidirectional trajectory should be replaced with a highly complex process in which previous cultures are not exhausted but are *transfigured*, i.e., brought to life again in a new form by the current ones, thus remaining alive and active over time.

The influence of the Soviet orientalist and philologists, together with that of other theorists (such as Vernadsky, Bakhtin and, from the second half of the 1980s, Prigogine), lead Lotman to launch a serious critique of the idea of “universal history” and to recognize that cyclical time and linear time can productively coexist. History, consequently, would be a straight line that develops according to certain laws and regularities, remaining subject to a pulsating cyclicity, which brings back to the present day — in the form of texts — “dormant” and “illegitimate” cultural forms (especially the symbolic–artistic ones) deposited in the collective memory (or consciousness). Lotman’s multi–perspectivist approach thus not only considers synchronicity, as incorporates different points of view, different cultures and different types of consciousness. It also operates on the axis of diachronicity, exploring how different perspectives submerge

and re-emerge unpredictably through history, challenging a simplistic, linear and unidirectional notion of time.

As Lotman writes in the unpublished essay *Monostructures and Binariness* (1991):

Future can awaken such latent forces in the past, of which the historian and politician, hypnotized by the present, do not even suspect. Therefore, the history that recreates the past, fortunately for historians, does not lose its informative value. It is as unpredictable as the future.

The path of any culture is completely alien to determinism because texts from the past, like unpredictable outbursts, can literally *explode* and profoundly change cultural identity, moving toward its centre (for further discussion see Gherlone 2022a and 2022b).

It is important to remember that, when reflecting on the problem of time, Lotman has in mind first and foremost Russian history. Having gone through a process of forced Europeanization and imported modernization in the eighteenth century, Russia had to traumatically “adapt” its cultural self-descriptions of history to the end-oriented model: a model that, by founding its worldview on the idea of destiny, final victory, ultimate goal, necessary progress, etc., excludes creativity and randomness from people’s lives, since the path has to end “exactly how it was supposed to end” (Lotman 2019[1992], p. 194).

3. The decolonial turn in Walter Mignolo’s perspective

The Lotmanian view of history could be extremely productive when reflecting on a concept that is attracting growing interest in the humanities, namely, the so-called “decolonial turn”. Under this term coexist a variety and diversity of voices coming mainly from Latin America⁽¹³⁾, whose richness, however, for reasons of space, cannot be addressed exhaustively

(13) For an introductory reading see Quijano and Ennis (2000), Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel (2007), Mignolo (2000), Maldonado-Torres (2007, 2008, 2011 and 2020). For a critical account on the decolonial turn see also the recent article by Claudia Zapata (2018).

here. In the present paper, we will focus on the works by Argentinean scholar Walter Mignolo. Son of Italian migrants and transplanted in the United States after his doctoral education in France with Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, Mignolo is one of the most important representatives of the collective “Modernity/Coloniality”⁽¹⁴⁾. Also, due to his semiotics background, he came often into contact with the ideas of Lotman — in the first phase of his intellectual trajectory, devoted to literary theory, and in the second phase, focused on historiographical discourse (see Maldonado-Torres 2009, pp. 986–988), he refers in fact explicitly to Russian scholar⁽¹⁵⁾.

For the present discussion, we will focus on the third phase of Mignolo’s intellectual trajectory, developed in the last two decades under the aegis of “decolonial theory” (Mignolo 2000, 2010a, 2010b, 2021; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Although with these publications Mignolo intends to move away, to a certain extent, from his semiotic roots, we will try to show instead how he finds a new convergence with the Lotman of the later works, in the critique of the idea of epistemological universalism (what Mignolo calls “epistemic colonization”) and in the restlessness of thinking plurally about diversity (through what he calls “decolonizing textuality”).

According to Mignolo, colonialism is, first of all, a form of thought and praxis centred on a universal story, i.e., the myth of modernity as narrated by the West (Mignolo 2021, p. x)⁽¹⁶⁾. Western philosophy of history is seen as an epistemological “stratagem” through which a certain worldview has been propagated. Through a precise narrativization of time, Western *Weltanschauung* has been employed to phagocytize and encapsulate within a premade hierarchy everything that represented a colonizable form of knowledge and life (i.e., seen as inferior, undeveloped, primitive), by *naturalizing* such a hierarchization. The West ended up trickling down, “framing subjectivities, education,

(14) This union of terms means at the same time a foundational concept and a framework for rethinking and reinterpreting reality, a programmatic horizon of research, a network of inter-academic, interdisciplinary, and intercultural relations.

(15) Mignolo is especially fascinated by Lotman’s theories on the role of text and textuality *in* and *for* culture and on the modelling performativity of semiotic systems, as “feeders” of different worldviews (*cosmovisiones*) (see Mignolo 1978; 1982, p. 60; 1992, p. 13; 1995, p. 22).

(16) This belief emerged in the 1980s after studying the relationship between literature, chronicle and history (Mignolo 1981 and 1982) and discovering that knowledge (*el saber*) does not necessarily go through alphabetical writing and the Grecolatin tradition (Hill Boone and Mignolo 1994).

ways of eating, health, and destroy[ing] conviviality” while its *ontology of history* “continues to assert its universality” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 108). As some members of the decolonial movement pointed out⁽¹⁷⁾, even in the decentralized and reticular world of the digital sphere, where knowledge appears democratized and distributed, there are meshes of power (mainly dominated by algorithms and artificial intelligence) that continue to reproduce ancient asymmetries of race, class, and gender — asymmetries that have an impact at cognitive, bodily, emotional, etc. level.

Therefore, the word “decolonial” refers to the conscious act of delinking from the Western epistemology, which implies “*an initial detachment [desprendimiento] from the rhetoric of modernity in which models of thought are legitimized and become equivalent to the very organization of societies and their historical events*” (Mignolo 2010a, p. 15, Author’s italics, our transl.). These “models of thought” are inextricably connected with the interpretation of time and its transformation into a precise discursive apparatus, centred on three core values: salvation, progress, development. These models are seen as coercively exportable since, in the Western world, as partially already said, “[i]t was assumed that the rest of the planet was going through a similar unfolding of history in the inexorable march toward modernity, and that at some point it would go through the same periodization as Europe” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, pp. 118–119).

A first parallel can be drawn here with Lotman who, as we have already seen, criticized all those visions of the historical process that tried to show that the end of humanity’s journey would be an ascending, universal and homogenizing climb towards ever greater levels of perfectibility — a perfection embodied by Western culture. In this linear–evolutionary model, according to the Russian semiotician, history and the utopia of progress became equivalent: peoples, as we read in the essay *Clio at the Crossroads*, “were presented as pupils attempting to solve one and the same problem. Some solved it in a way very close to the ideal algorithm, while others made mistakes; some found themselves in elementary school, while other advanced far ahead” (Lotman 2019 [1988], p. 179).

In other words, it is a model that completely banishes the randomness of life (with its daily decision–making under conditions of high

(17) We particularly recommend Mohamed, Png and Isaac (2020).

uncertainty, which implies creative, inventive, sometimes apparently illogical semiotic acts), imposing the right/wrong, rational/irrational, universal/particular binarism. History — the Russian semiotician stresses in the line of Pushkin — is the combination of logic and Providence (understood as *slučajnost'*, i.e., the chance, the accidental). It is not an algebra: if history were an “it could not have been otherwise”, the historian would be as an astronomer who predicts a future certain and set in stone (Lotman 2019 [1988], p. 182).

Furthermore, both in Mignolo and Lotman this fundamental philosophical and historiographical critique is seen as the starting point for a new form of thought and life.

Since their goal is to rediscover and give new centrality to the *non-European peripheral otherness* through a systematic re-examination of the modern concept of history, the act of rediscovering and telling *other stories* acquires a fundamental centrality. Thus, the second point of convergence between Lotman and Mignolo lies in their common belief that the movement of “shifting away” from the totalizing claims of Western modernity passes by way of the liberating force of alternative accounts when “telling” the events. Both in Lotman’s and Mignolo’s perspectives, we find the idea that culture is pervaded by “central” — resilient and normative — narratives that act as discursive–interpretative patterns and shape the individual and collective identity and memory. This “centre” is a set of theories, ideas, methods, practices and textually expressed procedures fashioning the cultural self–description (or self–representation). In the case of the Western culture, such modelling would have a centrifugal action, affecting the *other cultural alterities*, under the aegis of the “unique totality”.

These discursive–interpretative patterns covertly feed people’s way of seeing, knowing and perceiving reality. Furthermore, they not only give meaning to the past but also *reproduce* it continuously. According to Lotman (1991), in order to *recreate* [*vossozdat'*] the past but, at the same time, allowing for novelty (or informative capacity) to break free, it is necessary to come into contact with those forces that lie dormant in culture. In the Russian scholar’s case, such forces are the *alien texts and languages* which allow us to defamiliarize from our usual discourses and ossified

meanings⁽¹⁸⁾. To do this, as Lotman emphasizes in several late writings⁽¹⁹⁾, it is necessary to bring to light the untold stories, the marginalized events and the invisible figures of history, trying to reconstruct the untaken paths. This is what allows the peripheral or dismissed memory, apparently dead, to re-emerge in all its vitality and actuality, and to approach the centre of culture.

Similarly, Mignolo appeals to a transformative action through *textuality*, intending to unearth “energies, knowledges and beliefs and praxis of living that were never destroyed” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 125). This means to start telling and circulating alternative stories, in the form of new terms, new conversations, new ways of living. It is not by chance that the Argentinian scholar, as other exponents of the decolonial movement, emphasizes the importance of rediscovering myths, indigenous learnings and ancestral forms of knowledge, for a long time considered — as we have seen — naïve premodern understandings of reality⁽²⁰⁾.

In both authors, the reawakening of forgotten histories does not possess only a scholarly value, but also a revolutionary and transformative potential. Even in Lotman, where the ethical–political themes kept more to the background, rediscovering the latent forces of history meant liberating an untapped and explosive reservoir of resistance to assimilation and potential for cultural and political change (on the topic see Restaneo 2022).

4. In place of a conclusion

The present paper should be considered as the very beginning of an attempt to build an interdisciplinary dialogue between cultural semiotics and decoloniality, a step that we took by pointing at some lines of

(18) This idea was already suggested by Formalists in the literary field with the notions of devices (*priëm*) and estrangement or defamiliarization (*ostranenie*).

(19) An excellent collection of these writings can be found in Lotman (2019), edited by Marek Tamm.

(20) What follows is the promotion of a *forma mentis* (investing education, academia, politics, economics, aesthetics, etc.) based on the idea of “pluriversality”: a space of co-existence, relationality and conviviality among all humans and other life forms “in which everyone would participate instead of ‘being participated’” (Mignolo 2021, p. 223). In this perspective, “[d]ecoloniality promotes pluriversality as a universal option – which means that what ‘should be’ universal is in fact pluriversal, and not a single totality”, being intrinsically and constitutively heterogeneous (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 147).

convergence between two of the most important representatives of those disciplines: Ju. Lotman and W. Mignolo.

What we wish to do in the conclusions is to point at the next steps that we aim to take in continuing to build the dialogue.

The first step will be to broaden the perspectives, including more and more diverse voices from cultural semiotics and decoloniality. This work should also include a historical reconstruction of some key decolonial concepts, as we already did in part on the cultural semiotics side in the present article.

The second step will be to reflect on the differences between the cultural semiotics perspective and decolonial theory: for example, we do not see a complete overlap between the “pluriversal” ideal of decoloniality and the “multi-perspectivist” epistemology, which makes Lotman’s critique of European culture much less totalizing. There is also a radical difference in their understanding of the category “culture–nature” which, for space reasons, we did not address⁽²¹⁾.

The final goal would be to create a new interdisciplinary methodological approach that could allow initiating a new research enterprise, aimed at rediscovering forgotten histories and untold stories.

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(21) To briefly touch upon this topic, we can say that, according to Lotman “the energy of Thought” (1990, p. 150) generates a hiatus (i.e., culture) between human beings and nature, without necessarily generating a dominant–dominated relationship. Instead, according to decolonial thinkers, the mechanisms that underlie the binary opposition of culture–nature are the same that create the link between (anthropocentric Western) culture and mechanisms of “sub–alterity”.

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THE MORPHOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND THE SEMIOSPHERE. INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE WORK OF MICHAEL FREEDEN AND THAT OF JURI LOTMAN

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: L'approccio morfologico delle ideologie politiche e la semiosfera. Intersezioni tra il lavoro di Michael Freeden e quello di Juri Lotman

ABSTRACT: This article shows the theoretical and conceptual closeness between one of the most recent conceptions of ideology (Michael Freeden's morphological account) and Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics (namely, his concept of 'semiosphere'). The thesis put forward in the article is that, in considering language, semantics and meaning-making as constitutive features of any ideological formation, the morphological account has come closer to semiotics and, particularly, to Lotman's conception of the semiosphere as a delimited space with boundaries, with core and peripheral elements, where semiosis is possible.

KEYWORDS: ideology; semiosphere; political theory; semiotics; morphology

1. Introduction

Over the past two centuries, the concept of ideology has given political theorists, scientists and other scholars working in the social and human sciences abundant material for discussion. Since its origins in the work of Antoine Destutt de Tracy but, most especially, thanks to the elaborations

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of Karl Marx in the nineteenth century, ‘ideology’ became a key category to deal with human experience, both inside and outside the political field. Normally, the concept has been used by scholars and analysts who aim at conducting a critique of asymmetric and usually invisible power relations, both from a politico-philosophical and normally Left-wing emancipatory perspective (Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, Žižek), and from scholars with a particular interest in studying language and discourse, even if these contributions are not free of political motivation (Pêcheux, Foucault, Laclau & Mouffe). Even semioticians such as Rossi Landi (1972), Eco (1964; 1976), Verón (1978; 1988) and Nöth (2004) have contributed to the debate, albeit these contributions are limited to a short period of time comprising only three decades – from the 1950s to the 1970s – after which the concept was left aside (Escudero Chauvel 2016a; 2016b; Bianchi, 2016). As such, “ideology” is a concept with a rich and dynamic history, whose normative load has not been helpful in clarifying what it might refer to.

In the 1990s, Michael Freedon (1996; 2003; 2013) introduced into the political debate a conception of ideology that is strongly based in linguistic – and, as will be argued here, semiotic – grounds. This account is known as the “morphological” account of ideology and constitutes the starting point of many approaches to ideological issues (cfr. Heywood 2021; Mudde 2004). For semiotics, the morphological account is interesting for a number of reasons. To begin with, it originates in some developments within research areas (hermeneutics, cultural anthropology) and by scholars (Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur) that give meaning a central role in explaining social phenomena. Moreover, it characterizes ideologies by employing analogies that are comprehensible to scholars working in the field of discourse studies, including the semiotic tradition. Finally, it is significantly close to Juri Lotman’s (1990; 2005) thesis regarding how meaning works within the semiosphere.

Over the last years, semioticians have made efforts to bridge semiotics and political theory. Selg and Ventsel (2020) have examined Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony through the lenses of Lotman’s cultural semiotics. Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017) have used Lotman’s cultural semiotics to make sense of politics in the post-Soviet era. Recent volumes of semiotic journals such as *DeSignis* (2020) and *Punctum* (2020) revolve around political communication and discourse. This article is in line with

those efforts: its goal is to present and discuss the theoretical closeness between Freeden's morphological account of ideology and Lotman's concept of the semiosphere.⁽²⁾ In carrying out this task, the article aims at serving a double purpose. On the one hand, it should serve as a contribution from semiotics to political science and theory with regards to how meaning-making works, and to how ideologies could be approached from a semiotic perspective – that is, looking at signification and meaning-making (Verón 1988). This would be a valuable contribution for the “morphological” account. On the other hand, it aims at contributing to the ongoing *denormativization* of the concept of ideology within political science by strengthening a more descriptive account on how to approach these phenomena of a discursive, cognitive, and ideational nature.

In what follows, the first section presents a brief roadmap of the history of the concept of ideology. The second section focuses on Freeden's morphological account of ideology, which in the third section is discussed from the perspective of Lotman's semiotics, particularly using his concept of the semiosphere. The fourth and final section illustrates the theoretical discussion with the case of the debate on what populism is.

2. Ideology: a brief historical roadmap

Theorists of ideology agree in that ideology's birth as a concept is linked to post-revolutionary France. Specifically, Antoine Destutt de Tracy is identified as its father (Knight 2006; Heywood 2021; Eagleton 1991; Freeden 2003). Based on a rationalist impulse stemming from Enlightenment, he believed that ideology would become a science that could “uncover the origins of ideas objectively” and, eventually, “come to be recognized as the queen of the sciences” (Heywood 2021, p. 3). As James Alexander (2015) argues, ideology is a *modern* phenomenon, even if one might find ideologies before the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, it was Karl Marx who gave the concept the nuances that made it a key political term. In *The German Ideology*, Marx dealt with

(2) The theoretical nature of Lotman's cultural semiotics and Freeden's morphological encompasses substantially more than just the concept of the semiosphere. Nevertheless, due to the limited extension of the article, only the semiosphere will be discussed in these pages.

ideology in a sense that lasts even nowadays and that is inherently critical: he conceived of ideology a set of ideas related to power and to class structures, and that has a component of delusion (the expression “false consciousness” goes in this direction). As Heywood (2021, p. 3) argues, according to Marx ideology “perpetrates a false or mistaken view of the world.” During the twentieth century, left-wing critical philosophers like Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser further developed the concept following Marx’s seminal work, always keeping the original underlying normative premise: ideology is not good and, hence, needs to be *unmasked* and *countered* (Leopold 2013). More recently, philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek (cf. 1991) have taken this argument further.

In semiotics, ideology has been an object of interest since the “pre-scientific” moments of the discipline, which date from the middle of the twentieth century. Specifically, semioticians interested in discourse and meaning-making have tried to unveil how ideology is “hidden” in mass culture and its products (Escudero Chauvel 2016a; 2016b; Bianchi 2016). In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1957) analyzed a vast group of elements pertaining to French mass culture to show how the values of the bourgeoisie are contained in these products and presented as if they were natural. In *Apocalittici e integrati*, Umberto Eco (1964) aimed at unveiling how mass culture products (Steve Canyon, Superman, Charlie Brown) convey specific ideological elements that are not visible in a first reading. In “Semiosis de l’ideologie et du pouvoir”, Eliseo Verón (1978, p. 9) argued that “every social phenomenon can be ‘read’ in relation to the ideological and to power.” Normally, semioticians also assumed ideology to be something that has to be “unmasked,” even if they did not necessarily commit to Marxist premises.

Also interested in language and discursive practices, more recent trends in discourse analysis stemming from a linguistic perspective and influenced by the works of Michel Pêcheux and Michel Foucault started paying attention to how language can be an instrument of ideology. It is worth mentioning the work of Norman Fairclough (1989; 1992), Teun van Dijk (1998), Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1993), and other Critical Discourse Analysts (Wodak and Meyer 2001), just to mention a few scholars interested in the topic. These three broad fields of research – political theory, semiotics and (critical) discourse analysis – reflect in a

clear manner what Geertz (1973) had in mind when he wrote that “it is one of the minor ironies of modern intellectual history that the term ‘ideology’ has itself become thoroughly ideologized.”

In contrast to these value-loaded and critical accounts, in political theory with scientific pretensions and, hence, with an essentially *descriptive* nature, the reference point when dealing with ideology is usually Karl Mannheim (Breiner 2013; Knight 2006; Eagleton 1991; Freeden 2003). Mannheim tried to “clean” the concept of its negative connotations and, in *Ideology and Utopia*, defined “ideology” as thought based in the past, by contrasting it with utopias, of which he conceived of as future-oriented thinking (Breiner 2013; Tower Sargent 2013). Since the decade of 1960s, after the declared “end of ideology” (Knight 2006), the concept of ideology re-emerged with strength within political science, usually deprived of the negative Marxist and post-Marxist connotations. Nowadays, from this more neutral and descriptive perspective, following Heywood (2021, p. 7), an ideology can be conceived of, in general terms, as “a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power.”

Therefore, even if researchers still identify a critique of ideology as a central purpose of the social sciences and humanities, the study of political ideologies does not necessarily imply doing critical theory—it can also consist in “analyzing the content of political thought” (Heywood 2021, p. 2). In other words: when scholars approach political ideologies the purpose is not only to dismantle them based on normative grounds; a descriptive approach is also possible. Here, Freeden’s morphological account of ideology is an innovative proposal to study these discursive articulations that mediate in how individuals make sense of the social realm.

3. Freeden’s morphological account of ideology

As a representative of the non-normative, description-oriented study of ideologies, Michael Freeden introduced his “morphological” approach in a 1996 book entitled *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. The book was followed by the 2001 edited volume *Reassessing*

Political Ideologies: The Durability of Dissent; a contribution in 2003 to Oxford University Press' 'Very Short Introductions' series; and a chapter in the 2013 *Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, co-edited by him. In that chapter, Freedon (2013, p. 148) argues that the morphological approach is

a general method of investigating and decoding the internal structure of ideologies, highlighting the central role of that structure in fashioning the semantic fields of all ideologies, and offering a revealing insight into the ways ideologies consequently construct the political and navigate through it.

In the book *Ideology. A Very Short Introduction*, Freedon (2003) introduces the concept of ideology in a rather standard way. He starts by referring to Destutt de Tracy as "the initial coiner of the term 'ideology'" (2003, p. 4) and moves on to discuss "the Marxist takeover" (2003, pp. 5-11). Subsequently, Freedon introduces Mannheim's (2003: 12-19), Gramsci's (2003, pp. 19-25) and Althusser's (2003, pp- 25-30) accounts. The more systematic and less historical approach to ideology starts in the chapter 'Ideology at the crossroads of theory': it is here that, in the subchapter 'Ideology as symbol' (2003, pp. 40-42), Freedon refers to aspects of a discursive nature when he discusses the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

According to Freedon (2003, p. 41), Geertz's semiotic approach to culture constitutes a valuable input into the discussion of ideologies, as it was he who stressed that ideologies are "metaphors that carried social meaning," or, in other words, that they are "multilayered symbols of reality that brought together complex ideas" (ibid). Using the input of Geertz's interpretative cultural anthropology, Freedon (2003, p. 42) concludes that "ideologies are symbolic devices that order social space." This is a move that puts the conception of ideology in a position that begs for a semiotic outlook. How do these symbolic devices work? By employing which semiotic resources are they constructed? How and by whom are they constructed? Is meaning contained in them, or is it an effect produced by elements of a discursive/textual nature? In the chapter entitled 'The struggle over political language', Freedon (2003, pp. 45-66) makes a

theoretical move that, even if he might not be aware of it, overlaps with semiotic's research agenda. It is also here that he introduces his morphological account.

In that chapter, Freeden discusses the role of language, meaning and semantics in studying the political domain. Curiously, though, the author defines "semantics" *en passant* as "the study of meaning" (2003, p. 45) and points out that, at some point during the late twentieth century, students of ideology discovered that it was "profitable to treat ideologies as linguistic and semantic products" (2003, p. 46). He refers to Paul Ricoeur and the idea of a "surplus of meaning" (2003, pp. 46-48), and proceeds to introduce the morphological account. As it can be seen, meaning-making is hovering over the debate.

According to this language-oriented account, "just as sentences contain words in a particular pattern of interdependence, a pattern that enables us to make sense of the words, so it is with ideologies" (Freeden 2003, p. 51). Therefore, and in contrast to the traditional approaches to ideology (including those within semiotics), this is a *descriptive* approach that sees "the internal structure of ideologies as a vital aspect of their analysis" (Freeden 2003, p. 51). For Freeden, political ideologies relate and assemble in particular patterns words which refer to *political concepts*. As illustrative examples, while liberalism prioritizes liberty and relates it with individuality, rationality and progress; socialism prioritizes equality, group solidarity and labour. According to Freeden (2003, p. 51), historically "these fundamental concepts controlled the admission of other concepts" into each of these ideologies.

This is how Freeden (2003, p. 52) arrives at a provisional definition of "ideology" as "a wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes meaning to a range of mutually defining political concepts." To this definition, he will later add that these meanings are *decontested* (Freeden 2003, p. 54). To illustrate the morphological account, the author employs the image of a set of modular units of furniture, which can be organized and assembled in different ways. Depending on how one assembles the modular furniture, a different room will be created, even if one uses the very same pieces of furniture, albeit displayed in different spaces of the room. Freeden's (2003, p. 52) thesis is that this explains why "identical political concepts can serve as the building blocks of an entire series of disparate

ideologies, for the same unit (concept) may have a different role (or meaning) in two separate rooms (or ideologies).” Assuming, as the author does, that “on their own, political concepts are too vague and too vacuous to carry intelligible meaning,” the conclusion is that “an ideology specifies the meanings of the political concepts it contains by assembling them in a pattern that links them together with other specific concepts” (Freeden 2003, p. 54).

Subsequently, Freeden (2003, pp. 60-66) introduces what he calls “the four Ps of ideology”: proximity, priority, permeability, and proportionality. “Proximity” refers to the fact that “political concepts make no sense on their own,” and that “they can only be understood when examined within a particular idea-environment of surrounding concepts” (Freeden 2003, p. 61). “Priority” refers to the placement of political concepts in the modular structure: “the meaning of every political concept in an ideology [...] is dependent on which concepts [...] are allocated core significance and which are relegated to the periphery of the ideology” (ibid). As an example, Freeden (2003, p. 61) refers to private property, a concept that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “migrated within liberal ideology from a core position in the liberal room to a more marginal one.” “Permeability” refers to the fact that ideologies are not mutually exclusive, but that they rather “intersect with one another at multiple points of contact” (Freeden 2003, p. 63). To this, he adds that “ideologies are not hermetically sealed: they have porous boundaries and will frequently occupy overlapping space” (Freeden 2003, p. 64). Finally, “proportionality” refers to “the relative space within each ideology allotted to a particular theme, or cluster of concepts” (Freeden 2003, p. 64). This is, in a nutshell, Freeden’s morphological account of ideologies.

4. Political ideologies through the lenses of Lotman’s semiotics

The reader familiar with semiotic theory – and, particularly, with Juri Lotman’s work – will have probably already identified some theoretical aspects in which Freeden’s account of ideology is close to Lotman’s understanding of how meaning works. Specifically, Lotman’s notion of the *semiosphere* seems to be a tool that shares multiple features with those

that Freeden attributes to ideologies. Therefore, the question whether ideologies can be conceptualized through the lenses of the semiosphere seems legitimate.

Lotman's (1990; 2005) category of "semiosphere", which reflects that of "biosphere" used when dealing with the natural world, has an abstract character, although it refers to space (and not in a metaphorical sense). As the author argues, a semiosphere is "a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space," and adds that "only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realized" (Lotman 2005, p. 207). Subsequently, Lotman (2005, p. 208) writes that "the semiotic universe may be regarded as the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other. In this case, all structures will look as if they are constructed out of individual bricks" (Lotman 2005, p. 208).

The concept of the semiosphere works as an analytical category to delimit spaces within which meaning is possible. According to Lotman (2005, p. 208), "the semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist." The distinction between an *inside* and an *outside*, which is characteristic of the semiosphere, leads to a series of defining features. First, there is a *boundary* between the semiosphere and its outside (Volkova Américo 2017). Second, elements are placed within the semiosphere following a *hierarchy* – i.e., there is a core and there are peripheral elements. Third, external elements might enter the semiosphere, but in doing so, they need to be *translated* into the semiotic system that characterizes the semiosphere in question. Finally, semiospheres are characterized by their internal semiotic *irregularity* (Lotman 2005). As a consequence of these principles, "the semiosphere has a 'semiotic personality' and combines within this property of personality both the empirically indisputable and intuitive manifestation of the concept and the difficulty of its formal definition" (Lotman 2005, p. 209).

Based on this characterization, if readers construct a mental image of the semiosphere as a circle containing another inner circle (i.e., the core) and with a clearly marked surrounding line, then they will probably not be surprised when faced with Figure 1. This image, which matches that exact mental image (even if it includes a second inner circle), is Heywood's (2001) visual representation of Freeden's conception of

ideologies. As it can be seen, both accounts seem to share a number of topological features. Therefore, if one assumes the methodological premise according to which the graphic representation of a concept reflects its internal structure, the similarities between Freeden's and Lotman's representations of their respective concepts are evident. This is even more the case if one takes into account that the two authors insist in the spatial dimension of their proposals.

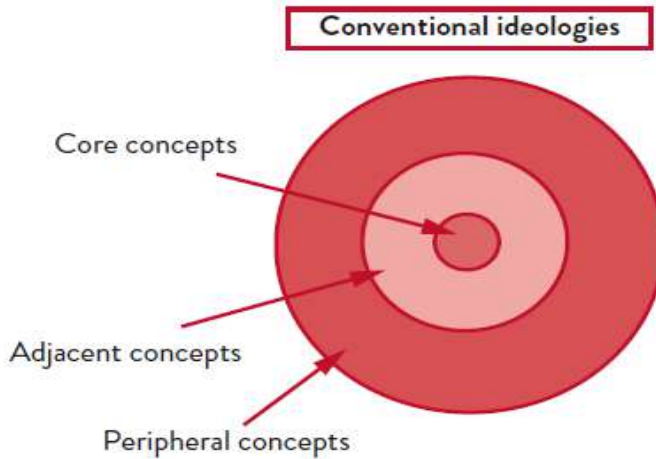


Figure 1. The structure of ideologies. Source: Heywood (2021, p. 10).

When introducing the feature of *priority* – one of the “four Ps” of ideologies – Freeden (2003) argues that it refers to a *ranking* of concepts that gives place to *specific internal structures*. In these rankings, the author argues, there is always a core, which can consist of one or more concepts: according to Freeden (2003, p. 61), “all ideologies have cores,” and these cores constitute “the ineliminable key concepts that it is deemed to have in actual political usage” (ibid). As an example, Freeden (2003, p. 62) argues that “what we have come to call liberalism would no longer be liberalism if it did not place liberty and progress at the core of its concerns.” Therefore, it seems to be the case that the core concepts, i.e., those that are placed at the very heart of a given ideology, *define the very identity* of that particular ideology, just as the core elements of a semiosphere define

how meaning and *semiosis* occur within that given semiosphere, giving it a distinctive identity.

According to Freedén, *adjacent* and *peripheral* concepts surround the core of a political ideology. While the former “flesh out the core” and “restrict its capacity for multiple interpretations and pull it in a more defined direction,” the latter “are more specific and detailed” and, while “most are still significant to the central meanings carried by the ideology, [...] some may be marginal” (Freedén 2003, p. 62). This duality of elements that are not core explains the inclusion of the second inner circle in Heywood’s image (Figure 1). Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that there are more elements that are not part of the core, the underlying logic seems to be the same: there are some elements (concepts) that are more relevant than others and, depending on that hierarchy or ranking, the identity that the specific ideology will have.

Regarding the placement of concepts in core, adjacent or peripheral positions, Freedén (2003, p. 63) argues for the possibility of *mobility*: as he writes, “occasionally, [...] changes at the periphery may work through back to the core,” as in the case of the equal rights of women, which was a peripheral political concept in the nineteenth century liberalism, but became central “to the core liberal concepts of individuality and human rationality.” Moreover, nowadays we can observe how this political concept has become the core of a new ideology – feminism (Moreno Barreneche 2022). Freedén’s (2003, p. 63) conclusion is that “ideological morphology is neither fixed nor shapeless; it is fluid.” This is a conclusion that intersects with Lotman’s dynamic conception of the semiosphere as a space in which new elements might enter (and leave) and redefine its internal structure, altering in doing so its identity.

In spite of the flexibility of the semiosphere, Lotman (1990, p. 128) argues that “the highest form and final act of a semiotic system’s structural organization is when it describes itself.” This is the stage of self-description, which leads to a semiotic system having “greater structural organization” and that is “a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere.” It could be argued that this is the process undergone over the past decades and centuries by the political ideologies that we identify nowadays – full ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, conservatism, but also thin-centered ideologies such as environmentalism,

nationalism and others: each of them is defined by a particular conceptual structure that serves as the norm to make sense of the social space by classifying attitudes, policy measures and other political practices as pertaining to a particular ideology.

5. The challenges of defining populism: from ideological to ideational

The research field of populism studies serves to illustrate the theoretical argument presented in these pages. Since the first theoretical approaches to populism (Ionescu and Gellner 1969), this political phenomenon has been conceived as an ideology. In 2004, political scientist Cas Mudde (2004) defined populism using Freedden's conceptual framework as a "thin-centered" ideology that sees society as divided in two groups – the people and the elites – and that normatively conceives of political legitimacy through the lenses of "the people's" general will. However, as years passed by and populism mutated into different manifestations, Mudde (2017) seems to have adjusted his conception in a fashion that reflects the argument presented in these pages: instead of insisting in that populism is an ideology, he refers to an *ideational* approach to ideologies, i.e., one that looks at ideas and how these have an impact in the political (Hawkins et al. 2019).

Populism can be conceived of as a political ideology in the sense that it proposes a signifying system in which the alleged will of "the people" – whatever this label might refer to – is placed in the core. Depending on the political context where populism occurs, other political concepts (nationalism, nativism, socialism, environmentalism) will be included in the system in core, adjacent or peripheral positions, giving place to different types of populism (right-wing and left-wing are only two examples). Nevertheless, if it makes sense to speak of populism as a distinctive political phenomenon it is because an underlying abstract structure can be identified as common to the various populist parties, actors, and movements around the world (Moreno Barreneche 2023).

Thanks to the influence of Freedden's morphological account, political scientists like Mudde seem to have realized that political ideologies are articulated and relatively stable discursive constructs that establish

relations between political concepts and that fulfill specific cognitive functions. Within this framework, speaking of “the ideological” is equivalent to speaking of “the ideational”, and speaking of “the ideational” is equivalent to speaking of “the discursive” and “the semiotic”: ideologies are semiotic constructs that exist in the realm of ideas, discourses and social imaginaries, that relate and place following a hierarchy specific concepts that serve the purpose of making sense of the social realm.

6. Conclusions

As suggested in a previous section, there are a number of commonalities between Freedén’s morphological account of political ideologies and Lotman’s concept of the semiosphere. This does not mean, however, that ideologies are semiospheres or that a semiosphere is an ideology. Rather, the commonality of the approaches evidences the salience of what could be conceived as a sort of grammar of signifying systems where meaning is possible. In the case of political ideologies, these are relatively stable discursive articulations of meaning that reflect the dynamics of a semiosphere, just as identities and other devices of a discursive and ideational nature that fulfill a cognitive function do.

Ideologies are discursive entities that pertain to the cultural domain and, as such, can be an object of study for semiotics—from a normative perspective, but also descriptively, with the aim of understanding their internal structure and what is it that they axiomatize. These two projects are compatible, but not equivalent: descriptive semioticians and political scientists will be interested in mapping ideologies, grasping them and describing them extensively and comparatively, while normative semioticians and political theorists will challenge and try to dismantle them. In either case, researchers will be faced to the task of identifying an ideology’s internal structure (its grammar) and the specific articulations between core, adjacent and peripheral concepts that it proposes and that define it.

In this sense, Freedén’s morphological account is more than welcome by semioticians dealing with the political. Individuals act in the world guided by meaning, as argued by Geertz (1973). The anthropologist is explicitly

mentioned by Freeden when introducing his morphological account—ideology and ideologies reflect Geertz’s semiotic account of culture as an ensemble of texts that are interpreted and meaningful to social actors. In other words, political ideologies have a constitutive discursive dimension that is inescapable for any serious and rigorous social study (Verón 1988).

Therefore, illuminating the semiotic, discursive and ideational nature of political ideologies by examining their morphology and conceptual structure can be fruitful in clarifying conceptual debates guided, for example, by an opposition between “ideology” and “discourse,” such as in the case of populism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As argued in the previous section, researchers seem to have noticed that dealing with ideas and discourses implies seeing two sides of a coin. Semiotics can certainly contribute in clarifying the nature and dynamics of the political realm by examining how meaning-making takes place in this discursive field of social life. Hopefully this article has been a step in that direction by introducing an account of political ideologies that will provide fellow semioticians with a possible working method.

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IL CONFINE COME DISPOSITIVO SEMIOTICO ESSENZIALE PER LA COSTRUZIONE DELL'ESPERIENZA UMANA. DALLA SEMIOTICA DI LOTMAN ALLA PSICOANALISI

DI RAFFAELE DE LUCA PICIONE⁽¹⁾

ENGLISH TITLE: The border as an essential semiotic device for the construction of human experience. From Lotman's semiotics to psychoanalysis.

ABSTRACT: The present work aims to provide the outline of a possible dialogue on the topic of the border between Lotman's semiotics and psychoanalysis (both Freudian and post-Freudian). The border is presented as a semiotic device of absolute relevance for the construction of experience, the relationship between identity and otherness, the processes of sensemaking, in a dynamic, temporal and relational perspective. Starting from the presentation of Lotman's pivotal notions of semiosphere and border (connected to ones of translation, dialogue, structural irregularity and difference with otherness), the author then examines how Freud and other psychoanalysts (Federn, Anzieu, Bion, Winnicott, Kaës) developed the idea of border in terms of psychic surface, contact barrier, psychic skin, interface, containment, transitionality, limit and mediation. Finally, the author discusses the theoretical and conceptual convergences between Lotman's semiotics and psychoanalysis, by hoping for the opening of a fruitful dialogic space.

KEYWORDS: border; contact barrier; translation; containment; transitionality

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1. Introduzione

L'esperienza umana si contraddistingue per un'incessante opera soggettiva e collettiva di costruzione del significato. La nozione di *confine* assume un'utilità e importanza fondativa in quanto i processi di organizzazione e trasformazione del senso possono essere pensati come processi dinamici che avvengono lungo le aree liminali⁽²⁾ dei confini (Lotman 1985, 1993; sul tema vedasi De Luca Picione e Valsiner 2017; Gherlone 2014; Sedda 2006). Yair Neuman (2003) argomenta che il processo di costruzione del significato in tutti i sistemi viventi è primariamente un fenomeno di confine implicante una struttura gerarchica-ricorsiva. Difatti ogni sistema semiotico è costantemente impegnato in un processo di significazione e interpretazione a partire dalla propria differenziazione con l'esterno e con l'altro da sé. Per realizzare tale differenziazione sono necessari i confini. Questa prospettiva è abbastanza generale da poter essere riferita a qualsiasi sistema semiotico, da quelli biologici (si pensi alla membrana della cellula o alla pelle di un corpo vivente), ai confini intra-inter-psichici di un individuo, sino ai confini dei sistemi sociali, e dei sistemi culturali. Lotman sostiene che ciò che consente ad una struttura di essere pensante è un processo dialogico con l'esterno in cui i passaggi tra una parte e l'altra sono primariamente processi di traduzione e di interpretazione realizzati proprio mediante i confini (Lotman 1985; sul tema vedasi Gramigna e Salupere 2017; De Luca Picione 2020a; Gherlone 2014; Leone 2015).

Nel campo della semiotica, Lotman ha non solo riconosciuto la rilevanza della funzione dei confini nei processi di cambiamento e di stabilizzazione, ma ha sviluppato una serie di nozioni concettuali e teoriche la cui importanza rimane indiscutibile. Tuttavia è sorprendente rilevare come tale contributo sia stato trascurato completamente dalla psicoanalisi, sebbene si ritrovi sin dalle origini stesse della psicoanalisi freudiana e nei suoi

(2) Nella prospettiva dell'antropologia culturale di Victor Turner, l'area liminale è uno spazio di molteplici possibilità virtuali e di opportunità potenziali. Attraverso la libera e creativa ricombinazione di elementi familiari con elementi non-familiari, il processo liminale consente lo sviluppo psichico, culturale e sociale, nonostante il rischio e il pericolo connesso alle sue caratteristiche di anti-struttura, disordine e caoticità. I rituali sono le forme simboliche e performative atte a favorire e a canalizzare l'attraversamento dello spazio liminale per raggiungere nuove configurazioni di senso tra soggetto/alterità/mondo (Turner 1967; si rimanda anche a Stenner 2017; De Luca Picione, 2021a; De Luca Picione e Valsiner 2017).

sviluppi post-freudiani una costante e profonda attenzione alla nozione di confine, alle sue operazioni e funzioni (De Luca Picione, 2021c).

L'intento di questo lavoro è tracciare le fila di un possibile dialogo sul tema del confine tra la semiotica di Lotman e la psicoanalisi, mostrando come vi siano una serie di interessanti convergenze nel riconoscere la priorità del confine per tutti i processi di costruzione identitaria, di relazionalità, di riconoscimento dell'alterità, di sviluppo e di trasformazione. Il lavoro è organizzato a partire da una presentazione iniziale del lavoro di Lotman sui confini e sulla semiosfera, prosegue con la presentazione dell'interesse freudiano e post-freudiano sul tema del confine, si conclude con lo sforzo di rintracciare le forme di un possibile dialogo rinvenendo convergenze teoriche e implicazioni comuni tra la semiotica di Lotman e la psicoanalisi.

2. La centralità del confine nel modello semiotico della Semiosfera di Lotman

Il contributo di Jurij Lotman rimane essenziale ed ineludibile per lo sviluppo epistemologico, concettuale e metodologico della nozione di confine. Egli riconosce al confine una valenza profondamente relazionale. L'idea centrale è che i segni non sono mai in isolamento ma sono sempre immersi in un continuum semiotico, definito *semiosfera* (Lotman, 1985). La semiosfera in sé è considerata come un vero e proprio organismo di significazione, ovvero uno *spazio semiotico complessivo e delimitato* che permette di rendere significativo il singolo atto segnico (testo, frammento di linguaggio, immagine, ecc.). La semiosfera necessita di confini per le diverse operazioni che ne assicurano la stabilità e la crescita, la trasformazione e la relazionalità, la definizione identitaria e il dialogo con l'estraneità.

La polarizzazione interno/esterno resa possibile dal confine è al cuore della definizione della semiosfera, la quale è definita come "quello spazio semiotico al di fuori del quale non è possibile l'esistenza della semiosi" (Lotman 1985, p.58). Tuttavia l'autore ci avverte che il confine non deve essere "immaginato concretamente" come un'oggetto (al pari di una linea, un recinto, un fossato, un muro, etc.) ma come un operatore di "delimitazione semiotica" dal carattere astratto (Lotman 1985, p. 58).

Il confine è un dispositivo semiotico che predispone un'area di contatto con un altro spazio culturale. Questo spazio altro viene considerato come estraneo, alieno, straniero, come “non semiotico” (si pensi al forestiero o al barbaro che al di là del confine parlano una lingua incomprensibile).

Lotman afferma che un qualsiasi confine (bordo, superficie, membrana o pellicola) funziona come delimitazione della semiosfera, come limitazione alla penetrazione, come filtraggio ed elaborazione trasformativa dei materiali esterni pre-semiotici (dal punto di vista interno della semiosfera). Egli scrive:

Il confine è un meccanismo bilinguistico, che traduce le comunicazioni esterne nel linguaggio interno della semiosfera e viceversa. Solo col suo aiuto la semiosfera può così realizzare contatti con lo spazio extrasistemico o non semiotico. [...] La funzione di ogni confine e pellicola — dalla membrana della cellula viva alla biosfera [...] — e in particolare del confine della semiosfera è quella di limitare la penetrazione e filtrare e trasformare ciò che è esterno in interno. [...] A livello della semiosfera essa determina la separazione da ciò che è estraneo, la filtrazione delle comunicazioni esterne, la loro traduzione nel linguaggio della semiosfera, e inoltre la trasformazione delle non comunicazioni esterne in comunicazioni, cioè nella semiotizzazione e trasformazione in informazione di ciò che arriva dall'esterno. (Lotman 1985, pp. 60–61)

I confini permettono *processi di traduzione*, volti a codificare e ricodificare le informazioni tra un sistema semiotico l'altro. I confini sono aree di potenzialità, caratterizzate da grande instabilità e da processi di trasformazione con un velocità superiore a quella delle parti centrali (che rappresentano dei nuclei identitari) del sistema semiotico (Lotman 1985, p. 64). I confini sono spazi periferici in contatto con l'alterità, l'estraneità, il non-conosciuto: “Il valore dello spazio esterno e di quello interno non è tuttavia stabilito in partenza. Ad apparire significativo è il fatto stesso della presenza del confine” (Lotman 1985, p. 63)

Il confine è centrale per lo sviluppo della stessa semiosfera, in quanto i confini operano non solo come strutture di distinzione tra dentro e fuori ma anche come strutture di differenziazione tra le parti che costituiscono l'organismo:

La semiosfera è attraversata più volte da confini interni, che specializzano le sue parti sotto l'aspetto semiotico. La trasmissione dell'informazione attraverso questi confini, il gioco fra strutture e sottostrutture diverse, le continue «irruzioni» semiotiche delle strutture in un territorio «estraneo» generano la produzione di informazioni nuove. [...] Una caratteristica fondamentale della struttura dei meccanismi nucleari della semiosfera è il fatto che ogni parte è di per se stessa un intero dotato di una sua indipendenza strutturale. I rapporti con le altre parti sono complessi e caratterizzati da un alto grado di deautomatizzazione, e, fatto ancora più importante, ai livelli più alti acquistano il carattere di comportamento: si ha cioè la possibilità di una scelta indipendente del programma di attività. [...] Rispetto all'intero le parti, che si trovano ad un altro livello di gerarchia strutturale, hanno la proprietà dell'isomorfismo. Appaiono così nello stesso tempo parti di un intero e simili ad esso. [...] La presenza di due parti comunicativi simili e nello stesso tempo diversi, pur essendo importante, non è la sola condizione che dà origine ad un sistema dialogico. Il dialogo comporta la reciprocità nello scambio di informazioni (Lotman 1985, pp. 65-66).

È interessante notare che la semiosfera, grazie ai sistemi di differenziazioni e connessioni creati dai confini, riesce ad assicurare il suo sviluppo mediante processi di crescita e trasformazione e allo stesso tempo garantendo una certa stabilità e tenuta. L'isomorfismo come processo *super partes* di connessione, e l'irregolarità strutturale lavorano in maniera complementare e simultanea.

La stessa irregolarità viene definita da un punto di vista sia topologico (centro *versus* periferia) che temporale (lento/graduale/prevedibile *versus* veloce/catastrofico/imprevedibile). La relazione tra centro e periferia (definita anche dalle relazioni di dominio e di imposizione di codici e di testi) genera diverse dinamiche sincroniche di trasformazione (cd "movimenti in avanti"): i *movimenti continui*, basati sulla gradualità e prevedibilità, e i *movimenti discontinui*, che si basano sull'imprevedibilità e si realizzano nelle modalità dell'*esplosione* (Lotman 1993; Gherlone 2014). Definendo la divisione tra centro e periferia come una legge interna della semiosfera (Lotman 1985, p. 64), Lotman sottolinea la differenza qualitativa dei processi semiotici lungo i confini, senza trascurare però di evidenziare la loro connessione con l'intero sistema semiosferico:

Il confine ha nella semiosfera anche un'altra funzione: è la zona in cui si sviluppano i processi semiotici accelerati che sono sempre più attivi alla periferia culturale e che di lì si dirigono poi verso le strutture nucleari per sostituirle (p.62) [...] La divisione fra il centro e la periferia è una legge dell'organizzazione interna della semiosfera. [...] Le formazioni semiotiche periferiche possono essere rappresentate non come strutture chiuse (lingue), ma come loro frammenti o anche come singoli testi. Poiché sono «estranei» rispetto al sistema dato, e questi testi svolgono nel meccanismo della semiosfera la funzione di catalizzatori. Il confine con un altro testo infatti è sempre una zona in cui si ha un accrescimento delle formazioni di senso. [...] L'irregolarità strutturale dell'organizzazione interna della semiosfera è determinata soprattutto dal fatto che, essendo eterogenea per natura, essa si sviluppa con una velocità diversa nei suoi vari settori (Lotman 1985, pp. 62–65).

Le parti centrali di un sistema semiotico si trasformano solo lentamente e gradualmente, mentre lungo i confini avvengono processi esplosivi. I confini pertanto sono aree nevralgiche dei sistemi semiotici, che assorbono ed accelerano gli stimoli che provengono dalle aree periferiche, trasmettendoli alle strutture centrali. Essi tracciano un profilo di transizione che consente un equilibrio dinamico tra il mantenimento della stabilità e la possibilità di trasformazione, tra la dissoluzione entropica e lo sviluppo di nuove strutture dotate di senso (Fabbri 2010; Marsciani 2010; Traini 2013; Gherlone 2014; De Luca Picione 2017). Lotman fornisce ulteriori chiarimenti nel suo volume *La cultura e l'esplosione. Prevedibilità e imprevedibilità* (1993):

...si devono rammentare i due poli del movimento storico. Uno di essi è legato ai processi che si sviluppano con un movimento non esplosivo, graduale. Questi processi sono relativamente prevedibili. Carattere diverso hanno i processi che sorgono come risultato di esplosioni. Qui ciascuno degli eventi realizzatisi è circondato da una nube di eventi non realizzati. [...] un avvenimento casuale apre il varco all'inizio di una nuova e imprevedibile regolarità. (Lotman 1993, p. 77).

Egli ritiene che dopo le esplosioni catastrofiche di senso avvenute lungo i confini, il ritorno alla stabilità e all'equilibrio avviene mediante la

possibilità di nuove meta–descrizioni che pongono un freno alle trasformazioni culturali redigendo i canoni, ricordando le regole, ridefinendo le grammatiche e i codici dei sistemi culturali: “Una volta divenuto atto, comportamento, l’elemento imprevedibile viene dotato di significato, munito di una motivazione aggiuntiva retroattiva” (Lotman 1994, p. 37).

I confini pertanto sono a tutti gli effetti dispositivi fondamentali per qualsiasi *struttura pensante* in quanto assolvono la fondamentale e simultanea funzione di mantenimento dell’informazione (simmetria, omogeneizzazione, isomorfismo) e di nuova produzione dell’informazione (asimmetria, dinamismo, dialogo) (Gramigna e Salupere 2017). La complementarità della simmetria e dell’asimmetria si sviluppa sia in termini di simultanea azione ma anche nei termini di ciclicità e periodicità:

Alla base di tutti i processi comunicativi c’è infatti un principio invariante che li rende simili fra loro. Questo principio si fonda da un lato sulla combinazione simmetria–asimmetria, dall’altro su un avvicendamento periodico di alti e bassi nel corso di tutti i processi vitali in ogni loro forma (Lotman 1985, p. 68).

Lotman argomenta che la forma minima di integrazione tra le due funzioni è assicurata dall’*enantiomorfismo*:

Il caso più semplice e più diffuso in cui si combinano l’identità e la differenza strutturale è l’enantiomorfismo ovvero la simmetria speculare che si ha quando entrambe le parti sono specularmente uguali ma disuguali se si sovrappongono, cioè sono fra loro in relazione come la destra e la sinistra. Questo rapporto crea quella differenza correlata, diversa sia dall’identità che rende il dialogo inutile, sia da una differenza priva di correlazione che lo rende impossibile. [...] La simmetria speculare genera i necessari rapporti di somiglianza e di differenza strutturale che permettono di creare le relazioni dialogiche. [...] Se, affinché il dialogo sia possibile, è necessario che i partecipanti siano diversi e abbiano nello stesso tempo nella propria struttura l’immagine del contraente, l’enantiomorfismo appare la macchina elementare del dialogo (Lotman 1985, pp. 68–69).

Con il richiamo alla simmetria speculare enantiomorfa Lotman propone un'immagine formidabile della miscela dinamica tra identità e differenza che il confine concorre a sviluppare. Lo sviluppo teorico dell'idea di confine sancisce inequivocabilmente la natura bivalente di questo dispositivo processuale semiotico; esso non funziona ai fini esclusivi della separazione e della definizione dell'identità, ma anche e sempre ai fini della connessione, della relazione, del dialogo, e del cambiamento (Gherlone 2016; Gramigna 2013; De Luca Picione 2017; Valsiner 2017).

3. I confini nella psicoanalisi freudiana

L'idea di confine non è affatto estranea alla psicoanalisi. L'idea di confine è presente sin dai primi lavori di Sigmund Freud e successivamente ripresa ed elaborata da altri autori che hanno contribuito allo sviluppo della teoria e della clinica psicoanalitica⁽³⁾. L'idea di confine viene sviluppata in molti modi: in termini spaziali (topici) quale delimitazione della struttura psichica, in termini dinamici come dispositivo che rende possibile i diversi processi psichici, in termini relazionali quale sistema che rende possibile l'intersoggettività, e in termini genetici e temporali come processo che rende possibile trasformazioni.

Freud esplicitamente propone la rilevanza dell'idea di confine sin dagli albori del suo pensiero. In uno dei primi lavori, *Progetto di una psicologia* (Freud 1895) ritroviamo la nozione di *barriera di contatto*, ovvero una zona di confine che protegge il sistema psichico mediante la regolazione del passaggio della quantità di energia tra esterno ed interno. Questa barriera funziona innanzitutto come difesa per l'integrità dell'Io (contro l'esperienza traumatica, cioè la rottura e la lacerazione di tale superficie liminare). La barriera di contatto del sistema psichico svolge inoltre una triplice funzione di separazione/connessione tra conscio e inconscio, tra memoria e percezione, e tra quantità e qualità.

(3) In questo lavoro non prenderò in considerazione le riflessioni teorico-cliniche dello psicoanalista Jacques Lacan che ha sviluppato in riferimento alla topologia dei bordi, superfici e tagli, e verso le quali ho riservato un intero volume di recente pubblicazione a cui mi permetto di rimandare (De Luca Picione, 2020b).

Nel 1922, Freud propone il modello strutturale della cd *seconda topica* nel testo *L'Io e l'Es* (Freud 1922) e chiarisce che inconscio e conscio non sono più entità ma attributi. La psiche viene tripartita ora in *Es*, *Io* e *Super-Io*. L'Es è del tutto inconscio ed è costituito dalle pulsioni⁽⁴⁾. Il Super-Io è una formazione psichica che si costituisce mediante il processo di identificazione con i genitori, portando il bambino ad assimilare norme, obblighi e divieti genitoriali, ma anche valori, ideali e canoni culturali.

L'Io è il risultato della modificazione di una porzione dell'Es, prodotta dal contatto con il mondo esterno. Nell'idea freudiana, alla nascita l'individuo è costituito dall'Es, mentre l'Io si sviluppa solo gradualmente attraverso la relazione con il mondo esterno. La funzione dell'Io è da un lato quella di mediare tra mondo interno e realtà esterna, e dall'altro lato di mediare tra pulsioni dell'Es e richieste censorie del Super-Io. Questi due livelli di conflitto sono differenti: nel primo caso si tratta di un conflitto tra la mente e il mondo esterno, mentre nel secondo il conflitto è intrapsichico tra diverse istanze della mente. Nel suo sviluppo ontogenetico, l'Io attraverso il processo di simbolizzazione introduce la dimensione temporale nella mente, la capacità di tollerare le frustrazioni, la possibilità di dilazionare/procrastinare il soddisfacimento pulsionale.

Impossibile sviluppare ulteriormente i processi psichici e le implicazioni cliniche/terapeutiche connesse. Ciò esula dagli obiettivi del lavoro. La questione in evidenza è l'utilizzo della nozione di confine. L'Io è infatti considerato come un vero e proprio confine, nei termini di una superficie di separazione e mediazione tra l'interno e l'esterno (Freud 1922). Esso lavora simultaneamente come una *doppia interfaccia*, cioè con un doppio livello percettivo, sia verso l'interno che l'esterno:

Nella sua veste di elemento di *confine*, l'Io vorrebbe farsi mediatore fra il mondo e l'Es, rendendo l'Es docile nei confronti del mondo e facendo, con la propria attività muscolare, il mondo idoneo a soddisfare i desideri dell'Es (Freud 1922, pp. 328–329, corsivo mio).

(4) Anche qui Freud si richiama esplicitamente al confine definendo la pulsione come una spinta elementare che si colloca esplicitamente al “confine” tra il somatico e lo psichico.

L'io è derivato da sensazioni corporee, principalmente da quelle che nascono dalla *superficie del corpo*. Esso viene considerato sia come una proiezione mentale della superficie del corpo sia come *la superficie dell'apparato mentale*: "L'io è anzitutto un'entità corporea, non è soltanto un'entità superficiale, ma anche la proiezione di una superficie" (Freud 1922, p. 295). In sintesi, l'io in quanto confine si forma per differenziazione progressiva dall'Es, mediante la pressione del mondo esterno esercitata in termini sensori/percettivi, acquisisce una graduale (ma mai piena) autonomia del controllo del sistema motorio, e rende possibili operazioni di pensiero mediante la traduzione in termini di rappresentazioni psichiche verbali (cioè la ri-trascrizione simbolica sotto forma di testi) dell'esperienza con il mondo (che qui possiamo pensare come duplice alterità, quella interna/inconscia e quella esterna/sconosciuta).

4. Lo sviluppo post-freudiano della nozione di confine

4.1. *Federn e i Confini dell'io*

Una prima rivisitazione e rielaborazione dell'io come confine viene proposta da Paul Federn sin dagli anni '30 del secolo scorso, il quale elabora la nozione di *Confini dell'io*, riprendendo sia la separazione intrapsichica tra le diverse istanze psichiche, sia la dimensione ambientale distinguendo tra *Sé e Altro da sé*. Egli ritiene che i confini dell'io posseggano una certa quota di energia propria, la quale concorre a rimodulare dinamicamente gli investimenti su di sé e sul mondo esterno. Tale rimodulazione è suscettibile di cambiamenti in funzione dell'età, di eventi particolari o di fattori situazionali (come deprivazioni o eccessi di stimolazioni), ma anche rispetto a cambiamenti quotidiani come la fase dell'addormentamento e del risveglio (in cui la carica libidica sui confini dell'io è rispettivamente ritirata e poi recuperata).

Secondo Federn esiste un sentimento dell'io che è primario, allo stesso tempo costante e variabile. Esso si compone di tre elementi costitutivi: a) il sentimento di unità nel tempo (continuità); b) unità nello spazio (nel momento presente); e, c) quello di causalità. Federn ci avverte che è su questi tre aspetti che l'io funziona come un vero e proprio confine.

L'elaborazione procede ulteriormente presentando sia l'idea di un Io Corporeo che di un Io psichico, le cui *frontiere* inconse sono in costante fluttuazione (anche qui i casi più eclatanti sono l'addormentamento, il sogno, il risveglio, lo svenimento, l'estasi). Tale modellizzazione (elaborata in termini di Stati dell'Io) è capace non solo di spiegare dinamicamente l'equilibrio mentale ma anche condizioni psicopatologiche. Quando lo Stato dell'Io è adeguato, l'energia immessa nei propri Confini sia interni che esterni risulta funzionale a mantenere un adeguato Senso dell'Io (generando un equilibrio dinamico tra l'individuo ed il mondo), mentre quando lo Stato dell'Io si presenta inadeguato, l'energia immessa nei Confini risulta insufficiente a contenere le pulsioni interne oppure le richieste esterne, con l'esito di una confusione psicopatologica del Senso dell'Io.

La teoria dei Confini dell'Io mi ha offerto una coerente spiegazione del fatto di tale scambio tra il valore di realtà ed il puro valore mentale di un identico contenuto psichico. Gli argomenti che provano l'esistenza di confini dell'Io mobili sono esposti nei miei lavori precedenti sull'investimento dell'Io e sul senso dell'Io, a cui devo rimandare. Su questa base avanzo l'ipotesi che il processo schizofrenico consista in una perdita dell'investimento dell'Io psichico e somatico. Tutto ciò che è puro pensiero è condizionato da un processo psichico situato all'interno del confine dell'Io psichico e somatico; tutte le cose a cui si accompagna il concetto di esistenza reale sono situate fuori del confine psichico e somatico (Federn 1949/1976, p. 194).

4.2. *L'Io-pelle di Anzieu*

Di grande rilievo in questa sede è il lavoro di Didier Anzieu. Egli, recuperando l'idea di *barriera di contatto* e di Io come confine, sviluppa la nozione di *Io-pelle*, evidenziando come Freud distingua una coscienza egoica come *interfaccia* ed un'istanza egoica come *involucro psichico*, che non è solamente un sacco-contenitore ma un vero e proprio operatore capace di stare in contatto tra mondo interno e mondo esterno, di raccogliere e trasmettere informazioni (Anzieu 1985, p. 106). L'Io come superficie di interfaccia agisce come struttura a doppio strato, differenziando le diverse

funzioni per la protezione di eccitazioni troppo intense, per la ricezione sensoriale degli stimoli e per la loro iscrizione come tracce mnestiche. Il confine dell'Io è una struttura dinamica che svolge una serie di funzioni fondamentali per la sopravvivenza dell'essere umano: protezione dagli stimoli, delimitazione fuori/dentro, ricezione, registrazione mnemonica, trasmissione, contatto e relazione. Nello specifico, l'Io-pelle, a partire dalle funzioni elencate, fornisce una prima rappresentazione (che avvia il processo di simbolizzazione) di cui si serve il bambino durante le fasi precoci dello sviluppo, per rappresentare se stesso come un Io che contiene i contenuti psichici, a partire dalla propria esperienza della superficie del corpo.

4.3. *Il rapporto contenitore-contenuto e la 'caesura' di Bion*

La nozione freudiana di *barriera di contatto* viene ripresa anche da Wilfred Bion. Egli concettualizza l'attività del pensiero come un processo di elaborazione e di trasformazione delle esperienze emotive e delle impressioni sensoriali (Bion 1970, 1972). Egli chiama *elementi alfa* le immagini inconscie (prevalentemente visive, ma talvolta anche acustiche, olfattive, tattili) che costituiscono in termini di simbolizzazione la prima tappa verso la formazione del pensiero. Gli elementi alfa non sono ancora pensieri veri e propri e vengono utilizzati soprattutto nei sogni, nei ricordi e nel pensiero onirico della veglia. Tutte le impressioni sensoriali e le esperienze emotive non trasformate sono invece denominate *elementi beta*. Con questo termine Bion designa la *cosa in sé*, ovvero il dato-non-pensabile e non trasformato, situato nella *sfera protomentale*, al confine tra il *somatico* e lo *psichico*, che rimane al di fuori della coscienza. Gli elementi beta sono intollerabili ed è necessario *evacuarli* verso l'esterno. Bion rielabora la nozione di *barriera di contatto* come un confine creativo e permeabile tra conscio ed inconscio, formato dalla proliferazione e dall'aggregazione degli elementi alfa. La barriera di contatto, in continuo processo di formazione, è intesa come una membrana semipermeabile che procura la capacità di dormire o stare sveglio, di essere cosciente o incosciente, di avere la nozione di passato o futuro. La barriera di contatto è la base della relazione vitale con il mondo esterno e con gli altri. Il punto centrale è che il

bambino, nelle fasi più precoci del suo sviluppo, non è in grado di trasformare autonomamente le proprie esperienze emotive e impressioni sensoriali in elementi alfa, perché non si è ancora costituita in lui la cd *funzione alfa* (il sistema di traduzione e simbolizzazione). Questa ultima si forma come riflesso della funzione alfa materna appresa attraverso la relazione di accudimento. La madre assolve cioè alla '*funzione di contenitore*' delle proiezioni psichiche del neonato, ovvero operando come un confine che allo stesso tempo delimita, tiene insieme, trasforma ed elabora l'esperienza sensoriale dell'infante rendendola digeribile psichicamente (cioè dal punto di vista semiotico, diremmo, simbolizzabile e pensabile). Gli stati intensi e brutali del corpo (emozioni e affetti allo stato puro) dell'infante tramite il contenimento offerto dal *confine* materno sono gradualmente resi tollerabili, rappresentabili psichicamente e pensabili. In continuità con queste argomentazioni, Bion infine introduce la nozione di *caesura* (1977), quale confine interno tra conscio/inconscio, che rende possibile il distanziamento, la barriera ma anche il transito. Essa è una condizione naturale nel cambiamento di stato mentale, appartiene a tutti e instaura forme di legami che permettono di mantenersi mentalmente vivi.

4.4. *La lezione di Winnicott: il confine come spazio transizionale*

Nell'opera dello psicoanalista Donald Winnicott troviamo elaborazioni molto interessanti sul tema del confine. Anche egli riconosce la preminenza del contenimento materno e della protezione ambientale che la madre esercita nei confronti del neonato. Tre principali processi inter-psichici agiscono nello sviluppo graduale dell'*identità*, dell'*integrazione* e della *indipendenza* (come processo verso la separazione e l'autonomizzazione): 1) *holding* (il contenimento materno funziona come un *confine* avvolgente per il bambino consentendogli di sentire l'integrazione del corpo, di superare la frammentazione e di percepire la continuità della propria esistenza); 2) *handling* (le cure materne esercitano sul corpo sensazioni che consentono di sentire la pelle come una membrana delimitante che distingue *me* da *non-me*); 3) *object-presenting* (la madre presenta il mondo al bambino; ciò consente una graduale percezione del mondo come qualcosa di separato ed altro da sé, non creato da lui stesso e dalla sua illusione di onnipotenza).

Una sufficiente (e mai perfetta!) adeguatezza delle cure materne consente la formazione dell'*oggetto transizionale* e dello *spazio transizionale* (tra i quattro e i dodici mesi di vita), ovvero una terza area psichica (detta *zona d'illusione*), la cui funzione è quella di costituire un cuscinetto che metta in relazione la fantasia e la realtà, il mondo interno e la realtà esterna. Lo spazio transizionale, è spazio psichico di confine, potenziale, che non è interno né esterno, ma separa e allo stesso tempo collega il dentro e il fuori, il me e il non-me, l'oggetto dei desideri e le cose del mondo oggettivo. Lo spazio transizionale è un'area vitale e creativa che accompagna lo sviluppo dell'uomo in tutta la vita, ed è al cuore della capacità di gioco, del dialogo, dell'arte, e della cultura (Winnicott 1953, 1971).

4.5. René Kaës: *Involucri, limiti, contenimento e transizionalità*

Altra trattazione originale e feconda sull'importanza dei confini viene dallo psicoanalista francese René Kaës. Egli sviluppa la nozione di confine nei termini di *limite* e di *intermediazione*, riconoscendone l'essenzialità per i processi di *simbolizzazione*, *legame intersoggettivo* e *sviluppo dei sistemi culturali*:

Vi sono “strutture psichiche” che assicurano i contenenti e gli involucri psichici e attraverso di essi i processi di mediazione e di trasformazione. Queste strutture e questi processi rivelano al massimo grado le esigenze di lavoro psichico imposte allo stesso tempo dalla strutturazione interna dell'apparato psichico e dall'intersoggettività, sono i *factotum* indispensabili in ogni “lavoro di civiltà”. Ma sono particolarmente fragili e alterabili. Ciò che in effetti risulta più fragile in ogni organizzazione vivente, e non solo psichica, sono le formazioni intermedie e i processi articolari. Sono le condizioni di possibilità del lavoro psichico di simbolizzazione e della formazione dell'alterità, in quanto è allo stesso tempo separazione e riconoscimento della differenza tra sé e gli altri. Queste formazioni e questi processi intermediari sono perciò al cuore della capacità di sognare e di giocare, di formare pensieri e pensare, di amare senza incollarsi all'oggetto. (Kaës 2013, p.195).

Kaës definisce il confine–limite come una *soglia*, una *frontiera*, un *passaggio al di qua e al di là* del quale il mondo cambia, dove il fuori non si confonde con il dentro. Egli considera il limite non solo come una categoria topologica ma anche sociale e psichica. Il limite riesce a separare e articolare luoghi, generare differenze, coesioni e conflitti (Kaës 2013, p. 198). Kaës vede una forte connessione tra *limite e proibizione*:

Limiti e interdetti fanno lega. La trasgressione dei limiti chiama in causa l'interdetto, quando mette in pericolo (reale o immaginario) se stesso o altri. Tuttavia, l'interdetto mette in opera un'esperienza che, senza di esso, non esisterebbe come tale: l'interdetto di toccare instaura sì il limite, ma anche il toccare medesimo (Kaës 2013, p. 198).

Il lavoro di Kaës sulla centralità del confine non è centrato sull'esclusività di una funzione prescrittiva ma anzi sulla possibilità che esso in quanto limite/vincolo possa esercitare propriamente una mediazione. È la mediazione che rende possibile lo sviluppo del *legame* alla base del quale sono possibili *psiche e cultura* (l'una il rovescio dell'altra nello sviluppo della civiltà). In quanto legame, la mediazione del confine–limite “associa correlativamente lo spazio intrapsichico e lo spazio intersoggettivo” (Kaës 2013, p. 203).

Kaës propone sei dimensioni della mediazione che organizzano la vita psichica e quella culturale (ad esempio le cosmogonie, i miti e i riti):

Una mediazione implica una rappresentazione dell'origine, convoca una scena dell'origine, una figurazione della congiunzione e della disgiunzione. [...]

Una mediazione si iscrive in una problematica dei limiti, delle frontiere e delle demarcazioni, dei filtri e dei passaggi. [...]

Una mediazione si oppone all'immediato, nello spazio e nel tempo. La mediazione è un'uscita dalla confusione delle origini. È coestensiva al processo di simbolizzazione che presuppone uno scarto, una disgiunzione congiuntiva, una frattura riparabile. [...]

Una mediazione suscita una cornice spaziotemporale. Genera uno spazio terzo tra due o più spazi e dunque dei limiti e dei passaggi. Genera

correlativamente una temporalità che esprime una successione tra un prima e un dopo, tra l'assenza e la presenza, dunque un'origine e una storia. È in questo spazio-tempo della mediazione che si inscrivono le poste in gioco dei processi di trasformazione. [...]

Una mediazione si iscrive in un'oscillazione tra creatività e distruttività [...] La mediazione permette al soggetto di esplorare, senza perdersi, lo spazio interno e lo spazio esterno, poi lo spazio singolare e lo spazio comune e condiviso. Assicura la capacità di investire nell'oggetto senza dissolversi in questo o distruggerlo, di fare traccia senza irrigidirla in un segno. (Kaës 2013, pp. 204-205).

Pertanto la funzione di intermediazione del confine è alla base di un lavoro semiotico di simbolizzazione, di creazione del senso dell'esperienza, di legame tra vita psichica intra-personale, inter-personale ed inter-generazionale. Il confine è il dispositivo necessario per la costruzione della cultura e della psiche.

5. Conclusioni. Lotman come interlocutore essenziale per la psicoanalisi e l'auspicio di un dialogo a venire

Il contributo di Lotman sul tema dei confini conserva un patrimonio inesauribile di elaborazioni, intuizioni e implicazioni. Al netto delle mie conoscenze attuali — mi occupo del tema dei confini dal punto di vista semiotico e psicoanalitico da circa vent'anni — non mi risulta che Lotman sia un autore entrato nel dibattito psicoanalitico. Vista la centralità che la nozione di confine riveste per la psicoanalisi sin dal suo esordio, ritengo che il pensiero di Lotman possa essere messo fruttuosamente in dialogo con essa. Come lo stesso autore russo sostiene, perché vi sia dialogo è necessario un bilanciamento tra differenze e similitudini atte a creare un'area in cui è possibile l'incontro. Considerando alcune differenze e distanze irriducibili (ad esempio le nozioni psicoanalitiche di pulsione e di inconscio) ritengo che il pensiero lotmaniano e quello psicoanalitico si incontrino tuttavia lungo diverse affinità e possano dialogare su molti punti condivisi.

Entrambe le prospettive considerano che il confine non esercita mai esclusivamente una sola funzione, né tanto meno sia definibile come

un'entità fissa e stabile. I confini mostrano una processualità inerentemente contraddittoria e paradossale (De Luca Picione, 2021b, 2021c): essi separano e uniscono, producono e riducono ambiguità, definiscono il rapporto gestaltico tra parti e intero (Tateo e Marsico 2021).

Il confine ha pertanto una natura sempre dinamica e ambivalente. Da un punto di vista modellistico il confine realizza dei processi che si muovono su dei continuum polarizzati (De Luca Picione, 2021c):

- *Distinzione* (continuo *versus* discontinuo)
- *Differenziazione* (identità *versus* alterità)
- *Separazione* (distacco *versus* fusività)
- *Contenimento* (cornice di senso *versus* frammentazione)
- *Protezione* (impermeabilità *versus* porosità)
- *Mediazione* (immediatezza *versus* mediazione/traduzione)
- *Trasformazione* (fissità *versus* innovazione)
- *Regolazione* (rigidità *versus* flessibilità)

Un confine è un operatore semiotico che consente di fare una *distinzione*, cioè all'interno di un campo omogeneo e indifferenziato rende possibile una differenza. Questo punto mette in luce la caratteristica semiotica del confine, esso è un segno in relazione (con gradi diversi di concretezza/astrazione) all'interno di uno spazio semiotico. Il confine è una dinamica processuale e non un'entità reificata, esso crea distinzione in uno spazio semiotico altrimenti amorfo e indistinto.

Il confine funziona come un operatore di *differenziazione*, capace di realizzare una differenza tra il me e il non-me, esso pertanto rende possibile la costruzione del senso dell'identità a partire dalla differenza con l'alterità. Questo punto così centrale nell'idea di semiosfera di Lotman è evidente in tutta la teoria e la clinica psicoanalitica. Un soggetto (sia esso un individuo o un sistema culturale) non nasce con una chiara e definita identità, come se essa avesse cioè dei contorni già dati. L'identità è un processo che negozia diacronicamente e sincronicamente la continuità del sé con la discontinuità dell'altro da sé. La riflessione psicoanalitica e semiotica si esprimono molto chiaramente su questo punto. Ciò accade regolarmente durante alcune fasi della vita in cui il tema dei confini è particolarmente cogente (come ad esempio l'adolescenza).

Il confine funziona inoltre come un operatore semiotico di *separazione*, esercitando un lavoro che si muove lungo il continuum separazione vs legame. Ciò è alla base della creazione di strutture sia intra-psichiche sia inter-psichiche (ovvero sia intra-sistemiche che inter-sistemiche): un sistema evolve per differenziazione e integrazione. Come Lotman ha mostrato si tratta di una dinamica olistica che implica il rapporto tra la parte e il tutto, tra una parte e le altre parti, tra l'identità e l'alterità. Allo stesso modo, la nozione psicoanalitica della *barriera di contatto* — elaborata da Freud, Anzieu, Bion e Kaës — indica l'importanza e la necessità di un processo di separazione e connessione tra materiale conscio e inconscio, percettivo e mnemonico, tra identità e alterità.

Per quanto concerne invece la funzione di *contenimento* realizzata dal confine, essa consente di creare una *cornice* attraverso la quale è possibile dare senso e valore alle cose. Il *frame* funziona come un principio di organizzazione dell'esperienza, è un modo di ritagliare/significare la realtà per interpretare il senso degli avvenimenti (lasciando all'esterno l'*extrasemiotico* non traducibile). Il confine crea una cornice di pertinenza entro la quale le cose producono senso e possono essere articolate e sviluppate. Il confine infatti circonda uno spazio che trasforma in termini simbolici (cioè "traduce" lotmanianamente) le esperienze brute somatiche in esperienze dotate di senso e valore, proprio come espresso dalla funzione alfa di Bion e dal processo di contenimento.

Il confine agisce sempre anche come *protezione*, realizzando una funzione di filtro dalle perturbazioni ambientali/sociali (ma anche dai turbamenti interiori, dalle pulsioni e desideri irrealizzabili e censurati, dai pensieri e rappresentazioni invasive, etc.). I due poli sono la totale chiusura (come uno scudo impenetrabile) o l'eccessiva porosità del filtro fino alla sua disintegrazione. In ambedue i casi l'effetto è lo stesso: la morte psichica e fisica del sistema vivente. Il confine protegge dall'eccesso, dall'effrazione degli stimoli/perturbazioni eccessive, ma quando la protezione è totale abbiamo l'impossibilità a scambiare energia, testi e informazioni con l'ambiente. Allo stesso tempo un buon confine protegge anche dalla fuoriuscita verso l'esterno, cioè da un movimento di fuga di contenuti verso l'esterno. In questo senso leggiamo la *doppia superficie* del confine intra-inter-psichico in termini psicoanalitici.

I confini sono operatori semiotici di *mediazione*. Qui si chiama in causa la funzione dei confini per superare *l'impasse* dell'immediatezza. Il confine agisce cioè come una struttura di mediazione contro l'immediatezza dell'azione e delle forme puramente reattive. Il richiamo è alla funzione di mediazione semiotica operata dai segni: i segni mediano il rapporto con l'esperienza, articolandola e complessificandola (De Luca Picione e Valsiner, 2017; De Luca Picione, 2015, 2020a, 2021). Attraverso questo processo di mediazione dell'esperienza sono possibili tutti i processi psichici di maggiore sofisticatezza: l'uso del linguaggio, la percezione, la memoria, il pensiero, l'immaginazione, la creatività, la narrazione, la produzione artistica, l'orientamento al futuro, la costruzione di diversi scenari possibili, il ragionamento controfattuale, etc. (De Luca Picione, 2017, 2020b).

Per quanto riguarda la funzione di *trasformazione* dei confini, possiamo osservare come essa sia centrale in tutti i modelli analizzati. I confini sono gli operatori del cambiamento per la loro funzione di connessione, scambio, informazione, filtraggio, traduzione. Pensiamo all'area transizionale di Winnicott che sfuma il dentro e il fuori creando una zona intermedia creativa di possibilità, alla funzione elaborativa *alfa* e alla *caesura* di Bion, ai processi *traduttivi* e ai processi *esplosivi* dei confini di Lotman.

Infine la funzione di *regolazione* dei confini consente di orientare verso il futuro. Lungo i confini infatti si esprimono quelle tensioni semiotiche *modali* espresse nei termini di necessità, possibilità, permesso, obbligo, proibizione, divieto, autorizzazione, ecc. (De Luca Picione et al 2018), che rendono i confini il luogo dell'attraversamento o dell'immobilità, il luogo della chiusura o dell'accesso, il luogo del transito o del respingimento (Leone, 2011, 2015). Il confine fornisce una regolazione semiotica continua tra stati di necessità, possibilità, impossibilità e contingenza. Se sono troppo rigidi si pongono sul versante della necessità o dell'impossibilità del transito e del superamento (in termini di divieto, proibizione, obbligo, costrizione), se c'è una regolazione più flessibile consentono l'espressione di molteplici possibilità di valico, legame, traduzione, un certo grado di libertà e di volontà del soggetto, così come l'accettazione della contingenza locale e contestuale. Tali aspetti ci inducono a considerare che il confine sotto il profilo regolativo acquisisce sempre una valenza agentiva, civile e politica (Sferrazza Papa 2020; Salvatore et al 2021).

In questo lavoro abbiamo mostrato come le due prospettive — lotmaniana e psicoanalitica — hanno elaborato e sviluppato l'idea di confine in termini dinamici e trasformativi. Entrambe sottolineano la dimensione relazionale del confine: da un lato l'attenzione di Lotman verso i processi dialogici con l'alterità, dall'altro lato la funzione intersoggettiva volta a sostenere lo sviluppo dell'identità psichica. Quest'ultima senz'altro può essere considerata un'implicazione forte evidenziata dalla psicoanalisi: perché sia possibile l'emergenza di un confine psichico individuale, deve esistere un confine intersoggettivo (altro, "terzo", super-ordinato) che assolva la funzione di contenimento e di cornice (con funzione di garante e condivisione, cura e regolazione dello spazio intersoggettivo).

Lucidamente Lotman ha mostrato anche il lato esplosivo e discontinuo dei processi trasformativi che riguardano i confini. Essi assorbono le perturbazioni, filtrandole e traducendole, tuttavia quando l'impatto è superiore alla capacità di assorbimento e di traduzione, si genera l'inizio di una crisi semiotica, con quote di incertezza, imprevedibilità che mettono in scacco momentaneamente ogni possibilità dialogica e di definizione identitaria avviando la ricerca di nuovi equilibri.

I confini non sono strutture da assumere come predefinite o di automatica implementazione. I confini sono dispositivi plastici e dinamici alle prese con la variazione del rapporto complementare di simmetria e asimmetria⁽⁵⁾. I confini sono luoghi di trasformazioni, che rendono possibile la sospensione momentanea dell'ordine strutturale e delle distinzioni troppo rigide, consentendo fusione, mescolamento e caos (De Luca Picione e Valsiner 2017). I confini sono aree di catastrofe, accelerazione esplosiva, trasformazione e creatività semiotica dei sistemi (De Luca Picione e Freda 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; De Luca Picione, 2021a). I confini non funzionano come depositi di informazioni stantie/obsolete/fisse, ma realizzano processi vitali di costruzione di nuove forme soggettive, culturali e simboliche.

Concludendo, attraverso il dialogo tra la semiotica lotmaniana e la psicoanalisi freudiana e post-freudiana è possibile proporre una riflessione

(5) In questo lavoro per ragioni di spazio e di focus non ho potuto sviluppare il confronto tra l'idea di simmetria/asimmetria di Lotman e quella dello psicoanalista Matte Blanco (1975). Mi permetto di rimandare per un approfondimento e una discussione ad un mio precedente volume (De Luca Picione 2015).

sulla nozione di confine che abbracci contemporaneamente e complementariamente approcci strutturali e funzionali, diacronici e sincronici, descrittivi e interpretativi, clinici e teorici, soggettivi e culturali. Tale dialogo, lungi dall'essere esaurito, è stato qui appena abbozzato e ne viene fortemente auspicato il suo sviluppo futuro.

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TOWARDS COMPLEXITY THINKING IN EDUCATION WITH JURI LOTMAN

DI MERIT RICKBERG⁽¹⁾

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Verso il pensiero della complessità in ambito educativo con Juri Lotman

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the potential of Juri Lotman's semiotic theory for a complexity-based understanding of learning and education. Complexity thinking as a separate approach to research and practice in education has arisen as a response to the growing need to understand how learning systems, such as individual students, schools, and whole societies, can become more adaptable in the light of the accelerating change of our environment. While the issues of learning, teaching or education are not explicitly discussed in Lotman's semiotic works, his theoretical investigations of creativity, unpredictability and cultural dynamics can serve as suitable ground for envisioning education in ways that transgress the currently dominant paradigm of learning as a controlled linear process with predictable outcomes. We will focus on the dynamics between two different orientations of semiotic activity in Lotman's semiosphere: on the one hand, we will view learning as non-linear meaning-making oriented towards generating new information; on the other hand, we will focus on how the process of learning is guided by various educational models that serve as stabilizing mechanisms that in turn are continuously transformed by the learners' unpredictable choices. The tension between these two tendencies is what allows learning systems to develop while maintaining their identity. In the last part of the article, Lotman's unique take on artistic modelling in which he sees the potential for making sense of extremely complex systems is considered as a means for addressing educational change and channelling learning towards greater adaptability.

KEYWORDS: complexity thinking, educational semiotics, artistic modelling, non-linear learning, Juri Lotman.

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1. Introduction

“How can a system develop and yet remain true to itself?” (Lotman 2009, p. 1) Juri Lotman has argued that this question is fundamental for describing any semiotic system (Lotman 2009, p. 1). The present article explicates the systems’ ability to change while maintaining their identity in the field of education where the process of reforming educational systems has been escalating together with the wider accelerating pace of change. New pedagogies, new literacies and novel competencies are replacing the old ones in educational agendas faster than school systems can implement them. The intensified search for new educational approaches seems to be caused, on the one hand, by the fact that it is becoming more difficult to predict what kind of future we should be preparing for. On the other hand, the growing demand to replace existing educational systems can also be caused by the gradual realization of the negative effects of the currently governing view on learning that is rooted in the ideology of economic growth and technological progress (see Värri 2021). It is becoming evident that framing learning as a process of developing skills and obtaining knowledge to successfully operationalize the world around us for personal gain can lead to detrimental consequences.

The necessity to reconceptualize learning through fundamentally new educational frameworks has been acknowledged by prominent worldwide actors as well. For example, in 2019 UNESCO launched the initiative *Futures of Education: Learning to Become*, which fosters global debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimagined in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity (UNESCO 2021). The focus on ‘becoming’ indicates a flexible openness to the new and challenges the exteriorized understanding of ‘learning *about* the world’ in order to act upon it, replacing it with movement towards an ecological view of ‘learning to become *with* the world’ around us (see Common Worlds Research Collective 2020). As such, the need to address the phenomenon of change itself seems to be the one of the major tasks of contemporary education.

One of the frameworks that addresses educational change on various levels is complexity thinking. ‘Complexity thinking’ (see Richardson and Cilliers 2001; Davis and Sumara 2006; Hager and Beckett 2019) as used

in this article refers to a broader scientific trend that includes various approaches to studying complex systems or exploring complexity as a phenomenon that characterizes different aspects of life. The methodological diversity of this trend makes it difficult to talk about one coherent scientific discipline. A common ground seems to lie in the interest towards systems' (dis)ability to adapt to their everchanging environments with attention on self-organization, non-linear change, emergence, diversity and redundancy, processes happening at the 'edge of chaos' etc.

Complexity thinking in education reimagines learning and educational systems from the perspective of greater adaptability, and Juri Lotman's semiotic theory is a useful framework for enhancing the complexity-based understanding of educational systems. Even though learning and teaching are not central to Lotman's theory⁽²⁾, his holistic take on semiotic processes in culture has merits for making sense of educational contexts as well.

The relevance of his ideas for contemporary education has been previously discussed by the Transmedia Research group at the University of Tartu⁽³⁾, to which the present author also belongs. The group's work is predominantly focused on the transmedial aspect of education and elaborating various of Lotman's notions like 'text', 'language', 'modelling' and 'autocommunication' in both theoretical and practical dimensions of education (Milyakina et al. 2020, Ojamaa et al. 2019, Ojamaa and Torop 2020). This approach presents a view of culture as education, referring "to the understanding that acquiring a cultural identity presumes learning cultural languages" (Ojamaa et al. 2019, pp. 153–154). At the same time, Lotman's ideas have not found much resonance in the field of edusemiotics⁽⁴⁾ which, being primarily rooted in the Peircean tra-

(2) The only text where this topic emerges as central is *The problem of acquiring a culture as typological characteristic*, where he differentiates between cultures oriented towards grammar and cultures where learning happens through texts (Lotman 2010).

(3) Transmedia Research Group was formed in 2016 at the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu. The group is developing open access online materials for supporting the teaching of humanities-related subjects in secondary schools and investigating new approaches to cultural literacy based on the framework of semiotics of culture.

(4) Edusemiotics is an emergent field of study that merges semiotics with educational theory and the philosophy of education. Edusemiotics as a separate theoretical branch of investigation was first acknowledged at the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in September 2014 (see Deely and Semetsky 2016).

dition, explores the process of learning and education with a focus on the notions of sign and semiosis (see Deely and Semetsky 2016, Semetsky and Stables 2014; Semetsky 2017). The discussion presented in this paper is in dialogue with both of these directions of educational semiotics, focusing simultaneously on the role of semiotic models in culture as well as on the process of meaning-making in learning.

2. The complexity approach in education

The complexity approach emerged as a distinct area of educational research in the beginning of the 2000s⁽⁵⁾. It draws on the framework of complexity theory to envision ways how our thinking about education could break with “simple successionist cause-and-effect models, linear predictability, and a reductionist approach to understanding phenomena, replacing them with organic, non-linear and holistic approaches [...] in which relations within interconnected networks are the order of the day” (Morrison 2008, p. 16). Thus, instead of focusing on the development of the individual learner, the complexity approach explores the dynamic connections between different learning systems, whose interactions can lead to unpredictable outcomes. The unpredictable nature of complex systems is connected to the notion of emergence developed in complexity theory and implies that:

given a sufficient degree of complexity in a particular environment, new (and to some extent unexpected) properties and behaviours emerge in that environment. The whole becomes, in a very real sense, more than the sum of its parts in that the emergent properties and behaviours are not contained in or able to be predicted from the essence of the constituent elements or agents. (Mason 2008b, p. 41)

(5) The first international conference on complexity and education titled Complexity Science and Educational Research Conference was held in 2003 in Edmonton, Canada. In 2004 the first issue of the journal “Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education” was published. Since 2020 an “International Journal of Complexity in Education” was founded. In addition, several collective volumes have been published, like: *Chaos, complexity, curriculum and culture: A conversation* (Doll et al. 2005), *Complexity Theory and the Philosophy of Education* (Mason 2008a), *Complex dynamical systems in education* (Koopmans and Stamovlasis 2016), *The Emergence of Complexity. Perspectives on Rethinking and Reforming Education* (Hager and Beckett 2019).

In this framework of complexity thinking, learning can be understood as a process “through which a unity becomes capable of more flexible, more creative activity that enables the unity to maintain its fit to its ever-evolving context.” (Davis and Sumara 2006, p. 93).

In educational research complexity approach has been interpreted in numerous ways. Some authors see it primarily as a descriptive theory that can explain emergence and change in education, whilst others note the prescriptive potential of modelling education as a complex system which would enable emergence and enhance adaptability. This latter point of view represents what Davis and Sumara (2006, p. 21) have called the emergence of ‘pragmatics of transformation’ within complexity research. According to them, placing the principal emphasis on affecting the behaviours and characters of complex phenomena (Davis and Sumara 2006, p. 74) “has also rendered the discourse much better fitted to the particular concerns of educators and educational researchers, given educationists’ societal responsibilities for deliberately affecting learners and communities” (Davis and Sumara 2006, p. 21). In addition, there is also a separate branch of research dedicated to teaching complexity theory and systems thinking to students in order to help them face the complex problems of today’s world (see Steele 2016, Jacobson and Wilensky 2006, Engelbrecht 2018).

While complexity thinking does seem to provide a promising framework for rethinking education from the perspective of adaptability, there are also doubts regarding the applicability and usefulness of a theory developed primarily in the context of natural sciences to guide educational practices. As asserted by Keith Morrison:

Though it offers an explanation for change and evolution in particular instances and circumstances, it is essentially a post hoc explanation [...] in the very notion of unavoidable unpredictability, complexity theory undermines its own power to guide behaviour with any certain future in mind. It is a theory for the here and now. (Morrison 2008, pp. 25–26)

The inability to imagine a system of education that would abandon the key principles that constitute the understanding of learning as a linear process, including setting learning objectives for the future, relying

on predictable outcomes, and measurable results, is not necessarily connected to the ontological features of the phenomenon of learning, but might be caused instead by the limitations imposed by the paradigmatic logic of educational research upon itself. As shrewdly noted by Edgar Morin “complexity is a problem word, not a solution word” (Morin 1990, p. 10). Thus, while complexity thinking might not propose immediate clear-cut solutions for educational practices, it has the theoretical scope and flexibility needed to problematize the current system and explore the possibilities beyond the status quo. The same goes for Lotman’s semiotics of culture with its ambitious core objective that “lies in explaining the exact dynamics of change in culture” (Ibrus and Ojamaa 2020, p. 55).

3. Complex thought in Juri Lotman’s semiotics

Viewing Lotman’s works in the context of the contemporary complexity paradigm is supported by parallels in the historical development of the two. Contemporary complexity thinking arose in the confluence of several areas of Western research that began to develop in the 1950s and 1960s, including cybernetics, systems theory, artificial intelligence, chaos theory, fractal geometry, and nonlinear dynamics (Davis and Sumara 2006, p. 8). The very same scientific context served as a ground upon which Juri Lotman started building his own theory of culture. Especially relevant for the development of his scientific thought were cybernetics and information theory; the influence of these fields is strongly reflected in Lotman’s metalanguage as well (see Salupere 2015, Grishakova and Salupere 2015, pp. 184–185). According to Salupere, the most important cybernetician for Lotman was William Ross Ashby, whose interest in living systems and parallels between machine, brain and society aligned with Lotman’s own understanding that “the society, the brain and living systems are all intricate, complex systems, but at the same time, they all share something in common” (Salupere 2015, p. 72, see also Ashby 1956).

This predisposition to think associatively is at the very core of complexity thinking (Jörg, Davis, and Nickmans 2007, p. 150). As proposed by Davis and Sumara (2006, p. 7) complexity thinking draws on the irrepressible human tendency to notice similarities among seemingly

disparate phenomena and poses questions that invoke a poetic sensibility and that rely on analogy, metaphor, and other associative functions of language. The importance of analogy for scientific thought was often stressed by Lotman in his works. He has distinguished two distinct spheres of scientific consciousness, one that operates through conjunctions, analogies and modelling and one that is ruled by logic (Lotman 1990, p. 45). Lotman stresses that while both spheres are invaluable for science, it is the first domain from which new ideas emerge: “Creative thinking both in science and in art is based on analogy and follows the principle of co-joining objects and concepts which could not be brought together without a rhetorical situation” (Lotman 1990, p. 45).

Analogical reasoning is central to Lotman’s own scientific thought as well. Laura Gherlone (2013, p. 316) has brought out two main ways how Lotman uses analogy in semiotic theory: the internal use of analogy, meaning Lotman’s analogical thinking in building his semiotic model of culture based on vertical isomorphic relations; and the external use of analogy, meaning Lotman’s effort to create a dialogue with other scientific disciplines that allowed him to find parallels with other scientific models from various areas of research⁽⁶⁾. In the same article, Gherlone also stresses the complementarity of Lotman’s ideas with complexity theory:

Lotmanian semiotics is gradually finding its place in the orbit of the “complex thought”, a scientific paradigm that, based on the study of nonlinear systems and on the legacy of cybernetics, has reconsidered the relation between the whole and its parts in compliance with a holistic vision, arguing for the non-reducibility of the entirety to its single components by virtue of those whole properties that, at certain levels of complexity, emerge as new information. (Gherlone 2013, p. 327)

In Lotman’s works, the relation of the whole to its parts is manifest in the principle of “vertical isomorphism of culture”, referring to the “analogy of the principles of structure and functioning, as well as mutually exchangeable functionality” (Lepik 2008, p. 17) of semiotic entities at

(6) Among the most important dialogue partners in this aspect are, for example, geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky and physical chemist Ilya Prigogine, both of whom also play an important role in the development of contemporary complexity thinking.

different levels. Isomorphism appears as one of the universals of semiotic space in Lotman's works and coincides with the notion of 'nestedness' used in complexity thinking (see Davis and Sumara 2006, Adolfsson and Alvunger 2017, Ludlow et al. 2017). Lotman proposes to view the various levels of semiotic space as semiospheres nested within each other in the manner of matryoshka dolls, making each individual "both a planet in the intellectual galaxy, and the image of its universum" (Lotman 1990, p. 273)⁽⁷⁾. Such a unique structure, "in which every part is at once a whole, and every whole functions as a part" (Lotman 2019b, p. 74) is open to ever-increasing complexity, as it emerges on the crossing of two opposing tendencies: on the one hand, the movement of each semiotic entity towards greater autonomy and on the other hand, constant integration of separate parts into higher-order structures (Lotman 2019b, p. 74). According to Lotman, this structural paradox results in the richness of inner conflicts and "ensures the exceptional flexibility and dynamism of Culture as collective intelligence" (Lotman 2019a, p. 47).

Although elements of complexity thinking can also be found in Lotman's earlier work, the conceptualization of the semiosphere model is an important step towards complex system thinking. Lotman (1990, pp. 123–124) defines semiosphere "as the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense, the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages." Thus, a minimum unit for the emergence of new meaning is a triadic relation between two semiotic systems that are immersed in the semiotic environment around them (Lotman 2002c, p. 271). As Edna Andrews (2003, p. 32) has observed, "such definition marks a clear shift towards a higher level of network semiosis and system-level phenomena in Lotman's works"; which according to Peeter Torop (2005, p. 169), "allows semiotics of culture to reach a new understanding of holism, a holistic analysis of dynamic processes". In the very last period of his research, Lotman's focus shifted towards describing the process of change in cultural development and exploring ways to model nonlinear processes (see Lotman 2019e; 2019f, 2009).

(7) This view of the structure of semiotic systems is mentioned already in 1970 in *Structure of the Artistic Text* where he describes the hierarchical syntagmatics of the artistic text as matryoshka dolls (Lotman 1977, p. 23).

Lotman's dynamic approach to culture as a whole provides a promising foundation for modelling various complex cultural phenomena. In recent years, Lotman's theory has been employed as a complexity framework for rethinking contemporary culture by several authors (see Haidar 2019, Hartley, Ibrus and Ojamaa 2020; Ibrus Schich and Tamm 2021). The present work aims to take another step in this direction by bridging Lotman's theory with complexity thinking in education.

4. The Lotmanian perspective on educational processes

The complexity approach to learning and education differs significantly from contemporary formal education, which on the level of educational practice as well as mainstream pedagogical research has remained true to the "input/output logic, analysis of crystallized structures and determination of connections between statical states of components" (Ruus 2018, p. 414). Simply adding a single creative exercise to classroom activities every now and then does not improve the broader adaptive capacity of education, when the overall system remains controlled clear cut learning objectives, controlled linear learning process, predictable learning outcomes and measurable results. Criticism of this understanding of learning has been voiced in various branches of contemporary pedagogy. For example, Andrew Stables in *Semiotic Theory of Learning* has emphasized the need for embracing unpredictability in learning: "Education is richest when its outcomes are most open; when, in the spirit of Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster, the teacher is pursuing practices in deference to both the practice and the student, and neither teacher nor student forecloses on the outcomes of the exploration" (Stables 2018, p. 49).

While complexity thinking tends to be associated with a similar point of view regarding the openness of the outcomes and non-linearity of the process, it does not advocate for complete randomness or lack of restrictions. This point is prevalent in Juri Lotman's theoretical investigations of creativity, unpredictability, and cultural dynamics as well. While it is common to associate change with dynamic forces and overlook the role of stabilizing mechanisms, it is relevant to acknowledge the importance of both tendencies in the development of semiotic systems. Dynamics

without stability is destruction. The phenomena of creativity and freedom are possible only in relation to rules and restrictions⁽⁸⁾. That is why discussion of the complex view of change in the sphere of education should be oriented towards explicating the fine balance between these two closely related tendencies. Placing this discussion in the framework of Lotmanian semiotics allows us to view education critically, as a system of constraints that channel the process of meaning-making according to previously established rules⁽⁹⁾, but learning can also facilitate the emergence of new meaning. While being guided by these models in culture, learning always simultaneously transgresses pre-set boundaries, eventually transforming these educational models.

Connecting learning with meaning-making is common for edusemiotics theories, where semiosis is usually seen as the foundation of learning and cognition (see Stables et al. 2018, p. 2). Establishing the connection between learning and meaning-making in the context of Lotman's semiotics emphasizes the aspect of non-linearity in this process, by connecting it to Ilya Prigogine's theory: "We will define meaning-making as the capacity of a culture as a whole or of individual parts to produce new, non-trivial texts. We will define new texts as those that arise as a result of irreversible (as Prigogine used the term) processes, that is, texts that are to a certain extent unpredictable" (Lotman 2019c, p. 85). For Lotman, the ability to generate non-trivial texts is what separates thinking semiotic structures from all others. According to Lotman, an intelligent semiotic entity is able "to react flexibly and effectively to changes in its environment and to reorient itself in that environment" (Lotman 2019a, p. 45) and this interpretation of intelligence coincides with complexity theorists' understanding of learning systems, which are defined by their ability

(8) See Lotman's take on how additional constraints in artistic languages lead to a higher capacity of creativity (Lotman 1977).

(9) The aspect of teaching is not discussed separately in this article. For the broader purposes of the present article, teaching is viewed as means of organizing the semiotic environment according to the existing educational models. In this sense, teaching can be conducted by a person, a schoolbook, a digital learning environment, a museum, etc. This view of teaching and learning has been presented by psychologist Aaro Toomela, who understands learning as getting to know the organization of the environment and constructing knowledge about the environment, and accordingly has defined teaching as the purposeful organization of the environment for the student by the teacher (Toomela 2020, p. 372).

to maintain themselves in their ever-evolving context (Davis and Sumara 2006, p. 93).

The essential feature of Lotman's semiotics is its dialogical nature, which enables flexible and creative reactions to changing contexts in semiotic systems. Drawing on idea of the functional asymmetry of the two cerebral hemispheres, Lotman proposes that an invariant model of an intellectual entity consists of two (or more) integrated structures modelling external reality in fundamentally different ways; this allows him to distinguish three classes of intellectual objects that share such structure: individual consciousness, artistic text, and culture as collective intellect (Lotman 2004, p. 585). For Lotman, the most universal example of creative dialogue is when information is exchanged using both discrete sign systems with linear sequencing in their syntagmatic organization of text, and continuous sign systems characterized by non-discrete representation and spatial organization of elements (Lotman 2019a, p. 35). The more different the structures of the dialogue partners are, the more difficult it is to translate a message expressed in one language into another, which increases the unpredictability of the translation, making it possible for new meanings to emerge.

In these and other cases of untranslatability, a dialogue can be described as a collision of languages and a source of semiotic resistance between communication partners (Lotman 2002b, p. 168). This view of dialogue emphasizes the importance of disruption or discontinuity without which emergence of new meanings is not possible. In the context of learning, a similar view of the emergence of new meaning has been voiced in various semiotic approaches before. For example, Kalevi Kull has described learning as a process "that starts with behavioural indeterminacy (describable also as a situation of incompatibility, confusion, logical conflict, problem-situation, ambiguity)" (Kull 2018, p. 457). Inna Semetsky, reflecting on the educational value of Julia Kristeva's notion of abject, writes that contradiction in the form of abjection or crisis should be acknowledged as the experience that elicits genuine learning in contrast to formal instruction, as it is the breakdown in existing meaning that produces the learning space where new meaning can occur (Semetsky 2015, p. 1075). In a similar manner Andrea English, drawing primarily on John Dewey's approach to

learning, talks about the importance of doubt, uncertainty and confusion as discontinuities in experience that open up the in-between realm of learning, that is “an educational space in which the learner finds herself bound up in a realm that lies between an encounter with the limits of knowledge and ability, and the new knowledge or ability that is yet to be found (English 2013, p. 55).

In the context of Lotman’s semiotic theory, the space of learning in semiotic systems, where new meanings can occur can be linked with the notion of the periphery. In the spatial description of the semiosphere, the periphery is set in opposition to the rigidly organized and rule-governed centre and is characterized as the hottest spot for semiotizing activity (Lotman 1990, pp. 134–136). The role Lotman assigns to the periphery in the wider dynamics of semiotic space corresponds in the discourse of complex systems to the notion of ‘the edge of chaos’ which is “the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive” (Waldrop 1992, p. 12). Regardless of whether we are talking about the border space of a culture or of the human mind, its dominant characteristic is indeterminacy. In semiotic terms, it implies the plurality of potential meanings which in turn creates the possibility of choice⁽¹⁰⁾.

For Lotman it is important to emphasize that, when dealing with intellectual semiotic entities, this choice is not determined by mere chance; instead: “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” (Lotman 2019c, p. 90). However, such freedom comes with a price. Lotman points out in his discussion regarding artificial intelligence that all thinking structures capable of free choice and generating new messages face the threat of becoming victims of neuroses, “stemming from feelings of vulnerability, ignorance, and doubt regarding what behavioural strategy to adopt” (Lotman 2019a, p. 46). One of the biggest challenges for learning systems

(10) The notion of choice in the semiotic approach to learning has been discussed by Stables and Gough 2006, Kull 2018, Campbell, Olteanu and Kull 2019.

is dealing with the uncertainty⁽¹¹⁾ that occurs due to the unpredictable nature of the process of meaning-making.

In this respect, a culture's ability to function as the generator of structuredness and to organize the world around humans according to a particular system of semiotic rules (Lotman and Uspenskij 1971, pp. 213–214) can be seen as one of the main stabilizing resources against the intrinsic indeterminacy of the border space that is causing the learning subjects to experience uncertainty. What is important here in the context of learning is that the openness of the semiotic system towards its boundaries, the ability to take in new information and the capacity to adapt to changes can differ depending on the type of rules governing the semiotic processes. Different types of modelling systems, i.e. a structure of elements and rules of their combination, existing in a state of fixed analogy to the whole sphere of the object of perception, cognition, or organization (Lotman 2011, p. 250) organize the environment in different ways and through that also guide the processes taking place in these environments.

An example of this idea can be found in Lotman's works where he distinguishes between binary and ternary cultural models. While 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 greater freedom of choice and individual behaviour, resulting in a greater degree of system complexity (see Lotman 2013, pp. 79–80). The central difference in these models lies 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 exist, while in ternary models even the most powerful explosions cannot encompass the entirety of the complex richness of the system (Lotman 2009, p. 166). That is why change in systems based on binary models is seen as a threat and tends to be avoided, whilst ternary structures allow more dynamics. Lotman describes binary and ternary models mainly in

(11) Seeing uncertainty as fundamental part of learning is not a new idea and has been explored in education theories before (e.g. Dewey 1916; Bruner 1966). However, in recent decades the necessity has arisen to address this topic explicitly in educational research and has brought about the emergence of a new paradigm of educational research occasionally referred to as "the pedagogy of uncertainty" (see Barnett 2007, Barnett 2012; Hall 2010; Wals and Corcoran 2012; English 2013; Tauritz 2019) where scholars of this research area frame uncertainty not only as a part of the learning process but as a learning objective in itself.

the context of social structures and even in connection to particular cultural spaces, but the general idea of such differentiation is applicable to various modelling systems in a different context. One cultural phenomenon that is always based on ternary structure according to Lotman is art. Lotman explains that the modelling capacity of art comes from the tripartite relation of the artistic word, the non-artistic word and the deed (see Lotman 2013, p. 156), which enables great semiotic freedom and determines the very specific functions that art has in the dynamics of culture. In what follows, we will consider Lotman's take on artistic modelling and discuss how the artistic approach to education could channel learning towards greater adaptability.

5. Artistic modelling of education

Comparison of art and science as two different approaches of making sense of the world is a common topic throughout Lotman's works (e.g. Lotman 2011, 2002b, 2002c, 2002a, 2013). Viewing them as the two eyes of human culture (Lotman 2002c, p. 265) or as two hemispheres of the collective brain of humankind (Lotman 2013, p. 220) is Lotman's attempt to abolish the simplistic understanding of art as merely a form of entertainment. For Lotman, finding a way how to merge these models in the field of science was a central question throughout his academic path (see Salupere 2017, pp. 91–92). The necessity of the plurality of modelling systems was addressed by Lotman in an interview with Peeter Torop in 1992:

Art is a totally different way of thinking, a different system of modelling the world. Essentially it is the creation of a different world, a parallel world to our world. It is thought that we can live in a world that is based on the model of science, or that we can live in a world that is based on the model of art. In fact, however, we live in a world that is based on the conflictual unity of these two models. From here follow also the different levels of predictability and different meanings of unpredictability. (Lotman in Torop 2000, pp. 13–14)

One of the values of artistic modelling for Lotman lies precisely in the opportunity of grasping the phenomena of unpredictability. If scientific thought in the traditional sense is interested in recurring incidents based on which it becomes possible to construct the invariant of the research object, then art, on the other hand, is always oriented towards what is unique or accidental. Lotman sees here the opportunity to bring the study of artistic text out of the academic periphery and turn it into a foundation for building a theory of dynamic processes (Lotman 2002a, p. 68). Already in 1967 Lotman proposed that studying the characteristics of art as a model could stimulate the creation of an apparatus for the description of extremely complex systems (Lotman 2011, p. 268). In a similar line of thought, the modelling potential of art is discussed in his article, *Brain - Text - Culture - Artificial Intelligence* in 1981, where he explores the possibility that the ideal model for constructing artificial intelligence could be a work of art⁽¹²⁾ (Lotman 2004, p. 589).

In the last period of his research, Lotman takes a step further from merely pointing out the potential art as a model can have for other research areas and begins to explore the ways how artistic modelling can rethink the paradigm of history (see Lotman 2019d, 2019e, 2009, 2013). According to Daniele Monticelli, Lotman's works show "the potential of art for recreating the past as a still open, explosive process instead of a stable and untouched refuge from our frightening future, as retrotopic thinking would wish to have it" (Monticelli 2020, p. 202). In this way, Lotman managed to introduce unpredictability to a scientific field in which, from the perspective of its own paradigmatic logic, such an attempt would have been impossible, and reframed history as an increasingly complex system. Lotman's academic endeavour could serve as a model to explore the possibilities of artistic modelling in the sphere of education as well. In the context of the present article, we will manage to merely sketch out some initial lines of thought on how artistic modelling of education could elucidate new ways how to think about education in complex terms.

(12) In connection to developing artificial intelligence, Lotman has even proposed that new branches of research should emerge: culturionics as cybernetics of culture and artonics as cybernetics of art, which both could open new ways of developing intelligent technology (Lotman 2005b, p. 234, see also Lotman 2005a, Torop 2010).

The first feature of artistic modelling relevant for learning is its disruptive capacity. If we consider learning in terms of generating new meaning, then one of the questions for educators is how to disrupt the existing patterns of interpretation to open a space where new meanings can occur. According to Lotman, such struggle is universal for all semiotic individuals:

Finding itself in a state of equilibrium, a structure must do something to get itself out of that state. If we were to translate this into the language of individual consciousness, then a sin, crime, or mistake must be committed, that is, some violation of the rules of conduct must take place, which excludes the “correct” symmetry of repetition [...] cyclical, repeatable, and orderly movement explodes into some destructive and unpredictable striving” (Lotman 2019d, p. 119).

In this respect, art appears to him as a universal mechanism capable of such disruption. Artistic activity is oriented towards transgressing the boundaries of the existing system and thus appears for the audience as incorrect. In a lecture given in 1967, Lotman points out that art “must always disturb us. If it does not disturb us, then it is not working” (Lotman in Lepik 2008, p. 243). What makes the artistic text so efficient in generating rupture is that, at every level — from tropes to coherent artistic creations — we face the combination of incompatible structures (Lotman 2002b). The artistic model of education would thus be oriented towards untranslatability, the collision of languages and semiotic resistance between dialogue partners as central mechanisms of learning.

The second aspect to bring out in this context is Lotman’s view of art as a laboratory of unpredictability. According to Lotman, art allows us to experiment with various structures of the world by creating a new level of reality, which is distinguished from the latter by a sharp increase in freedom (Lotman 2009, pp. 150–151). Such experimentations are not meant to merely entertain but to work out solutions for real-life problems. For example, in the case of conflicts, art enables us to move the conflict to the sphere of “as if reality”, where “a whole bundle of potential alternatives is introduced into the sphere of self-consciousness and control” (Lotman 2013, p. 184). What is noteworthy in Lotman’s view is that the

value of such “laboratory conditions” lies not only in working out the alternatives, but can have a more profound effect on how we deal with the indeterminacy of reality. He writes: “It is appropriate to remember that unpredictability experienced in the realm of art can be carried over into reality in a form free of catastrophes, similar to the way an injection provides an organism with immunity” (Lotman 2013, p. 131). Incorporating such “laboratories” in the educational systems would mean reorienting the process of learning towards engaging with indeterminacy, uncertainty and unpredictability in a non-defensive way and exploring the creative potential of such phenomena without the fear or anxiety that accompany similar experiences in real life.

The third aspect, relevant for educational contexts is the tension in artistic models between the plurality of meanings and the striving for the single truth. The former is connected to the structural similarity of art and play, which Lotman has referred to as the play-effect. Lotman emphasizes that the play-effect is not based on a rigid coexistence of different meanings, but on the acknowledgement of the possibility of the existence of alternate meanings besides the ones currently perceived (Lotman 2011, p. 264). This means that “different meanings of the same element do not appear in a static coexistence, but “twinkle”. Each interpretation makes up a separate synchronic slice yet retains a memory of earlier meanings and the awareness of the possibility of future ones” (Lotman 2011, p. 264). However, Lotman stresses that art is profoundly different from play in the fact that, despite the inherent plurality of meanings, artistic models are essential means for the search for personal truth; but what is important is that this search must never come to a close. According to him, art is a mechanism for creating truth not yet given, and should never be forced into the sphere of a single meaning — it should always remain in the space of the open search (Lotman 1991, p. 11).

The problem of implying a single correct meaning is equally problematic for art as well as for learning. The following quote from *Unpredictable Workings of Culture* illustrates this point well:

Art is a difficult interlocutor. It is a common misconception that the main purpose of art is to enrich our knowledge with information. [...] It cannot be represented as a simple exchange — from hand to hand — of

some object or another, or as a grade school lesson, in which a teacher explains to his or her pupils in clear and accessible terms what he or she already knows. (Lotman 2013, pp. 129–130)

That is why, while acknowledging and addressing the alternate meanings existing in culture, the learning process channelled through an artistic model would encourage the learner to move towards meanings not yet given. This would mean giving up, at least to a certain degree, on the status quo of linearly structured learning and through that move towards a more open and flexible education system.

6. Conclusion

Present day education systems are facing enormous pressure to keep up with the increasing speed of processes in socio-ecological systems, manage the fragmentation of contemporary culture and deal with the all-encompassing uncertainty. This demands a holistic approach towards the process of educational change on the various levels of culture. In the present article, our aim was to explicate the potential of Juri Lotman's semiotics in modelling the process of change in educational contexts. Lotman studies culture as a complex system that is capable of self-organization, non-linear change, and creativity. His theoretical focus is balanced between static and dynamic forces in semiotic systems.

In the article, we proposed to view learning as a non-linear process oriented towards generating new meaning and functioning as a dynamic force in educational systems. Education was understood as a system of rules and regulations represented through cultural models and texts that channel the process of learning in a certain way, while being constantly transformed by the unpredictable choices the learners make, which in time turn into cultural patterns themselves. This interpretation of the static and dynamic relations in educational systems is not merely descriptive but can also have an effect on the way these systems function. Rethinking learning as an unpredictable process of meaning-making and not as exchange of static messages can lead to educational models characterized by greater variability and freedom of choice, which in turn

can accommodate more flexible and creative responses to the changing environments.

In the last part of the article, we presented some initial thoughts on how Lotman's ideas of artistic modelling could be applied to the sphere of education for the purpose of modelling learning in a non-linear way. Such models would be oriented towards disruption of the pre-existing meaning; they would engage with indeterminacy, uncertainty and unpredictability in a non-defensive way and explore the creative potential of such phenomena; and they would accept the existence of a plurality of possible meanings while not giving up on the search for a truth not yet given.

This short discussion is not meant to provide an exhaustive overview of the potential of this approach, but was merely aimed at marking this opportunity as a path for further exploration. Nor was our goal to suggest that the current education system should be entirely transformed according to the principles of artistic modelling. Adaptive education requires first and foremost diversity. According to Lotman, the only way to act in a state of ignorance, growing complexity and unpredictability is to compensate for the insufficient information with stereoscopicity — “that is, by producing a completely different projection of reality — a translation into a completely other language” (Lotman 2019a, p. 46). The proposed approach of artistic modelling in education could therefore be one of the many parallel paths in which education systems can move forward towards an unknown future.

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PARTE IV

LOTMAN IN CONTESTO: UNA PROSPETTIVA SOCIOSEMIOTICA

PART IV

LOTMAN IN CONTEXT: A SOCIO-SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

HOW ADVERTISING PRESERVES CULTURAL IDENTITIES WHILE COMMUNICATING SOCIETAL CHANGES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN BETWEEN ITALY AND SAUDI ARABIA

DI MARIANNA BOERO, CRISTINA GRECO⁽¹⁾

TITOLO IN ITALIANO: Come la pubblicità preserva le identità culturali mentre comunica i cambiamenti della società. Uno studio comparativo sulla rappresentazione delle donne tra Italia e Arabia Saudita⁽²⁾

ABSTRACT: This contribution is part of a wider reflection on the similarities and differences in terms of socio-cultural facets and their repercussions in the cultural text between Italy and Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between the representation of women and the dynamics of changes happening in the last few years between the two cultural contexts. The study begins by providing an introductory reflection on Lotman's concepts as an effective tool to understand cultural transformations. This part offers a first reading of the two cases under study and an overview of the relation between advertising and women representation. The paper employs a semiotic approach drawing on a corpus of six cases representing women in advertising. The findings reveal a first significant difference in

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(2) This paper is the result of a research carried out by the two co-authors. Concerning the writing, Marianna Boero wrote paragraphs 1 (Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework) and 3 (Italy and the Representation of Women in Advertising), while Cristina Greco wrote paragraphs 2 (Lotman's concepts as an effective tool for the analysis of cultural transformations) and 4 (Saudi Arabia and the Representation of Women in Advertising); paragraph 5 (Conclusions) has been written in collaboration by the two authors.

terms of prominent societal and cultural changes, focusing on attitudes and dynamics of transformation, while a second difference pertains to the salience of gender stereotypes. Despite the relevance of a comparative study, it has limitations due to the corpus size and time frame. The study contributes to the understanding of challenges and barriers that might arise in communicating the cultural transformations and their impact on society through the cultural texts.

KEYWORDS: socio-cultural transformations; advertising; gender; Italy and Saudi Arabia; semiotics

1. Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework

This paper aims to reflect on Jurij Lotman's theoretical perspective for the analysis of cultural transformations, with reference to the change in the representation of the female figure in the advertising language in Italy and Saudi Arabia. The selection of these two cases is justified mainly by the need to compare the different and often antithetical, socio-cultural processes that have guided the differing paths of the advertising language and to analyze the way in which they are represented in the texts under study. The urgent need to re-think the socio-cultural processes and their complexities is due to the multiple tensions and conflicts that they are generating in terms of emergence and speed of development. To be specific, the purpose of this contribution is to evaluate the relevance of Lotman's theory in today's advertising language and to read this path of change through the concepts of "explosion" and "semiosphere" (1990). This could be done by analyzing the unpredictability and the rapidity – or, on the contrary, the predictability and the gradualness – of such changes, and by monitoring the trajectories traveled by the advertising discourse in the system of social discourses.

We were interested in carrying out a comparative survey between the representation of women in advertising in Europe, with reference to the Italian case, and in Saudi Arabia. This comparative study deals with the current and unprecedented transformations that are fascinating multiple

industries in these countries. Furthermore, with the objective of studying and analyzing the representation of women in advertising, the analysis was conducted through an evaluation grid that allowed us to investigate both the stereotypes related to the concept of femininity and the new trends in the representation of the female figure in terms of visual and verbal languages. It should be noted that the aim of our research is neither to highlight and describe the differences between the two realities, nor to analyze the phenomenon from the point of view of gender studies, but to analyze the different speed of change and the different ways through which they are represented by advertising. The set of Lotmanian tools is therefore still current today and particularly effective, in this sense, for describing the changes taking place.

In this paper, for research purposes, we have decided to focus on a representative corpus of six texts (observation period: 2017-2020), even though the overall research presents a wider number of analyzed advertisements. Before proceeding with the description of the analyses carried out, in the next paragraph, we will briefly define the theoretical assumptions that have guided our reflections. Then, we will offer an overview of the representation of women in Italian and Saudi Arabian advertising, showing the prevailing models and the specificities of their representation. In the final part of the paper, we will discuss the results of the research, highlighting similarities and differences in the process of change.

2. Lotman's concepts as an effective tool for the analysis of cultural transformations

The theoretical framework of this contribution is deeply rooted to Lotman's reflections of culture and its history, as part of an intense connection between the texts of the culture, whether verbal and non-verbal, religious, poetic, and aesthetic, and their contribution to the definition of the culture itself. In addition, advertisements still have a massive impact on society due to their progress in the digital culture. As a building block, Lotman's concepts can still be considered as an effective tool for the study of the economic, cultural and political variations to be read through the lens of their fluctuations within discourses.

Furthermore, we will often refer to the concept of “revolution” in the representation of the female figure. Starting from this concept, we can refer to Jurij Lotman and the “explosive moments”. With his studies, starting from the typology of culture (1990), Lotman founded and defined a specific field of modern semiotics known as the semiotics of culture. This field has the primary objective of understanding the underlying mechanisms of organization and cultural practices of a society and more generally, of human society. Culture is a necessary condition for the existence of any human community. When we talk about culture, according to Lotman, we mean the set of non-genetic information, the non-hereditary memory of humanity, which acquires content by conserving and accumulating information. The struggle for memory is essential to the intellectual history of humanity, so much so that the destruction of a culture passes above all through the destruction of memory and the annihilation of the texts that constitute it. We have a dramatic example of this erasing operation with the current destruction of signs and texts indicative of the emancipation of women by the Taliban after the fall of Kabul.

To ensure that a portion of reality becomes the patrimony of collective memory, it is necessary to translate it into codified information. This is the task of culture, whose fundamental work consists in structurally organizing the world that surrounds men. This “codified information” inevitably goes through different stages. In fact, according to Lotman, there are prevailing “gradual processes” in history, which can be carried out without self-awareness and self-description, in a spontaneous way. Alongside them, on the other hand, “explosive processes” can occur, which due to the rapidity of their appearance would perhaps be more sensible to call them as “explosive moments”, whose physiognomy is characterized by unpredictability and dynamism Lotman (2009 [1992]). If the “gradual processes” reinforce a persistent and reassuring tradition, through the explosions, traditions are broken, and new conditions and ways of communicating are created.

Lotman’s analysis is completely pertinent to the theme of our research. Words and advertising images have such a pervasiveness as to promote new attitudes, new behaviors, new ambitions, new perspectives, and laboratories of new communication methods, which, however, invest the entire social context.

These observations by Lotman provided the framework on which our analysis was designed. We sought after grasping the elements of what we can define a “cultural revolution” that has radically changed the perception of roles and identity of the female figure in the observed contexts on one hand, with sudden and constant “explosions” and, on the other hand, through gradual and slow change as following the idea of advertising as a “consoling art” developed by Umberto Eco (1968). These two different paths are bearers of processes of change, and it is interesting to explore their constitutive dynamics. We will begin our journey with the study of the Italian case and then move on to the advertising representation of women in Saudi Arabia. The final part of the paper will finally be devoted to a comparative balance between the two realities examined and a reflection on the authenticity of Lotman’s theory.

3. Italy and the Representation of Women in Advertising

3.1. Women in Italian advertising: a brief excursus

Since its modern origins, advertising has focused its gaze on the female image, a figure that has always had an important and central role in Western visual communication, from portraiture to symbolic representation, from sculpture to sacred painting (Papakristo 2015). However, in mass media, such as television, film and advertising, the use or portrayal of women has been frequently exploited – and is still exploited today – as a means to increase the appeal of media or a product to the detriment of, or without regard to, the interests of the women portrayed, or women in general. In this section of our paper, we will retrace how the female image is represented in Italian advertising⁽³⁾.

According to research conducted by Panarese (2012) on the

(3) Already in the 1970s, in the wake of emerging feminist movements, Gender Theory highlighted how sexuality was socially constructed. In particular, we recall Goffman’s hypothesis (1979), according to which the representation of the gender relationship in advertisements is strongly biased in favor of men: the woman therefore finds herself assuming a position of subordination towards him, and this subordination is explicit in a series of micro behaviors and postures with which she is depicted in the advertising images collected by the author.

representation of women in television commercials in Italy, starting from the advertisements of the Carosello era up to the most current ones, a plurality of archetypes emerges on the role of women. In the years of Carosello, the commercials tried to exert an influence on female psychology, focusing on the need for gratification or on identification processes. An example for this is a TV commercial of Locatelli cheeses⁽⁴⁾, aired in the years of Carosello, starring Nino Manfredi and Giovanna Ralli, in which the typical portrait of a woman in those years clearly emerges. The commercial opens with an enunciative *débrayage*⁽⁵⁾ in which the two actors find themselves inside the Research Office for television advertising ideas and precisely interpret the role of advertisers in search of an idea for a commercial on cheeses.

The “luminous” idea seems to be precisely that of an advertisement that has the “ideal woman” as its main character. The scene changes and, at a certain point, “the commercial in the commercial” starts, in which a woman, Giovanna Ralli, appears, wearing the “Miss Ideal Woman” sash, and is intent on carrying out an action typical of the figure of a housewife, that of ironing. Next to her, the male figure takes over, the chronicler Nino Manfredi, who interviews her, asking her how she spends her days. Despite the ironic and emphasized tone of the communication, it is possible to find, within the brief exchange of words, a strong characterization of the female figure in stereotypical terms. The woman is in fact portrayed as an efficient but frivolous housewife, and confirming this portrait, the woman herself states: “I’m a bit mindless but I never forget to bring the cheeses to the table”⁽⁶⁾. In the last scene, there is an effect of return to the enunciation context, in which the two actors who present the product appear again addressing the audience directly.

According to Panarese, the most popular female figures in advertising in the 1950s and 1960s are two: the “sensual / seductive woman” and the “mother / housewife”. If the function of the former is that of a “communicative bait”, a pretext or decorative element associated with the product whereas the maternal figure, on the other hand, retains the role of provider of care and affection. The latter has always been considered as a

(4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtpHQLJLf1o>.

(5) See Greimas and Courtés (1979).

(6) Our translation.

privileged target of advertising, as it is responsible for family purchases. She is the main consumer as the one who makes the decisions on purchases that affect the family, so advertising is mainly addressed to her in the effort to increase her purchasing potential (Codeluppi 2013).

Up until the 1960s, a woman was portrayed as an “angel of the hearth”, however, overtime the female figure became an increasingly independent figure, capable of managing both home and career at the same time which resulted in the representation of these transformations through advertisements (Boero 2014). The figure of the mother begins to emancipate itself thanks to the use of “revolutionary” appliances, such as the washing machine, the refrigerator, whose advertisements are intended to help housewives with housework therefore allowing them to have more free time (D’Amelia 2005). The Seventies instead show female depictions more assertive but also representations of women as objects, or products. On one hand, advertising conveys the value of freedom, while on the other hand the false chimera of sexual liberation through explicit gestures like winks (Papakristo 2015).

In the Eighties and Nineties, the emancipation process seems to impose itself with greater force. This resulted in mothers acquiring more freedom outside the home, even if this does not lead to the end of traditional values such as family, home and motherhood, which remain the fundamental goals of the majority of women (Sapegno 2011). In current years, the body and its physical form have become central. There is also an increase in the representations of the career woman, affirmed, self-confident, with attitudes and behaviors that were previously the exclusive prerogative of the male world (Boero 2018). It is in this period that a real revolution in the communication of women in advertising is triggered: rapid and unpredictable, the image of a free, independent woman, distant from the prevailing images of previous decades, bursts like an “explosion”, according to the Lotmanian definition of the term (2009 [1992]). From the Nineties onwards, however, these changes begin to be slower and more gradual. In the 2000s, mothers appear more autonomous, often having a job position equivalent to that of men and in some cases being shown as successful women; however, the stereotype of the perfect, beautiful, smiling woman in charge of family care continues to be present to a significant extent.

Today the range of stereotypes related to female identity in advertising is even wider. From the “mother-wife”, who takes care of children and companions, to the unscrupulous woman, the bad girl capable of inflaming the erotic imagination, to the sporty or career woman, but also to the friend, the grandmother, and the worker, the woman is no longer represented exclusively in the domestic context or in relation to the dimension of motherhood. Representations emerge aimed at restoring depth to the single person, in all its emotional and value complexity. However, from a numerical point of view, even in the most current advertisements the “ideal woman” is the one who takes care of the family. Representations that diverge from the model exist but are still linked to negative connotations⁽⁷⁾. Over the years, ultimately, the representations of women differ, returning more complex images, less linked to conventions and more attentive to social changes, but still simplified, and conventional (Zanardo 2010). The most recent advertisements are no exception, confirming the hypothesis of the lack of explosive moments in favor of a slow, gradual, consoling change.

This brief excursus on the representation of women in Italian advertising shows how within the same cultural sphere there can be propulsive thrusts and containment movements. In the cultural space of advertising, a constant struggle takes place between the tendency to stability – justified by tradition, morality, religion, history, and the commercial nature of the advertising itself – and the orientation towards new models, which aim to undermine the existing ones. Moreover, if the explosive processes ensure innovation, the gradual processes ensure continuity. The transformations of systems take place according to internal – or immanent – procedures or starting from multiform external influences, since any dynamic system is immersed in a space in which other equally dynamic systems are located. Therefore, any structure not only lives according to the laws of self-development but is also subjected to manifold collisions with other cultural structures. (2009 [1992], p. 87).

(7) In this regard, Walter (2010) observes that the meaning that women assign to the word “empowerment” is distorted: in the aspirations of many young women that she interviewed in night clubs, it is seen as a means for obtaining power over men, as well as self-confidence and success. The female body is therefore reified, reduced to pieces that the woman “chooses” to display, sell, use and reconstruct with the aid of cosmetic surgery. The normalization of strongly sexualized bodies operated by cosmetic surgery, and advertised by the mass media, calls for a critical stance from a gender perspective. On these themes, see Bordo (2004).

3.2. *Stereotypes and Gender Identities*

The following are examples taken from the corpus of analysis. A recent commercial from the Cif brand⁽⁸⁾ (2018) re-proposes, while focusing on a narrative inspired by the fairytale genre, a situation in which the image of women is linked to stereotypes and generalizations. “The princess was cleaning, cleaning”⁽⁹⁾, says the commercial, indicating how the roles of care of the domestic environment are the prerogative of the woman, regardless of whether the one represented is a princess. Her magical object, the degreaser Cif, allows her to perform the task in the best possible way and thus to regain her freedom. Alongside the representation of the woman as a housewife there is also that of a subordinate, passive, resigned subject who can only find her freedom again by perfectly fulfilling her domestic duties. The advertising imagery, therefore, represents social and cultural changes (Marrone 2001), but continues to use stereotypical images that often dilute the result, contributing to the dissemination of simplified images of the female identity. This commercial incorporates consolidated codes and representations able to reassure the target audience. The communication methods may have changed, but the underlying message and the emerging values remain the same as 40 years ago.

In a recent press announcement of the Pandora brand (2017), the woman’s body disappears, and the narration is entrusted only to words (see fig. 1). The verbal message, harshly contested by social users, reads: “An iron, a pajama, an apron, a Pandora bracelet: in your opinion what would make you happy?”⁽¹⁰⁾. The advertisement, written in white on a green background is accused of fueling gender stereotypes, as the combination of some elements (the apron, the iron) identifies the woman with the role of “housewife” / “in charge of domestic chores”. Even in this case, despite the change in communication methods and the minor use of the female body as the focal point of the visual message, the role inscribed in the text is that of a woman as housewife. The irony of the text plays a secondary role compared to the homologation of the Pandora bracelet to the other objects mentioned strictly connected to the domestic sphere.

(8) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlGiMVbTrGo>.

(9) Our translation.

(10) Our translation.

In spite of the innovative communication codes, the change is therefore only apparent.



Figure 1: Pandora advertisement

However, there are advertising communication campaigns that have tried to break away from the predominant stereotypical representations to trigger deeper, epochal changes. We mention two cases in particular. The first is the commercial entitled “Reverse selfie”⁽¹¹⁾ (2020), belonging to the Dove campaign for authentic beauty. The campaign aimed to revolutionize the concept of beauty, proposing the “natural” face of the girl and going beyond the concept and the models of perfection required by the world of communication and entertainment⁽¹²⁾: “Deep fakes and other trolling facial technologies cloud the water of facial recognition, increasingly blurring the difference between a ‘natural’ visage and an ‘artificial’ one, between the face and its simulacra” (Leone 2021, p. 14). The commercial shows the hidden face behind perfect and inauthentic selfies. The woman is also beautiful in her imperfection and in her distance from the idealized models of contemporary society. This campaign

(11) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiCDmK9oMxs>

(12) For a semiotic study of the face, see Leone (2021).

was found to be innovative due to the shifting of the communicative focus from the playful sphere to that utopian dimension (Floch 1990). The values underlying the narrative, in fact, refer above all to the field of woman's identity, which is defined through self-acceptance. However, many brands have preferred to continue to focus communication on perfect, idealized bodies, often retouched with photo editing programs, far from the everyday life of the public.

The second, more recent campaign, on the other hand, concerns the Nuvenia brand sanitary pads⁽¹³⁾ (2021) and tries to "exorcise" the moment of the menstrual cycle, showing it in its essence, without sweetening the message, as done in other advertisements concerning the same consumer item. A "revolutionary" commercial, starring women outside the typical aesthetic canons, in which a blood-stained sanitary napkin is shown. In addition, in the full version on television, there are numerous references to female private parts: shells, origami, flowers, fruits, clutches that open and close to the rhythm of music, alluding to the intimacy of women.

The goal of the campaign is to bring this moment in women's lives back to naturalness, going beyond the censorship imposed by cultural heritage that saw it as something to be hidden⁽¹⁴⁾. For a long time, in fact, myths and beliefs have influenced the collective imagination by defining menstruation as something malignant to the point of making women impure and dangerous. These beliefs exist also in our contemporary society, for example the idea that during the menstrual cycle women can compromise the integrity of what they come into contact with.

This type of communication inscribes in the text the profile of a liberated, self-confident woman, able to go beyond conventionality. However, there have been numerous criticisms directed at the advertising campaign where signs of the public's difficulty in accepting the new communication methods and the socio-cultural changes were shown. Indeed, this can be considered as an attempt of the advertising discourse to invade other discursive systems and to extend its field of action (Landowski 1989).

We thus notice that advertising identifies trends, anticipates changes, but in doing so, it tries not to confuse its audience, offering them known

(13) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSlsknYptu8>

(14) On the concept of naturalization of cultural issues, see Barthes (1957; 1964).

and reassuring models. Moreover, as recent sociosemiotic studies indicate (Boero 2018), advertising communication has a dual social and commercial status that requires it to have a “slow pace” (Traini 2018). It can stage innovations and increase public knowledge, but without destabilizing the public and therefore always in a very gradual way. Behind the emancipation communicated by advertising, we find in fact implicit references to traditional and consolidated values, or the use of stereotypical representations, capable of reassuring the public.

These dynamic transformations can be observed by focusing attention on texts, on their interactions and their reciprocal modifications within a cultural space. Indeed, as stated by Lotman (2009 [1992]), culture can be considered as a text organized in a complex way, as a space of homogeneous meaning that is completed with the transformation of elements from other texts, from the outside. It is precisely the constant intrusion of textual elements from the outside that gives the systems the dynamic characteristics of linearity and unpredictability. In advertising, we thus observe the contemporary trend towards change and conservation. If in some periods the speed of change has been greater, it is thanks to the pushes coming from external systems (feminist movement, changes in the system of women’s rights). However, at the same time other external elements (of a historical and religious nature) have put a restraint to change, contributing to the preservation of established models. Advertising reflects these opposing forces and trends. If in the Eighties, the speed of change was greater, as we can see from the prevalence of an individualistic actorization within the commercials of the time – in line with the dominant value trends of that period (emancipation, freedom) – in contemporary advertising there is a slowdown in the speed of change, despite the proposal of innovative models. In the most recent commercials, the representation of the woman in the family is not absent but juxtaposed to many other images of life, not specifically in family. At the same time, the traditional family model is not even denied or surpassed, confirming the fact that advertising is moving slowly, with great prudence. It does not propose radical innovations, but gradually innovates, always maintaining an anchor with tradition. It is the destiny of a language that must, on the one hand, reflect social changes – interacting with other cultural discourses – and, on the other hand, preserve its commercial function, avoiding destabilizing the public. Advertising language

must innovate by reassuring and it must amaze without disorienting. For this reason, traditional models and values continue to prevail in the contemporary advertising representation of women, although, as we have seen, there are signs of social transformations.

4. Saudi Arabia and the Representation of Women in Advertising

4.1. Socio-Cultural changes in KSA through Lotman's lens

The effect of the socio-cultural transformations in Saudi Arabia varies meaningfully by industry, medium, and primary market served as the country is moving rapidly. The need to adapt quickly to a changing environment is essential, where the transformations have forced a rethink, not only in terms of advertising spending, but also in terms of contents, since things that were not possible yesterday are possible today. Regarding the Kingdom and the multiple transformations occurred over the last four years, the question is already formulated, as a premonition, at the very start, in the opening lines of Jurij Lotmans's book *Culture and Explosion* (2009 [1992]), where the author wonders: "how can a system develop and yet remain true to itself?". When Lotman elaborates the idea of the static and dynamic relations of any semiotic system with the world which lies beyond its borders, he includes it in the framework of a reflection on the extra system and the function of the language and space outside of it, translated into content the moment it enters the sphere of the language. Focusing on the particular socio-cultural conditions of Saudi Arabia from Lotman's perspective helped us to gather preliminary data on whether a cultural transformation works in terms of its representation and collection in the memory for certain cultures, and how this could lead to a change in patterns of culture and social behavior. These societal transformations are part of a plan built by the Government and aligned with the "Saudi Vision 2030", a strategic framework to increase the possibilities for the Country to develop, valorise and strengthen a variety of sectors, including tourism, entertainment, recreation etc., reducing the dependence of oil as a result (Greco 2021). This overview highlights the importance of considering the cultures throughout a lens who can show

us how the changes are occurring and what are the difference in terms of their effect on the social environment. Moreover, the process of transformations is happening not as a gradual development but as a cultural burst who is affecting the autochthones and residents' perceptions in different ways, and not less, the construction of a country's image. Two examples that more than others communicate this cultural fluctuation are the removal of ban on women driving and the approval of women travelling without guardianship (Greco 2021). It is necessary to emphasize that the above-mentioned examples cannot be considered as an exhaustive representation of the phenomenon and as the only source of variety. They are part of a wider structure, where the "perpetual motion" (Lotman 2009 [1992], p. 115) is constantly complemented by transgressed intrusions which are, in this case, characterized by explosion. The case of Saudi Arabia is a relevant example of the idea developed by Lotman regarding the ability of the semiotic systems to survive and to be transformed, to remain themselves, while becoming others (2009 [1992]). The significant socio-cultural changes, such as the removal of ban on women driving, the opening of cinemas terminated forty years back, and other comparable radical events, awaited their time over the years to enter or re-enter the space and being conceived as a new, due to their intended and unintended effects on the society within and beyond their borders. They function as dominant elements, internally originated while urged by external boosts, able to determine future movement (2009 [1992], p. 15). Likewise, the current situation of rapid changes is affecting consolidated discourses, including advertising in the relationship between international and local line of action.

4.1.1. *Advertising in Saudi Arabia and the representation of women image: a brief overview*

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest advertising markets within the Gulf countries based on the market-oriented economy. Its development from a small industry, mostly limited to local media, with a contained need of ad agencies, until the late 1990, to an attractive pole for multinational agencies is due to the media age of the current population (35,503,333 in 2021), which is around 31 years in 2020 (worldometers.info). However,

the challenges faced in the past by the Country in terms of a limited understanding between international advertising and local context due to the dominance of the foreigner in the creative process is not completely overcome. For what may concern the miscommunication between two divergent socio-cultural contexts, experiences and knowledge, the barriers among practitioners, brands and consumers are still in place. This is the effect of a missing holistic comprehension of the cultural changes that are affecting the Countries, often considered just as a matter of what is permissible, and not as a transformation that occurred also in the people mindsets, critical thinking and self-determination (Lotman 1990). The importance of home-based approach is still valid as a strategy which reflects the need to enter a system of values of those who are involved in the process of communication and build a relationship with the consumer and the community surrounding them. In opposition to the idea of an equalization of socio-cultural diversities (Robertson 1992), the study of the target audience necessarily leads to an understanding of the similarities and differences from country to country in terms of their perception and interpretation of stimuli, but also the way they perceive themselves and the other and build a country's image accordingly, considering the concept of the *other*, as pointed out by Laura Gherlone, "as a plenitude of meaning: a concept that Lotman thematizes from the cultural point of view" (2016). In addition, the use of multiple and mixed languages has a significant effect on people's attitude towards advertising messages in several markets and leads to a deep comprehension of the country's controversial transformations. Cultural components of Saudi Arabia are usually used in advertisements as a constant connection between past, present, and future and an attempt to preserve and communicate the cultural identity of the country through the ads. Religion is another element that can be an integral part of advertising in the region. From a study perspective, the narrative representation of women in contemporary advertisement practices in the Islamic context is visible in the most recent semiotic and linguistic research. In these studies, the different components are not seen as separate elements, detached from other domains of communication, and advertising practices are seen in the wider semiotic environment. The representation of gender and stereotypes in advertising is analyzed by using a socio-semiotic approach.

Such research employs a number of different methods adding nuance to the semiotics study of narrative representation of women in the Islamic culture¹. Indeed, researches illustrate the use of denotation and connotation concepts discussing the model argued by Roland Barthes (1972) in terms of different levels of representation of meaning as in “Analysis of Women’s Image in Iranian TV Commercials Based on Barthes Visual Semiotics” by Nooshin Azin and Hossein Heidari Tabrizi (2015). The paper in particular focus on the techniques of persuasion involved in the construction of the meaning of Physical standards in advertising. In another example, “Islamic Beauty: Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Facial Foam and Body Lotion Advertisement” by Susi Herti Afriani (2012), the author bases the analysis section of the paper on the theoretical framework of the early communication theories considering the perspective of the communication process proposed by Shannon and Weaver. Thus, she conducts a discourse analysis focusing on the language as a semiotic resource in the theoretical framework of multimodality. In addition, a dissertation entitled “A Semiotic Analysis of the Iconic Representation of Women in the Middle Eastern Media” studies how different styles of colour, framing, typeface, salience, camera angles and their relations could be analyzed in a semiotic perspective (Sarah Ahmed Adham 2012). The analysis considers these elements with regard to the production of a configuration, which conveys a specific message determining the role of advertising in representing women in the media in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Regions. The position of women in Islamic culture, in general, and in Saudi Arabian society, is a complex and frequently misunderstood issue. It is certainly true that Muslim and Western views of the role of women show sharp cultural differences, as the current comparative study is highlighting between Italy and Saudi Arabia.

The development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has brought new opportunities also in terms of women empowerment in education and employment in order to overcome the barriers and the work challenges faced by Saudi women in the workforce (Al-Asfour et al. 2017). The representation of women in advertising in Saudi Arabia changed over the time from a situation where their presence was less compared to the men and was barely related to a specific model of woman wearing their veil and traditional clothes to a situation where she appears in

more facets and from different angles portraying the societal changes. However, in opposition to the advertisements in Western countries, and specifically in Italy, the sexual references remain a forbidden and impassable barrier, whether they are naked parts of the body or more implicit details of it, till reaching the self-censorship of the creative departments covering up the naked parts, as it used to be in the past. Along with the limitations in terms of representation of the body, advertising in Saudi Arabia expressed the people's stereotypical assumptions about how the two genders differ in terms of traits and attitudes portraying the woman as the docile and weak one primarily involved in home episodes, cooking interests, cosmetics and fashion. This reflection follows the idea developed by Goffman (1979), De Lauretis (1984), and Hall et al. (2013), that we also find inherent to the concept of *semiosphere*, that gender representation should be considered in terms of patterns, as the result of deliberately constructed relationships among different elements, responsible of the creation and circulation of multiple meanings due to a repetitive occurrence in the media discourses about what gender is in that particular cultural context, and not as a standalone image.

4.2. 2018: the Year of the Shift and the Corpus Under Study

The acceleration of the shifting process, that can be read by the lens provided by Lotman in his study of the culture, occurred in June 2018 and even before, in September 2017, when the Kingdom announced the lift of the ban on women driving. The importance of the announcement, and the decision to highlight it herein, resides in the impact that it has had on advertising and other sectors by more than its application. For instance, the repercussions of this epochal decision impacted also on the driving school, the first one for women, that attracted more than 165.000 applicants recorded in just three days. On another hand, also the possibility for women to buy their first car and get involved in the same rite previously reserved to the men, as coming of age moment, resulted in the activation of a new market for car manufacturers and in marketing efforts to lure female customers and enlarge the car sales. The most representative cases are the ones that included in their strategy and workforce structure

a specific focus on women, such as Toyota that dedicated showrooms sectors to female staff and call centers run by women, and General Motors that promoted a Saudi woman advertising executive as the chief copywriter of the region to directly speak to their target, understand consumers insights and build ad campaigns tailored on the local culture and its peculiarity.

From an advertising viewpoint, the attention to the Saudi lifted ban has resulted in an innovative approach to the representation of the women and her body that underlines some facets never highlighted before in a series of ads dedicated to women driving, released by car companies, but also by other industries, such as in the case of Coca Cola and Vogue Arabia. Instead of applying censorship as in the past, where women's faces were blurred out while the other characters' faces were not, the advertisements released, while waiting for the women driving lifted ban, show a powerful identity not regretting their cultural references and traditional heritage. Two cases are representative of this concept: the ad campaign launched by Ford Middle East⁽¹⁵⁾ (Fig. 2), and the advertisement released by Volkswagen⁽¹⁶⁾ (Fig. 3).



Figure 2 – Ford Middle East advertisement (posted on Twitter: September 27, 2017)

(15) Posted on Twitter by the profile Ford Middle East on the 27th of September 2017. The post received 12.121 retweets, 2.338 tweet citations, and 23.838 likes.

(16) Posted on the 27th of September 2017, with a very high average of engagements among Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

In the first case, the strengthening of the abrupt changes is accompanied by two powerful messages anchored to an effective verbo-visual relationship using different strategies to build up an implicit dialogue at three voices along with the hashtags #SaudiWomenMove and #SaudiWomenCanDrive. The verbal part of the ad, in its claim “Welcome to the driver’s seat”, establishes a dialogue between the source of the message and its receiver, while the image distorts, reverses and deceives the meaning of the message by inscribing a third person, the spectator, into the dialogue, as the key witness of the shift in the driver seat. The focus on the woman’s eyes through the representation of the side-view mirror is an attempt to redirect the audience attention to the woman fixed gaze firmly on the future. The cultural references and the bond with its own heritage are stated by the representation of a playful combination of the traditional black abaya⁽¹⁷⁾ and niqab, the veil that covers the entire face except for the eyes, and the car mirror tailoring the gaze in the same way.

On another hand, by following the same conceptualization, Volkswagen shows the hands as the chosen part of the body identifying the gender with a cultural reference, which is the one of the ancient traditions of henna art still in use today in Saudi Arabia and in the whole Gulf.

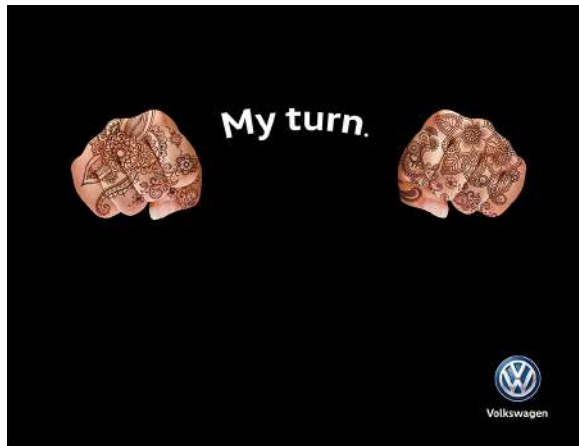


Figure 3 - Volkswagen Middle East advertisement (posted on Twitter: September 27, 2017)

(17) A garment worn by women in Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regions.

Here, the dialogue builds the visual strategy that reminds the idea of both hands on the wheel and the verbal text, which follows the shape and engages the audience in the dialogue. In both cases, this refers to the reflection developed by Lotman regarding the cultural texts and the paradoxical self-referential logic as a *bricolage of image* led by the unconscious contribution of the construction of a cultural identity in the middle of its transformation that needs always to be grounded to its own heritage. As for cultures, all explosive dynamic processes, according to Lotman, occur via a complex dialogue with stabilized mechanisms. The cultural advantage of the advertising messages lies in its semiotic function of re-constructing the identity through the composition of several pieces and rendering visible what is, otherwise, barely discernable. The examples above represent, albeit as a condensation, the dynamic of explosions and the gradual processes. For example, in the woman perspective, which is not just the representation of a subjectivity that inscribes the spectator in a position of participation, but also a condition of self-determination in contrast with the cultural issue of the forbidden eye contact.

This combination is imperative to the existence of the culture itself where, according to Lotman, “gradual and explosive processes, although antithetical, exist only in terms of their mutual reciprocity” (2009, p. 7). On the opposite side, some international advertisers saw in Saudi Arabia socio-cultural transformations the opportunity to directly speak to their consumers. Indeed, that is why they choose to communicate completely differently and create a totally new advertisement for the Country. This is no more an adaptation but a creation. In those advertisements, there are usually references to the culture and the values of the country. Coca-Cola is an example of miscommunication of the mentioned cultural changes that represents the women in a completely different way. Set in the desert and featuring an older-style red car, the ad depicts a woman struggling to accelerate until her father places a bottle of Coca-Cola on the dash. Not wanting to spill it, she manages to get going smoothly, drinks the Coke, and speeds off into the setting sun⁽¹⁸⁾. The ad

(18) Released on November 2, 2018, viewed over 73,000 times on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dcksBDOcTI>

generated a mixed audience reaction on the Internet showing the skepticism as the main advertising variable. The reason behind the phenomena is mainly related to the representation of stereotypes and patriarchal facets: the cultural references -such as, the desert as the main scenario of the Country and safe place for women driving- and the scene that depicts an older man allowing the young woman to drive, seems to be the mise en scene of a surrealistic scene made to intensify sexist cliches and stereotypes.

On another hand, and for a different target, the representation of woman still intensifies their characteristics and peculiarities. In this regard, the series of Saudia Thick Cream advertisement created by BBDO (Figg. 4, 5, 6), posted in May 2019, a year after the mentioned lifted ban, withing the category *food*, shows a woman ready to cut with the caption “Get your arms ready” and suggests the start of an action, recalling the idea of cooking at home.



Figure 4 – Saudia Thick Cream - BBDO advertisement (posted in May 2019)



Figure 5 – Saudia Thick Cream - BBDO advertisement (posted in May 2019)



Figure 6 - Saudia Thick Cream - BBDO advertisement (posted in May 2019)

Advertisement's parts are characterized by the actual physical object (e.g., the kitchen tools), the woman taking a pose which recalls cultural features and refers to the other, another *semiosphere* (Lotman 2005), specifically with reference to Japanese culture, and the brand name as logo and

product. The ads, and the occasion they portray, are real and surreal at once: traces of concrete reality refer directly to everyday life and practice, while the traces of another culture are intensified and disrupt the effect of concrete reality due to the background. The cultural value is anchored to the societal changes where the woman is represented in her personal strength and empowerment while showing something else. In both cases, the cultural context plays a fundamental role: it can be understood as a kind of framing device which incorporates attitudes, but it cannot be taken-for-granted. By following Christina Wilkman's reflections (2005), based on Roland Barthes' perspective (1977), the Saudis, as the Swedish in her case, "do not recognize the frames used by the sender" and make an intentional interpretation which does not correspond to intended meaning and build up on it a counterargument. This process shows us how Saudi socio-cultural changes can be detected even through an unforeseen reaction of the advertising audience who generated an alternative discourse. By following these discursive strategies, advertising, the text itself that, as pointed out by Lotman, "is considered as a functional rather than a stable object with constant properties" (2009 p. 115), depicts the cultural trends in Saudi Arabia, specifically in terms of contrast among different attempts to speed up, slow down and/or change direction, originated by the two current orientations of the country regarding the changes and the reactions of the society: the progressive one and the conservative one. Thus, we cannot consider advertising in Saudi Arabia as the space where to find a response, but again as a place where to preserve the cultural identity and its dynamics through the combination of the above-mentioned boosts. We refer to those events, which would help to confer identities to the culture as a combination of diverse features (Greco 2019, p. 22). This leads to an important understanding of the cross generation as an expression built to organize the new trends and plan for the new generation, while preserving the culture inherited from cultural texts (Greco 2016, p. 217).

5. Conclusions

The results of the present contribution examine the differences in the representation of women during the last few years with the aim of mapping

the traces of the socio-cultural changes and identity in advertising between Europe, specifically Italy, and Saudi Arabia. These facets are analysed through the Lotman's lens, considering various factors like discursive strategies, concerns for resistant stereotypes, local contexts and cultural values. Apart from these components, the outcomes are compared to see the differences and/or similarities between the two case studies.

Regarding the rhetorical elements used in advertising, results revealed that a first significant difference is observed between the two countries in terms of expression of the dynamics of socio-cultural transformations. According to Lotman's reflection, Saudi Arabia can be considered, through the cultural texts, as an expression of a mutual of explosions and gradual processes. On another hand, the case of Italy shows that the explosions occurred between the 70s and 80s are followed by a long period of gradual changes. Moreover, a significant difference is remarked in terms of representation of women role and body, through the diverse approach to the manipulation of its meaning. However, we do not identify a significant variance in terms of presence of stereotypes anchored to the cultural patterns and suffering of a distorted translation of the societal aspirations.

As mentioned in the introductory part of our essay, the objective of the research is not to question the reason behind these differences, which would be beyond the objectives of a semiotic investigation, but to highlight how this change occurs. We are thus able to highlight the presence of different models of change. In the case of Italian advertising, we have seen how the advertising does not invent new codes, but it picks up on social types and stereotypes. Indeed, advertising does not want to disorient its audience; rather, it wants to reassure the public, offering familiar models. In this sense, advertising mirrors social reality, reflecting and suggesting existing models and trends. To use terms introduced by Lotman (2009 [1992]), advertising in Italy always progresses gradually and only very rarely explosively. However, as we have seen earlier, in the representation of women in Italian advertising there are some indicators of change: new female models are slowly emerging and there is not a complete absence of novelty.

As for Saudi Arabia, the analysis of the corpus highlighted that the representation of women focuses on existing social types and over generation recognizable traditional models, although the female figure is linked to a set of values, for instance women empowerment, as a reflection of the society's

attempt to overcome a culture that has been nurtured by non-inclusive working practices. The shift towards women empowerment is the expression of a gradual change that still preserves the traditional identity, but also displays the extent of its explosion by building up the bridge between traditional identities and women in positions of power showing an evolutionary perspective. The result is at once contrived and real, prudent and optimistic as a resonance between gradual and explosive transformations. It might be considered as the greatest example of what, according to Lotman, a semiotic system does, rather than what it looks like, preserving its memory as a building block of its own identity, while changing itself due to those dominant elements pulled by the explosions into the system ensuring future movement (Lotman 2009 [1992], p. 14).

We need, then, to consider further the pace and the methods adopted by the language of advertising when it portrays social change. If in the case of Italy advertising is still working mainly as a “consolatory art” (Eco 1968), in the case of Saudi Arabia it acquires a function of self-determination of the cultures as an urgency to communicate with the other and beyond the boundaries while affirming and recalling its own identity. The Lotmanian tools and his conceptualization of cultural systems, therefore, allow us to grasp and understand this change and to read it in the broader set of socio-cultural changes that concern the two investigated realities, revealing itself to be current even in the contemporary communicative scenario.

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THE HEGEMON AND THE GHOSTS IN THE INDIAN ELECTORAL SEMIOSPHERE

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: L'egemone e i fantasmi nella semiosfera elettorale indiana

ABSTRACT: The Indian electoral semiosphere has a semiotic personality. It has a boundary containing bilingual filters that transform information from outside the semiosphere to the language inside it. Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi started at the periphery of the semiosphere and now routinely acquires the core position. The opposition to Modi is paralysed and stays on the electoral periphery. Modi obtained supremacy by coming to mirror the public's collective representations. The semiosphere, the greater system, and not the sign, is primary. It is the space for meaning generation. The electoral semiosphere mirrors the hegemon and the ghosts of the electoral arena.

KEYWORDS: Yuri Lotman, Semiosphere, Indian elections, Narendra Modi.

1. Introduction

India's electoral semiosphere is a space where textual meanings and languages are both created and contested in the presence of multiple social, economic, political and cultural structures. Several ideologies are at play, making texts and languages, and signs and symbols of the secular and the divisive, caste and casteless, regional aspirations and nationalists, most in binary opposition. We so extend Lotman's concept of the semiosphere,

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a “totality of individual texts and isolated languages, as they relate to each other” (Lotman 2005, p. 208) to India. Semiosphere is also a “space of meaning generation” (Kull 2005, p. 177).

The concept of the semiosphere is an important departure in semiotics. Saussure’s semiotics is about the sign, comprising the signifier and the signified; Pierce’s Sign is, in the main, about Representamen, Object and Interpretant. Lotman breaks from this tradition of individual semiotic objects and considers the *whole*, which for him, comes before the *parts*. Lotman proposes the semiosphere after Vernadsky’s biosphere:

While the biosphere — consists of a quite definite structure, defining everything, without exception, which falls within it... The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist... primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the “greater system”, namely the semiosphere (Lotman 2005, p. 208).

A study of an electoral semiosphere, the socio-political semiosphere during elections, would focus on the *whole* or the *greater system* and individual texts and multiple languages. There will be a multiplicity of texts immersed in more than one language. The codes that decipher the texts could be absent. Lotman explains:

As an example of a single world looked at synchronically, 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; besides there are the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour-leaders and the visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which *in a certain sense* it is). This is an image of the semiosphere. Then we have to remember that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing (Lotman 1990, pp. 126-127).

India’s electoral semiosphere is also a museum that comes alive, not just in space but also in time. Thousands of years of religion, caste, *varna*, patriarchy, matriarchy, kinship, political parties, sects, belief systems, class

system, occupation systems, regions, influential political leaders, peoples, farmers, those engaging in small jobs, illiterates and educated, young and old, ruralites and urbanites, the large corporate houses and the media they control, the independent media and social media, and the like are on display. There is a long history of these elements that becomes dynamic and lively during elections. The actors are both like and not-like; they communicate with each other, decoding the texts in more diverse ways than perhaps in any other country in the world. Then there is an institution of the Election Commissioners that sets the rules of behaviour, as does the museum staff in the museum. The government in power appoints the commissioners. Finally, to complete the analogy with the museum, all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic correlations in a single mechanism.

While the museum objects are static, the related elements in the electoral semiosphere are dynamic; they come and go at short or long intervals. There are “verbal texts: slogans, press releases, public speeches; non-verbal texts: logos, party and coalition symbols; syncretic texts: posters, commercials, audio-visual products ... endowed with meaning. Individuals’ behaviour ... and masses of people moving and acting together” (Cosenza 2020, pp. 99-100) that help generate meanings in the semiosphere.

2. Heterogeneity in the semiosphere

In an electoral semiosphere, each actor produces texts and also decodes texts produced by others. Journalists who tour the electoral world and leading politicians produce oral and visual texts. Political workers and the *mahaulis* who lead discussions in tea shops and informal meeting places catalyse the election environment (for *mahaulis*, see Narayan 2021) and the voters. Each text occupies overlapping semiotic spaces and languages. The texts mirroring individual and public consciousness if not decoded by the same codes, lead to a discrepancy in meanings. Such discrepancies are not exceptions but the rule in the Indian election semiosphere.

In an internally plural semiosphere, the languages, therefore, run from “complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability.... various languages that are spoken can be said to exist synchronically but without a single coding structure” (Lotman 1990, p. 125).

When differences in languages are high, inter-connections become all the more difficult. For example, India is “arguably the most socially heterogeneous nation-state of modern times.... These many religions, natural languages, ethnic and tribal groups, castes and classes of India provide friction points which frequently become occasions for intergroup conflict” (Chhibber and Petrocik, 1989, pp. 191-192). Since these many elements may not be mutually translatable, they cannot easily communicate, resulting in a plural and diverse electoral semiosphere.

Undoubtedly, the semiosphere consists of isolated units like texts, languages, structures and individuals, but it is more than the sum of the parts; it is a single mechanism. Umberto Eco gives an analogy that adding branches and trees cannot help us understand the forest. Still, a walk in the forest will enable us to discover the whole forest and individual trees (Lotman 1990, p. xiii).

3. Rise of the hegemon as he walks the forest

The incumbent prime minister Narendra Modi walked the forest, the whole forest and talked to each root, branch, leaf and fruit to bring people into a collaborative whole and a collaborative consensus (Raja 2019). Just as trees and grasses in a natural forest vie with each other for space and existence, and nature brings order, so does Modi overcome ‘intergroup conflict’, playing on the multiple fissures and divisions.

In overcoming intergroup conflicts, Modi’s parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), supports him. RSS has worked at the grassroots for the last 90 years for building Hindu Nationalism and for resolving some intergroup conflicts. Jaffrelot (2007) sees Hindu Nationalism as a variant of Indian Nationalism whose origins lie as far back as the late 19th century. One of the primary aims of this movement is to protect Hinduism from religions that strike at its foundations.

Many social organisations in the country talk in divisive overtones on religious grounds. Modi does not talk in such overtones. Instead, he emphasises mainly development in his public appearances, creating a cosmopolitan image of himself. He won the two Parliamentary elections comprehensively in 2014 and 2019 on the planks of development,

corruption-free governance, and Hindu Nationalism. He took charge of the first two and left the latter to other organisations.

3.1. *Binary oppositions*

(Cosenza 2020) identifies two tendencies in western political communication: constructing *binary oppositions* and the *storytelling fashion*. These two elements have been used by Modi efficiently to his advantage.

Modi developed binaries like *Naamdaar* (the one with a big name), which he used for his opponents and *Kaamdaar* (the one who works) to situate himself against others, especially Rahul Gandhi⁽²⁾, a leader of the opposition. Commentators like Jha (2019) blame the RSS for creating binary oppositions on religious grounds and creating an anti-Muslim semiotic space; Jha says:

They (the RSS) have been actively complicit in anti-Muslim riots and violence – and benefited from the anger and anxieties such moments produce. They have triggered low-intensity but persistent tensions and sharpened existing ones to enhance the trust deficit between friends, neighbours, villages and workers on religious lines (Jha 2019, p. 115).

While denying being complicit in such violence, the RSS-BJP says that other political parties appease Muslims; Modi says everyone deserves equal treatment.

This hegemon surges ahead: he talks development and walks Hindu Nationalism.

3.2. *Modi, the storyteller, the godi media and beyond*

RSS and Modi have used storytelling to put forward political ideologies. These stories narrate the struggle, motivation and aim of the RSS and a

(2) Rahul Gandhi is the great-grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, grandson of Indira Gandhi, and son of Rajiv Gandhi, all of whom were Prime Ministers of India. The Gandhi family has a stronghold over the Congress and on governance when in power.

critical element in all stories is the element of valour, deeply rooted in the Indian psyche (Narayan 2021, p. 29). As storytelling mirrors and appeals to public sentiment, people's minds are drawn to it.

Modi is an expert storyteller. He forcefully weaves his journey with the story of the nation. Remembering his childhood, he called himself a *chaiwala*, a tea vendor. The voters empathised with him. Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar said that Modi will not become Prime Minister but could come and sell tea at a Congress session (The Indian Express 2014). Modi retorted, saying that people like Aiyar were feudalists who found it 'insulting to compete against a tea vendor' from a backward caste (Modi 2014). A *Chai pe Charcha* (conversation over tea) programme helped relate with Modi, the tea vendor. Ordinary people mesmerised by Modi found their existence, needs, aspirations, and love reflected in Modi's sayings on Twitter or on the media inundated with messages, quotes, slogans, pictures, and visuals.

Storytelling has helped Modi translate some of the completely mutual untranslatable elements into his language and establish textual and cultural hegemony over the electoral semiosphere.

Furthermore, the government started a campaign, *Thank you Modi Ji*, on banners thanking Modi for providing free vaccines for Covid19. This deification gives divinity to the hegemon. The *godi media*⁽³⁾ has worked towards giving Modi the status of a god.

In contemporary times, the mass media is synonymous with propaganda. In several elections, like that of US President Trump, neo-fascists invoked hatred against the 'enemy within', with 'complete unreason' and prejudice; they 'set themselves up as movements' (Patnaik 2020). In this manner, they hegemonised the semiosphere.

However, in a wild forest, some florae are poisonous; nevertheless, part of the organic system of the biosphere and hence the semiosphere. Modi deals with these poisonous florae and translates them into ghosts, a phenomenon that we shall discuss in a following section.

(3) A section of the media that blindly follows Modi is being called *Godi Media* by political commentators. *Godi Media* means media sitting in the lap. A few large corporates have come to control media in India.

4. On the language of development: Capturing the People Speak

The semiosphere of economists and policy consultants speak in a specific language favouring the need for economic and social development. Modi draws upon it and converts its language into his own⁽⁴⁾. Notably, Modi's campaign machine is the filter.

For instance, the Hindi synonym *Vikas*, used by Modi *ad nauseam*, captures the aspiration for development. Two slogans in BJP's lexicon are noteworthy:

Ham Modiji Ko Laane Vale Hein, Acche Din Aane Vaale Hein (We will bring Modi, good days are about to come)

Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas,

(Everyone's Co-operation, Everyone's Development)⁽⁵⁾

The advertisement guru Pandey writes about how the people's life-world was an inspiration for the advertisements:

We took real people, real stories, real issues. The raw material came from the BJP briefing team...

All lines in this campaign were from people-speak—*Ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* (This time, Modi Government) was as simple as the brief. *Janta maaf nahin karegi* (People will not forgive) is something on the lines of what we have said or heard many times since childhood: *Bhagwan maaf nahin Karega* (God will not forgive you). Or, for that matter, *Acche din aane wala hai* (Good days are around the corner). Have we not consoled friends in grief or trouble, saying, 'Don't worry, good days are about to come?' (Pandey 2016, pp. 211-213).

(4) Any semiosphere is a part of an interconnected group of semiospheres (Lotman 2005, p. 205) and is true also for the electoral semiosphere.

(5) These slogans were part of the BJP campaign in 2014, relayed extensively in mass and social media. For instance, see (Chatterjee 2019) and BHARATIYA JANTA PARTY (2014, March 29). *BJP- Achchhey Din Aane Waley Hain: 2min 30sec*. [Video]YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMEBFw-lhh8>.

Modi used several phrases to define himself in ‘people-speak’. These included *chaiwala* (tea vendor), *fakir* (mendicant), *chowkidar* (watchman), and *kamdaar* (worker). In this manner, Modi’s political semiosphere mirrored the lingua of the typical man on the street. ‘I am one among you, ordinary folks!’, ‘I will protect you!’ seemed to be the message.

The media machine projects Modi as a commoner who is at once an uncommon, extraordinary person who can lift the burden of the hopes and expectations of over one billion Indians. Modi, the ordinary became extraordinary; the profane turned into the sacred.

4.1. *Modi draws upon collective representations*

Modi draws upon the feelings and sentiments common to an average citizen and comes across as an *Apna Admi* or a son of the soil. While the repeated mention of ‘Development’ and government programmes aimed at the marginalised hits the right nerve, mentions of Hindu Nationalism get the audience emotionally charged. Modi’s language mirrors public sentiment, which everyday people think is proper. Some instances are:

In the towns, streets and villages... many who supported Modi could not, or did not, offer tangible reasons for their support. It was just extraordinary faith, faith in the *niyat*, intentions, and the *imaan*, integrity, of a single man. (Jha 2019, p. 13)

They were the first year, second semester students, so around 18 and first time voters this year or next. Conversations brought the same answers, so striking that I made videos on my phone. Each said she would vote for BJP, “but only because of Modi”. Why? Because Swachh Bharat has worked, even my village is 75 per cent clean; we are becoming Digital India; he has improved India’s image globally and, most notably that “corruption has been destroyed”. Now there is no point arguing because they believe it as ‘the’ truth. What do they think of Rahul Gandhi? “Must be a good man, but I don’t really know.” So, it isn’t as if I love Modi and detest Rahul. I only know Modi as a leader. And his is the only message I have heard. (Gupta 2018).

4.2. *Avalanche of Texts*

Preceding instances are elucidations of ‘vertical isomorphism’ (Lotman 2005, p. 216) wherein structures include peer groups and communities. Modi’s image in its entirety is reflected in the structures and commented upon by the public. This, Lotman says, “facilitates the conversion of the text into an avalanche of texts” (Lotman 2005, p. 216). And makes Modi the most talked about person in the media and people talk. It shows that many people across religions, castes, occupations, ages see a reflection of themselves and their life-world in the signs and the language of Modi. People fall in love with their images of India and define how they should be as a nation.

Modi associated youth with his ‘Doer’ image: “today’s young mind does not want to tread the oft trodden path... he wants to make new paths ... wants to step in the unknown ... new destination, new aims, new paths and new wishes.” (Modi 2021). Modi is then the fountain of the avalanche of texts when the young respond. Modi is electorally rewarded.

5. **The Code-Switch of Semiotic Personality**

The semiosphere thus created by Modi “correlates to the concept of semiotic individuality” (Lotman 2005, p. 209). The method of coding defining the semiotic personality of a semiosphere underwent a massive change in India when Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. The ideology/characteristic feature/supremacy code went through a code switch. Before the 2014 elections, the personality was secular/corrupt/dominant Gandhi family. After 2014, it was a Hindu Nationalist/honest/dominant RSS. In Lotman’s words, the semiotic processes “flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments, seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view to displacing them” (Lotman 2005, p. 212). Modi accomplished this periphery coming to the centre in 2014. Pandey (2016) notes that they accomplished their mission within a few hectic months for a compelling portrayal of Modi as the contender for occupying the core.

For Modi’s 2014 campaign, the elections were not about past achievements but a display of aggression and power of an *Urbemensch* Modi. A

significant departure from the past was belittling the political opponents with fierce, negative, virulent attacks. In addition, the 2014 elections saw systematic management by advertisement gurus on a massive scale, contrary to elections in past decades. Modi has proved an uncanny ability to produce images and texts in the semiosphere and control their definitions. Modi is now god of Hindu Nationalism.

6. The Boundary of the Electoral Semiosphere

The boundary of a semiosphere belongs both to the semiosphere and the extra semiotic space that surrounds it. The texts of a semiosphere are translated through bilingual translatable filters into language (or languages) situated outside the given semiosphere (Lotman 2005). These bilingual filters enable communication between various possible languages while creating a gap in meaning. Creating the border requires a “chaotic” external sphere and constructs this itself in cases where it does not exist (Lotman 2005, pp. 205-212).

Modi and his team acted as bilingual translatable filters. Before 2014 they were outside the political semiosphere dominated by Congress. He painted the Congress government as leaderless, corrupt, and inefficient ‘Other’. His attack on the Congress was so ferocious that its leader Rahul Gandhi could not make a mark later in 2019. Furthermore, in 2022 Rahul Gandhi is unable even to portray the contours of what he wants to oppose. Modi virtually silenced the opposition.

Chaos soon prevailed in the periphery. There was mob lynching of the vulnerable castes and minorities, and farmers felt that the government was infringing their rights. Even in such circumstances, the poise of Modi rose like a pole star over a tumultuous storm. The leader, nevertheless, had to restore a semblance of order. Creating a storm and restoring order required different languages. With Modi occupying the nucleus of the semiosphere, this was easy.

Lotman speaks of nuclear structures in “a visibly organised more amorphous semiotic world gravitating towards the periphery”. While gravitating towards the periphery, Modi rose to a state of ‘self-description’ using meta-languages and then separated himself from them. Modi

then becomes a “superstructure which itself is above the irregularity of a real semiotic map” (Lotman 2005, p. 213). Modi, as a consequence, rose above everyone else.

7. A Paralyzed Opposition sees Ghosts

Modi emerged as a superstructure. Rahul Gandhi is far from rising to ‘self-description’ or using a ‘meta-language’. He battles less with Modi and more with some senior members of his party. In an online interaction, he said:

There are a lot of people who are not scared, and they are outside the Congress, who are ours. Bring them in. And those who are scared, throw them out.... Leave. You are of the RSS. Just leave. Have fun; we don’t want you. You are not needed. We want fearless people; that is our ideology. This is my direct message⁽⁶⁾.

A semiosphere also has internal borders and the translation of information through these borders gives birth to meaning, generating new information (Lotman 2005, p. 215). Seemingly, Rahul Gandhi is attempting to do the same.

Rahul is asking for some structures, which exist outside his party, to come inside the border. Rahul appealed to a host of activists, students, journalists, professors and the like who are vocal against the RSS and Modi. This group has been called *Anti-National* and *Urban Naxal*. This included a student Kanhaiya Kumar of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), whose slogan⁽⁷⁾ of *Aazaadi*, meaning freedom, drew national and international attention. The slogan asked for liberation from caste,

(6) This is an excerpt from the address of Rahul Gandhi to his party workers. This was telecasted on New Delhi Television Ltd (NDTV) a popular Indian Television News Channel. See: NDTV (2021, July 16) *Run To RSS, We Don't Need You: Rahul Gandhi's Message To Dissidents*, [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLMJ6pBOuxc> (Accessed: 26 September 2021).

(7) For the full slogan see: STAND WITH JNU (2016, March 19) *Azadi slogans at JNU's Freedom Square, led by Kanhaiya* [Video] YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQC_1a2tXX4 (Accessed: 30 September 2021).

capitalism, media, Modi, RSS, incarceration, custodial rape, and the like. A significant section of the *godī media* projected the slogan as being not against the powers that reign but against India itself and called the JNU Anti-National. These events remained at the periphery of the electoral semiosphere.

On the boundary of India's electoral semiosphere are different civil society voices, playing an important role in elections and politics, objectively calling what Modi stands for in their opinion. One such voice is Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy who speaks from the periphery of the electoral semiosphere. She speaks of the power of Modi's core and the helplessness of the periphery as follows:

Every time I speak at this Press Club, beyond this group of real people, I see the ghosts of people who, even in recent times, would be here, at this table with us. The ghosts of all of them who are today in prison. People who have spoken up recently.... there are no more eminent people in this country. Everybody is fair game, you know.

Everyone is now on the list, or the waiting list, or reservation against cancellation list. So, I want to salute all those people who have stood up and are behind bars today.... (We) are reduced to begging for our citizenship or begging not to be just mass incarcerated in prisons.

(In) Kashmir, in the states of North East, in Chattisgarh, in central India where hundreds, thousands, of Adivasis and villagers, nameless and unknown, are in jail—charged with sedition, charged with UAPA, the Unlawful Activity Prevention Act. If there is one thing that this panel must demand, it is the revocation of that law. Because that is not a law, that is just a loose connection of words, which allows a state to charge anyone with anything. And imprison them for months and years together.

That law, if it is not repealed, any amount of protest are not going to help us.

The most rotten part of this country is the mainstream media. (Journalists are) Spineless pets on a saffron leash, drawing massive corporate salaries, destroying the lives of people... And we would not be in a state of fascism if it was not for the Indian media. An election is like watching the Ferrari of the BJP compete against a few broken bicycles. And we call ourselves a democracy. We are a one-party democracy, which is an oxymoron.

We have a government that is very cunning in how to win elections. But no intelligence about how to rule this very vast country...

Unless every one of us, whatever our differences, realise that we are up against fascism... So, every one of us, whether you are a judge, whether you are a politician, whether you are a writer, whether you are a student, whether you are a small magistrate, whatever you are, the time to stand up is now.

Thank you, ghosts, for listening. Bye⁽⁸⁾.

In this commentary, the ghost is both an admission of defeat and hope. Modi would have smiled snidely with the opposition reduced to 'ghosts', which belong to the other world, and are not relevant for the moment. However, he knows that they could return. So his magic spell keeps them in prison. "Though the appearance of the ghost of Napoleon probably implied a prophecy of the future triumph of the elements: From the gloom of exile/He foretold eternal freedom to the world". (Lotman 1990, p. 84). So while Roy awaits her ghosts to rise, Modi remains in oneness with his one billion people.

The opposition is not only on the margins; it increasingly consists of a core that does not exist. The (left) intellectuals call themselves ghosts, activists like Kanhaiya clamour for elusive independence. Other political leaders in the Modified semiosphere do not know anything other than cling to those groups and caste alliances, not with Modi. Some others are silent and know that they are silent.

The hegemon can create new signs and symbols and an avalanche of texts in interactions. With the help of corporate friends who control the print and digital media, he re-assures his position in the semiosphere; new signs and symbols are a distant dream for the opposition, primarily limited to social media. They only tweet. They appear to be ghosts. The greater system is asleep.

(8) This is a transcript of Arundhati Roy's address to the Press Club of India on October 22, 2020. See: KARWAN E MOHABBAT. (2020, October 23). *The Media Has Enabled Fascism In India | Arundhati Roy | Karwan e Mohabbat* [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muiXZOC077g&t=315> (Accessed: 30 September 2021).

8. Conclusion

Modi has become the 'Master-Sign' and the chief 'Sign-Maker' of the Indian electoral semiosphere whose deification has blown his image out of proportion; a god beyond mortal reproach. Opposing becomes sacrilegious. Modi, the Hindu Nationalist sets the rules of the game. As a result, many alternate perspectives such as gender, class, and communication have been silenced and made invisible also by the heavy presence of Modi's electoral artillery.

This paper has argued that a hegemon could control the semiotic personality of an electoral semiosphere. In plural and diverse India, the hegemon has to code and be a bilingual filter at the borders of semiospheres. There are consequences for both winners and losers. Those unable to deconstruct the hegemon's semiosphere and fail to engage in people talk end up victims like the ghosts in exile.

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THE MARVELOUS CITY: A POSSIBLE TEXT OF RIO DE JANEIRO⁽¹⁾

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TITOLO IN ITALIANO: La città meravigliosa: un testo possibile di Rio de Janeiro

ABSTRACT: Based on the concept of “text of the city,” formulated by semioticians Yuri Lotman and Vladimir Toporov, we aim to outline the presence of the city of Rio de Janeiro in some literary works, among which are Machado de Assis’s *Quincas Borba* (1998[1891]), Lima Barreto’s *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma* (2015[1915]); João Rio’s *The Enchanting Soul of the Streets* (1908); the poetic work of Olegário Marianno and Noel Rosa; Nelson Rodrigues’s *Golden Mouth* (1959); Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star* (2011[1977]); Rubens Figueiredo’s *Passenger at the End of the Day* (2010), and Martha Batalha’s *The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão* (2017[2016]). The space in the selected literary corpus is Rio de Janeiro, represented in different periods of time: from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. We hypothesize that Rio de Janeiro, as is the case of Russian cities analyzed by Lotman and Toporov, can be studied by antitheses, such as our own/the other’s, city/nature, order/disorder, center/periphery, and parallels, such as city-body and city-woman. Besides, in many texts the characters are in a marginal position in relation to the wealthy layers of Brazilian society.

KEYWORDS: Yuri Lotman; Semiotic of Culture; Text of the City; Rio de Janeiro; Brazilian Literature

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Introduction

In Yuri Lotman's wide output as a semiotician we find some works, albeit not many, that focus on the cultural manifestation of the city (Lotman, 1990a; Lotman, 1990b). As we know, the concept of "text of the city" emerged in the context of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school in the 1980s as a result of the expansion of the concept of "text": it is no longer used to show the difference between "linguistic text" and "artistic text" (as in *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, first published in 1970), but to encompass the variegated manifestations of human culture. Thus, the notion of "text of culture" (Lotman, 2005 p. 436) is consolidated. The concept of text of the city was first developed in reference to Saint Petersburg in Yuri Lotman's (1990a) and Vladimir Toporov's (2003) works. According to Toporov (2003 p. 25), in the works of writers such as Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Dostoevsky, and Bely the description of Saint Petersburg is surprisingly similar, which allows us to define the cultural manifestations of the city as a single text. Besides, from the different characteristics that shape the text of the city, Lotman (1990a) underlines the ability all cities have to create and accumulate codes, producing new meanings.⁽³⁾

In this paper, we would like to approach the possibility of applying this concept to the manifestation of cities in other literary expressions, such as Brazilian literature. Would it be possible to single out texts from Brazilian cities, such as Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, São Paulo, and others? What characteristics would mark the existence of these cities in the works of different authors so that we could define it as a single text?

Some studies in this area have been carried out in Brazil. For example, Vólkova Américo & Américo (2016) studied the possibility of applying the concept of "text of the city" to the representation of Brasília, Brazil's capital city, in Brazilian culture and literature – more specifically, in Clarice Lispector's oeuvre. Differently from Brasília, whose representation in Brazilian literature is very timid, Rio de Janeiro is the space used

(3) In the following decades the concept was applied to other cities by Mikhail Odessky (1998), Konstantin Isupov (2000), Nina Mednis (2003), and Sergey Nekliudov (2005), among others. In the conference "Urban Semiotics: The City as a Cultural-Historical Phenomenon," the principal event of the Third Annual Juri Lotman Days at Tallinn University (3–5 June 2011), the use of the concept of "urban text" was also examined.

in many texts, such as songs, poems, chronicles, short stories, and novels. Known as the “beautiful” and “marvelous city,” the one that is “full of charm,” the literary Rio de Janeiro reveals aspects of the city that go beyond the stereotyped images the media portray (Ferrara 2008, p. 47).

The number of texts in which Rio de Janeiro is their space of representation is countless; therefore, we have selected some that not only use it as such, but also reflect on the city and its role in Brazil’s history and culture. Moreover, these texts belong to different periods of time: from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century: Machado de Assis’s *Quincas Borba* (1998[1891]), Lima Barreto’s *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma* (2015[1915]); João Rio’s *The Enchanting Soul of the Streets* (1908); the poetic work of Olegário Marianno and Noel Rosa; Nelson Rodrigues’s *Golden Mouth* (1959); Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star* (2011[1977]); Rubens Figueiredo’s *Passenger at the End of the Day* (2010), and Martha Batalha’s *The Invisible Life of Euridice Gusmao* (2017[2016]).

The text of the city is portrayed not only in literature, but also in other artistic expressions, such as architecture, painting, music, photography, and cinema. Each art form translates and represents the urban semiosphere in its own way. To briefly exemplify it, we will show some manifestations of Rio in music and cinema.

Therefore, we hypothesize that a diachronic approach allows us to point out distinctive traits of a possible text of Rio de Janeiro and to consider some relevant inversions in the representation of the constitutive elements of the urban semiosphere. We also suppose that Rio de Janeiro, as is the case of Russian cities studied by Lotman and Toporov, can be analyzed by antitheses, such as our own/the other’s, city/nature, order/disorder, heaven/earth, center/periphery as well as by parallels, such as city-body and city-woman. This research is theoretically grounded not only in the founding works of Lotman and Toporov, but also in studies by Brazilian semioticians Irene Machado (2015) and Lucrécia D’Alessio Ferrara (2008), and Italian semiotician Franciscu Sedda (2008). They all have tackled the semiotic nature of the city, inclusive from a Lotmanian perspective.

1. The name

Both Yuri Lotman (1990a) and Franciscu Sedda call attention to the role a proper name plays in the process of city individualization:

It is possible to say that the emergence of a city's name is the result of the encounter between space and community. Besides, retrospectively, it is the sign that shows and sanctions the communication between them. It is the dynamics that appears clearly when the city is founded, which in myth is always represented by an act of city nomination. [...] The conflict over the name of the city is the sign of a conflict about subjects who dispute the city as a "piece of property" and about the specific "piece of property" that turns the city into space⁽⁴⁾ (Sedda 2014, p. 4).⁽⁵⁾

The history of the name of Rio de Janeiro can be understood as a desire to catechize and purify its pagan origins. According to Rafael Freitas da Silva, Rio de Janeiro was "paganly" named, for it refers to the day when the Portuguese arrived at Guanabara Bay and believed it was only a large river (2020 p. 286). Other Brazilian cities were named according to the liturgical calendar. Later on, around 1567, when Estacio the Sá (considered the founder of the city) fought against the Tupinambá indigenous people, his death by arrows gave him the aura of a martyr and allowed him to be compared to Saint Sebastian (Silva 2020, p. 457). Thus, the name of the city fulfilled the Catholic ideal to name it the Saint Sebastian City of Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, since the myths of Rio's foundation, the Carioca bourgeoisie has clinged to the importance of Europe, denied black and indigenous influence, and demanded the presence of God, whether to watch or punish people.

(4) All translations from Portuguese into English are by Orison Marden Bandeira de Melo Junior, unless otherwise noted.

(5) "Poderíamos dizer que a emergência do nome da cidade é o resultado do encontro entre o espaço e a comunidade, e também, retrospectivamente, o signo que demonstra e sanciona a realização da comunicação entre os dois elementos. Trata-se de uma dinâmica que emerge com clareza no ato de fundação da cidade, que, no mito, é sempre representado com um ato de nomeação da cidade. [...] O conflito sobre o nome da cidade é o signo de um conflito sobre os sujeitos que disputam a cidade enquanto "bem" e sobre qual seria o "bem" através do qual a cidade torna-se espaço".

2. The Rio of Antitheses

2.1. *Nature/City*

Lotman's starting point is the position of the city: he begins his analysis by classifying cities as concentric and eccentric (at the edge). The former represent a model of an ideal country, and their cultural text is concentrated around the antithesis heaven/earth. The latter type of cities is situated at the edge of the cultural space: "on the seashore, at the mouth of a river" (Lotman, 1990a, p. 192). Because of their geographical position at the edge, both Saint Petersburg and Rio de Janeiro would be eccentric cities. Their eccentric position activates the antithesis natural/artificial, nature/city (Lotman 1990a, p. 192).

In Rio de Janeiro, nature, which is part of the name of the city (Rio – River), manifests itself through imposed forests, hills, and bodies of water. In the texts we analyzed, the presence of the ocean is discrete; however, there are some narratives about the Carioca river⁽⁶⁾ which go back to the time when the Portuguese first arrived in Brazil: iron-rich waters that would quench thirst and have therapeutic properties:

To avoid the cold, right after taking a bath, indigenous men and women would rub themselves and warm their bodies by rubbing leaves from the forest on themselves [...]. One can imagine the fully-clothed Portuguese arriving on the banks of the Carioca river and getting rid of their clothes so they could dive into the crystal clear water and drink from it [...] (Sandroni 2016, pp. 165-166).⁽⁷⁾

However, the more the nobility and the bourgeoisie took over the region around the still clear water of the Carioca River, the more they would push popular classes to the central area of the city, which is where job opportunities were mainly found. Morro do Castelo surroundings

(6) Carioca is the adjective given to the city and the people of Rio de Janeiro.

(7) "Para evitar o frio, logo após o banho, índios e índias se esfregavam mutuamente, aqueciam seus corpos ao passar em si folhagens da mata [...]. E já imaginaram os portugueses chegando às margens do Carioca enroupados, livrando-se dos fatos para mergulhar na água cristalina, bebendo dela [...]."

came to be considered a stain on the landscape. Because of that, in 1921 Carlos Sampaio determined that it had to be demolished for sanitation and city modernization. Besides, an uncomfortable vision of the city center hovered exactly in the excess of natural elements, associated to disorder, filth, and poverty. City nature constantly imposed itself on anyone who would explore it and was held responsible for the countless attempts to sanitize the city, which happened especially in the first years of the 20th century. Later on, with the speedy expansion of the city, a noteworthy inversion occurs: the presence of nature becomes an item of luxury, accessed only by the elite. For example, in Rubens Figueiredo's *Passenger at the End of the Day* we follow the process of overpopulation of a distant district, leading to its total deforestation.

The nature/city antithesis is clearly expressed in urban skylines:

The city landscape, an unresolved mixture of natural and constructed elements – to the point it is not totally natural, nor totally constructed – has its own rhythms, forms, colors, materialities. The community that lives in it turns some of its elements into true dominant symbols, into its own image. It is exactly when a panorama becomes an emblem or a skyline, a logotype (Sedda 2014 p. 6).⁽⁸⁾

As an example, the silhouette of the Cristo Redentor (Christ the Redeemer) at sunset becomes a logotype of Rio de Janeiro. It is sold on paintings, beach sarongs, and decorative objects. However, the Carioca skyline reveals much more than this stereotypical view.

According to Brazilian semiotician Lucrecia D'Alessio Ferrara, “the city's skyline is a graph that registers the fluctuations of its economic power, but, above all, points to the symbolic value of its height in terms of the city's communication with the world” (2008 p. 39).⁽⁹⁾ The increasing height of the buildings aims to showcase power and wealth. However,

(8) : “A paisagem da cidade, mistura irresolúvel de natural e construído, ao ponto de não ser nem totalmente natural e nem totalmente construída, possui seus ritmos, suas formas, suas cores, suas materialidades. A comunidade que vive a paisagem eleva algumas de suas porções a verdades dominantes, a verdadeiros símbolos, a imagens de si própria. De maneira explícita, como quando um panorama torna-se emblemático ou um “skyline” transforma-se em logo”.

(9) “O skyline da cidade é um gráfico que registra as flutuações de seu poder econômico, mas, sobretudo, assinala o valor simbólico da altura como comunicação de uma cidade com o mundo”.

in Rio, the opposite occurs: Carioca skylines are still defined by nature, hills and slums, which insist on standing out in the urban landscape. Therefore, another important inversion becomes part of the Carioca semiosphere.

Height is a means to communicate with the reference points of a city. Thus, building means “verticalizing to make it seen, making it seen to turn it into a symbol” (Ferrara 2008, p. 41).⁽¹⁰⁾ This is very intriguing, as we consider the fact that the hills of Rio – besides Cristo Redentor on Corcovado – show the communities’ constructions and the borders created by social inequality, which is evident in Rio. Black, indigenous and poor people’s own construction of housing was done by the communities’ dwellers, amateur bricklayers, and carpenters: they were the ones who built the city. However, their activity has been historically disqualified, and yet when they are done by white people, those skills are called art (Campos 2021, p. 60). To live is to be in the collective body of society as an individual, and the historical lack of public policies addressed to popular classes – which somehow makes it clear that they are unwanted – lead to consequences, such as vulnerability, insalubrity, home ownership insecurity, and risk.

The conflict between nature and culture, poverty and wealth, occupation and urbanization has followed Rio de Janeiro’s history to this day. The feeling that there is always something to be corrected, to be purified “to please the English” is sublimated in the relations between the bourgeoisie and the popular classes, in family and professional relations.

2.2. *Our own/the other’s*

A fundamental antithesis that allows the delimitation of the borders of a semiosphere is its relation with the other, other cultures, and semiospheres (Lotman 1990b; Machado 2015, p.75; Sedda 2008, p. 10). If in Lotman’s text on the symbolism of St Petersburg (1990a), the city is revealed as the antithesis of Moscow, in the case of Rio, the antitheses are many. For example, in Machado de Assis’s *Quincas Borba* (1998), Rio de

(10) “verticalizar para fazer ver, fazer ver para simbolizar”.

Janeiro, which was the capital city of Brazil at the time, is represented as connected to power, and, especially, to the Crown. It is the antithesis of the provincial town of Barbacena:

“Are you going to stay in the capital, or are you going back to Barbacena?” Palha asked after twenty minutes of conversation.

“My desire is to stay, and I’m going to stay,” Rubião replied. “I’m tired of the provinces. I want to enjoy life. I might even go to Europe, but I’m not sure yet.”

Palha’s eyes lighted up instantly.

“You’re doing the wise thing. I’d do the same if I could. Right now I can’t. You’ve probably been there before, haven’t you?”

“I never have. That’s why I got the idea when I left Barbacena. Not right now. People have got to get the melancholy out of their systems. I still don’t know when it’ll be, but I’m going ...”

“You’re right. They say there are a lot of splendid things there. It’s not surprising, they’re older than we are, but we’ll catch up. And there are things in which we’re just as good as they are, even better. Our capital, I’m not saying it can compare with Paris or London, but it’s beautiful, you’ll see ...” (Machado de Assis 1998, p. 61).

Rio de Janeiro is also viewed as a province when compared to Europe, represented by Paris and London. On the other hand, Rio is portrayed as a type of “other” in relation to the province town Barbacena, which, in fact, represents the rest of the country. In the passage above, Europe is characterized as “splendid,” “older,” “they”; as to Rio, it is “beautiful,” “young,” “we.” A kind of competition between Europe and Brazil is thus established. In fact, it is embodied in Rio, which, on the one hand, tries to imitate Europe, and on the other, seeks to be different from it, to find its own peculiar traits.

Brazil-Europe relations are also portrayed in contemporary writer Rubens Figueiredo’s *Passageiro do fim do dia* [*Passenger at the End of the Day*]. The city here is also a metaphor of Brazil and an antithesis to Europe. While Pedro, the main character, rides a bus through town, he

reads Darwin. The urban space is thus drawn through a foreign scientist's perspective:

Pedro knew that a century and a half before Darwin had crossed the same city where he lived. His observing eyes had contemplated the coast. Without a doubt, he had chosen and picked some butterflies, insects, and plants; besides, he had put them in a systematic catalogue with names and surnames in Latin, and pinned them in boxes which probably had glass covers (Figueiredo 2010, pp. 21-22).⁽¹¹⁾

Lotman (1990a) emphasizes that the need of an outside viewpoint is a specific characteristic of cities at the edge. However, in the passage above, the city, which represents Brazil, is portrayed as a prey, a product of study and consumption for the European culture. In general terms, the European influence in the text is portrayed as predatory, colonizing, and destructive. There is, therefore, another inversion: the outside element, which was admired at first, becomes a target of criticism. Besides, Europe is not the only one to represent the "outsider," based on which Rio de Janeiro defines its identity. Throughout the 20th century other "rivalries" became more intense: São Paulo became the largest city of South America, a symbol of modernization and industrialization, and in the 1960s, with the foundation of Brasília, Rio was no longer the capital city of Brazil.

2.3. *Center/Periphery*

The antithesis between center and suburb is also recurrent in city descriptions (Lotman 1990b). As an example, this is how João Chagas writes about the 19th-century suburbs of Rio de Janeiro:

(11): "Pedro sabia que um século e meio antes Darwin tinha passado por aquela mesma cidade onde ele vivia. Tinha percorrido aquele litoral com seu olhar observador. Tinha, sem dúvida, escolhido a apanhado umas borboletas, uns insetos, umas plantas, e tinha levado embora – tudo num catálogo bem ordenado e espetado dentro das caixas, talvez com tampas de vidro, com nomes e sobrenomes em latim".

[...] Laranjeiras and Botafogo are the elegant suburbs. They have electric transportation, larger streets, and more cheerful aspects. The electric Tramway which takes us there is fast, cozy, and elegant; [...] then the air of the city changes completely. One could say that they were in any large summer estate. One sees rich houses, small palaces surrounded by gardens, houses entwined in vines, marble terraces, and picturesque facades of country houses. [...] One breathes repose and well-being, opulence and elegance. Light is warm and vibrant; the air is abundant and fragrant; the backwater is soft. Bees hum, and an imperceptible whisper caresses the ears. One suspects a rich idleness (Chagas *apud* Sandroni 2016, pp.182-183).⁽¹²⁾

Here there is an interesting inversion of the traditional pair center/periphery (Lotman 1990b), which is typical of a *Carioca* text: the center is portrayed as poor, dirty, and chaotic whereas the periphery is rich, orderly, and European. However, in the beginning of the 20th century, as the city grows, the suburbs are totally different:

The buildings in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro are the strangest of all the city. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the local topography, the capricious shape of the hills. The main cause, however, is the bizarre nature of the buildings themselves.

You can picture nothing as irregular, as erratic and as completely unplanned. The houses sprouted up like seeds that had been scattered by the wind, and the streets sprouted alongside them. Some begin as wide as a boulevard and end as narrow as an alley; they meander along in fortuitous loops and resist being straightened out with implacable and sacred hatred (Barreto 2015, p. 84).

(12) “[...] os subúrbios elegantes são os das Laranjeiras e os do Botafogo, servidos pela viação elétrica, ruas mais largas, aspectos mais ridentes. O Tramway elétrico que nos conduz até lá, é ligeiro, cômodo, elegante [...] então o aspecto da cidade muda completamente, e dir-se-ia estarmos em qualquer grande estação de verão. Tudo são casas ricas, palacetes no meio de jardins, vivendas enleadas em trepadeiras, terraços de mármore, pitorescas fachadas de moradias campestres. [...] Respira-se repouso e bem estar, opulência e elegância. A luz é quente e vibrante, o ar abundante e cheiroso, suave o remanso. Zumbem abelhas; um imperceptível sussurro acaricia os ouvidos. Suspeita-se de uma rica ociosidade”.

In the passages above the suburbs are related to nature. In Chagas's text, this connection is harmonious and peaceful; in Barreto's text, on the other hand, the hilly topography and the bizarre nature of the buildings create chaos. But it is more than that: it is nature (wind) that sprouts up buildings. The inevitable comparison with Europe comes in the following paragraph:

There is nothing in our suburbs that remotely recalls the famous suburbs of the great European cities, with their grand, placid villas and their well-cared for, tarmacked streets and avenues, not even those well-kept gardens, pruned and trimmed, because ours, when they exist at all, are usually ramshackle and ugly (Barreto 2015, p. 84).

In Figueiredo's *Passenger at the End of the Day* we see the city through the bus window: Pedro, the main character, rides the bus from the city center, where he works, to a distant district, where he lives. The bus is the link that connects different (and antithetical) places in town. Contrary to Baudelaire's and Benjamin's *flâneur*, the passenger at the end of the day can only contemplate the city when the bus stops in traffic and the narrative orbits around the degradation and impoverishment of a peripheral district.

The center/periphery antithesis in the Carioca text has undergone different semantic inversions both in qualitative terms (poor/rich, beautiful/ugly) and in relation to its locality. This is due to the fact that "the city outskirts change, become plural, stratify" (Sedda 2014, p. 10). A multifold of centers and peripheries exist in current Rio de Janeiro, a phenomenon that has not been studied in depth by Lotman's and Toporov's urban semiotics. According to Brazilian semiotician Irene Machado, "Lotman did not live long enough to follow the technological explorations that created the semiotic space" (2015 p. 76).⁽¹³⁾ As a consequence of the processes of modernization, industrialization and overpopulation, Rio has become a fragmented metropolis, comprised of different enclaves (Salgueiro 1998) that are in continual – and sometimes conflicting

(13) "Lótman não viveu o suficiente para acompanhar as explorações tecnológicas criadoras do espaço semiótico".

– interactions. The outside element, therefore, is not only outside the urban semiosphere; it is also inside it as it depends on the viewpoint, on the position of the utterer.

3. City-woman, city-body

Another recurrent motif in city description is the parallel between cities and women (Toporov 1987, p. 124; Nekliudov 2005). It is also used when describing Rio. For example, in *A cidade mulher* [*The Woman City*] (1923), a book of chronicles authored by Álvaro Moreyra, the capital city of Brazil is described as a woman who had an inverse aging process: the older she got, the younger she became (Castro 2019, p. 102). When Brazil was still a colony of Portugal, Rio was described as “a sad old lady with a Christian name and tired eyesight – São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro.”⁽¹⁴⁾ When Moreyra describes it in 1923, it is a young woman:

The girl and young lady slowly got rid of her shyness and wanted to live... Her body took on the rhythm of the waves and the elegance of slender trees. Her eyes embrace a remnant of a dream, and her hands hold the flight of a happy desire... A woman, a real woman, the most woman of women... She knows the present. She divines exquisite things in the future. But don't talk about dates, times, deeds, creatures from the past... She gets confused when people talk about them. On the other hand, she knows every single seamstress and hatter in Paris... she knows the biography of every movie star by heart. She speaks French, English, Italian, Spanish... She loves poets... She drinks tea voraciously... And she dances everything... She's beautiful! (Moreyra *apud* Castro 2019, p. 102).⁽¹⁵⁾

(14) “uma velhinha tristonha, de nome cristão e vista fatigada - São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro”.

(15) “Menina e moça, pouco a pouco se desembaraçou, perdeu o ar acanhado, quis viver... O corpo tomou o ritmo das ondas, a graça das árvores esguias. Tem um resto de sonho nos olhos, o voo de um desejo alegre nas mãos... Mulher bem mulher, a mais mulher das mulheres... Conhece o presente. Adivinha coisas deliciosas do futuro. Mas não lhe falem em datas, épocas, feitos, criaturas do passado... Não lhe falem que se atrapalha. Em compensação, enumera todos os costureiros e chapeleiros de Paris... diz de cor a biografia dos artistas do cinema... entende de esportes como ninguém... Conversa em francês, inglês, italiano, espanhol.. Ama os poetas... Toma chá com furor.. E dança tudo.. É linda!”

Therefore, it is the autonomous existence that rejuvenates the city. The same city-woman parallel is also found in *Cidade-Mulher* [*Woman-City*] (1936), a movie⁽¹⁶⁾ directed by Humberto Mauro and played in the liquidated Casino Theater. Noel Rosa's songs were played in the movie, one of which was the theme song also titled *Cidade Mulher* [*Woman City*]. The city is depicted with ambiguous feminine features, with charm and temptation, and yet, because of its beauty and closeness to nature, it has no sins:

Sensitive city,
Irresistible,
City of love, woman city. [...]
A patterned city of beauty,
It was nature
That protected you
City of sinless love
Jesus was born
really close to Corcovado.⁽¹⁷⁾

In this excerpt, nature is a starting point to the semiosis of urban space. As Rosa tries to portray space, he refers to it in the feminine gender, creating an ambiguous perspective. In "Jesus was born really close to Corcovado," Rosa alludes to the Cristo Redentor statue, which was inaugurated in 1932 and is one of the city's most famous landmarks. He also refers to Mary, the immaculate virgin, as the "city of sinless love."

Olegário Marianno, in his turn, made this city-woman parallel more sensu-

(16) Rio's manifestation in painting, photography, music and cinema is an extremely broad theme. For example, Rio is portrayed as a City-woman and a City of God (2002, under the direction of Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund) in cinema. The latter movie represents one of the most dangerous areas of the city. It is in the west zone and is subject to ceaseless conflicts between slum dwellers and the police.

(17) "Cidade sensível,
Irresistível,
Cidade do amor, cidade mulher. [...]
Cidade padrão de beleza,
Foi a natureza
Quem te protegeu
Cidade de amores sem pecado,
Foi juntinho ao Corcovado
Que Jesus Cristo nasceu".

al. In his book *Cidade maravilhosa* [Marvelous City] (1922), the city has body contours:

City of joy and addiction!

A 20-year-old flower, a rose of desire

A vibrant body for the sacrifice

Breasts willing the first kiss (Marianno *apud* Castro 2019, p. 232).⁽¹⁸⁾

The same parallel was explored in 20th-century Brazilian music. The most renown song is certainly Vinicius de Moraes e Antônio Carlos Jobim's *Garota de Ipanema* [Girl from Ipanema] (1962). The city-woman dyad is linked to the theme of the sea and the beach.

The recurrence of the connection between the ambiguous image of the holy and sensual woman and the city, which can be the cradle of sin and charm, takes us to the very idea of what a woman is. Throughout the centuries, women are depicted as emotional, connected to nature, with nourishing sensitivity and emerging feelings. As she is regarded as more sensitive and emotionally irrational – as well as fragile, beautiful, submissive, and sweet –, she is also given negative traits, such as perfidiousness, seduction, and sexual amorality (Eve's characteristics). This makes scientific and common-sense view of the feminine sex profoundly ambiguous and incompatible with a social life of work and seriousness (Engel 2017, p. 339). These issues take us back to Lotman's reflection on the "eternal struggle between elements and culture" (1990a, p. 193). Whatever is perceived as natural becomes wild, genuine, beautiful, and attractive. Culture is "humanized" as a worked stone. His postulation on this struggle makes us reflect on the perception of women and the city space.

It is also interesting to compare Rosa's untainted view of Corcovado, where he sees the birth of Christ, and Machado de Assis's take on the place. In Machado's chronicle titled *O Sermão do Diabo* [*The Devil's Sermon*], the writer imagines the lord of hell himself sitting on top of the Corcovado Mountain (on top of which the statue of Christ the

(18) "Cidade do gozo e do vício!
Flor de vinte anos, rosa do desejo
Corpo vibrando para o sacrifício
Seios à espera do primeiro beijo".

Redeemer is) to proclaim his gospel, a “Sermon on the Mount” that announces the new morality of Rio’s modern society:

9th You are the salt of money market. And if the salt loses its strength, what will it make salty? [...] 13th You have heard that it was said to the people, “Love one another.” Therefore, I tell you, “Eat one another, for it is better to eat than to be eaten; the loin of the neighbor is more nutritional than your own.” [...] 17th I, however, tell you, “Never swear by the truth, for naked and raw truth is both indecorous and hard to chew. Always swear by everything, because men were made to believe in those who swear untruly rather than in those who do not swear at all. If you say the sun has died, people will light candles.” 18th “Do not do your deeds in front of people who may report you to the police” (Machado 1962, p.648).⁽¹⁹⁾

Nevertheless, even before Machado, the Portuguese colonizers were also intimidated by the Corcovado Mountain. They called it the Pinnacle of Temptation (Sandroni 2016, p. 190). According to Toporov, space is understood as a replica of the body, the “small world” (Toporov 2016, pp. 24-29). When Bakhtin writes about the grotesque body in popular culture, he states that it is “not separated from the rest of the world”; it is unfinished, imperfect. Similar to a city, it is a collective body that emphasizes apertures and convexities, such as the open mouth, the genital organs, the potbelly and the nose (Bakhtin 1984, p. 26). As to the Portuguese colonizers, a possibility of the renewing perception of the body ended up in a religious understanding of the official culture.

In the mythopoetic perspective, urban narrative emerges as a continuation of the narrative of men’s expulsion from paradise (Toporov 1987, p. 121). Some narratives about Rio create an impression that its population fails to be a collective body and recreate the lost paradise and

(19) “9º Vós sois o sal do money market. E se o sal perder a força, com que outra coisa se há de salgar? [...] 13º Ouvistes que foi dito aos homens: Amái-vos uns aos outros. Pois eu digo-vos: Comei-vos uns aos outros; melhor é comer que ser comido; o lombo alheio é muito mais nutritivo que o próprio. [...] 17º Eu, porém, vos digo que não jureis nunca a verdade, porque a verdade nua e crua, além de indecente, é dura de roer; mas jurai sempre e a propósito de tudo, porque os homens foram feitos para crer antes nos que juram falso, do que nos que não juram nada. Se diseres que o sol acabou, todos acenderão velas. 18º Não façais as vossas obras diante de pessoas que possam ir contá-lo à polícia”.

exist independently of God. For some, maybe, this lost paradise takes them back to the time before the Portuguese first arrived in Brazil – an idyllic view of still living in communion with nature without the suffering of slave labor and without sin.

4. Madness and marginalization

Another recurrent theme in the texts in which Rio de Janeiro is represented is the characters' madness and/or marginal position. It seems it is not directly related to Rio, but to the alienation of city inhabitants due to modernization. In Machado de Assis's *Quincas Borba*, marginality is taken to an extreme through the character's gradual maddening process: Rio brings hopelessness, lack of money, disappointment in love, and Rubião's madness.

However, Lima Barreto may be the writer who most approached madness associated to Rio. In *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma*, the main character, a learned and patriotic person, is committed to a psychiatric hospital because he wanted Tupi, not Portuguese, to be Brazil's national language. Similar to *Quincas Borba*, in Barreto's novel the character is taken away from the city to improve his mental condition. Moreover, the author himself – a Black man – was forcefully committed to a mental hospital as an indigent (Dias 2009).

João do Rio's narratives also portray marginalized characters: "the ones who live off of useless things"; "those jobs that, despite being ignored, are part of the system of large cities!" (Rio 2012, p.48).⁽²⁰⁾ In the chapter "O que se vê nas ruas" [What is seen on the streets], the author portrays different types of jobs Carioca people could take: petty jobs, "the product of misery linked to important factories";⁽²¹⁾ cigar stamp dealers, cat hunters who sell them as hares, prostitutes, prayer sellers, *vultures* that spy on passersby next to hospitals and morgues... In relation to the ones at the edge of the Carioca society, we read how people from disadvantaged classes survive. Further on, when we reach the chapter titled "A

(20) "os que apanham o inútil para viver"; "essas pequenas profissões ignoradas, que são partes integrantes do mecanismo das grandes cidades!"

(21) "produto da miséria ligada às fábricas importantes".

Galeria Superior” [The upper aisle], we find a detailed description of penitentiary inmates and their habits, contrasting them to everyday workers from popular layers of society and showcasing how arbitrarily arrests were made (Rio 2012, p. 179).

Maria Rita Kehl states that samba was banned in Rio in the beginning of the 20th century. Usually connected to the crime of idleness, it was directly associated with Black people’s leisure activity. Therefore, at the end of slavery, popular classes tried to create a “world without guilt.”⁽²²⁾ And the result of that was the creation of the “rogue,” for poor people had to “live off of improvisation between illegality and misery, between low-paid jobs and heavy jobs equally low paid. Or, in the lack thereof, to create a way out at the edge of legality” (Kehl 2019, pp. 58, 70).⁽²³⁾

João do Rio wrote about these rogues (*malandros*), the art of capoeira, the mad people and the *pombagiras* who lived in a city that claimed to be civilized but would increasingly deny its Indigenous and African roots, hide the poor, or show them when working. In João do Rio’s chronicles, the process of modernization brought foreigners worldwide to work in the city, turning it into a true Babel. However, the European influence not only enriched the Carioca semiosphere, but also pushed it far from its roots:

Rio may well know the life of the London bourgeois, the theater plays of Paris, Manchuria’s geography, and Japanese patriotism. I bet, however, that it does not know its own development plan, nor the life of its inhabitants, its strange and exotic ways, the jobs that promote progress, the pain, and the misery of the wide changing Babel (Rio 2012, p. 48).⁽²⁴⁾

The rogue (*malandro*) is a figure that is easily found in the imaginary of the Carioca. He is the one that knows the streets and their laws, the night

(22) “mundo sem culpa”.

(23) “a viver na base do improviso, entre a ilegalidade e a miséria, entre a oferta de pequenos serviços mal pagos e de trabalho braçal pesado e igualmente mal pago. Ou, na falta de ambos, a inventar uma série de expedientes à margem da legalidade”.

(24) “O Rio pode conhecer muito bem a vida do burguês de Londres, as peças de Paris, a geografia da Mandchúria e o patriotismo japonês. A apostar, porém, que não conhece nem a sua própria planta, nem a vida de toda essa sociedade, de todos esses meios estranhos e exóticos, de todas as profissões que constituem o progresso, a dor, a miséria da vasta Babel que se transforma”.

and its pleasures. A well-known example is Seu Zé Pelintra. Wearing a white linen suit, a Panama hat, and a red tie, he became the first in the line of the rogues of Umbanda, a Rio-born religion (Simas 2018) that is part of the culture of Rio's lower classes. A sister religion to Candomblé, Umbanda brought with it and its Orixás all the African ancestry, whose blood and sweat have for centuries been spilled onto the cobbled stoned streets of Rio. It also praises those whose knowledge about ancestral healing herbs and rituals is passed onto the younger generations. However, as Umbanda followers praise old black men called Pretos Velhos – regarded as underdeveloped by the official culture (Simas 2018) – it brings the Carioca semiosphere other figures, such as gypsies, indigenous people, rogues, *pombagiras*, and *exús*, who are also rejected by society. These are night figures who are maliciously associated with depravity and sin. Guardians of city corners, these marginalized figures are pushed to the borders of the semiosphere as an energy that is directly connected to the urban space.

Nelson Rodrigues contributes to the list of marginalized Carioca figures. In the play *Boca de Ouro* [Golden Mouth], a bookie from the district of Madureira has all his healthy teeth pulled out to show his social status through golden teeth. We can again think about the relationship between space and body as the body catalyzes city signs and sums up in itself a space of multiplicity. *Boca de Ouro* is a laughable symbol of the national frustrations of the petty bourgeoisie who live in the suburbs and whose ambition to social climb is constantly thwarted.

Similar to Nelson Rodrigues's character, Rio de Janeiro attempted to create "golden mouths" as a means to reach the status of a modern and cosmopolitan city, subject to foreign scrutiny. The demolition and deliberate burning of slums as well as the removal of public spaces to build highways are great examples of it. As part of the preparations for the 2016 Olympic Games, they decorated the acrylic panels installed along Linha Vermelha, which hide The Favela (Slum) da Maré in some stretches. The process of beautification was more evident in the stretches closer to Galeão International Airport, from where tourists arrive in Rio. Like *Boca de Ouro*'s main character, Rio evinces a constant desire to be on the top and belong to the group of "posh cities." Rio's surface is thus ripped apart just like *Boca de Ouro*'s natural teeth are substituted for a golden

denture. However, for semiotics of culture, the boundaries of the semiosphere, i.e., the area on the periphery, at the edge, are the ones that generate their dynamism (Lotman 1990b).

Macabéa, a character in Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star*, is also among the marginalized population in society. She is from the Northeast and "there are thousands of girls scattered throughout the tenement slums, vacancies in beds in a room, behind the shop counters working to the point of exhaustion. They don't even realize how easily substitutable they are and that they could just as soon drop off the face of the earth" (Lispector 2011, p. 17). She is almost nonexistent and resembles insignificant characters that populate Russian literary narratives, such as – and especially – the works of Pushkin, Gogol and Dostoevsky, which portray Saint Petersburg in its most vivid expression. The Brazilian writer of Jewish-Ukrainian origin was most likely directly influenced by Russian literature. It is not by chance that Macabéa realizes she belongs to a lower social class when she reads the title of Dostoevsky's novel *Humiliated and Insulted* (Lispector 2011, p. 38). It is still noteworthy that the main character somehow represents the city, which takes us back to the city-woman parallel.

Another female character that portrays the city-woman parallel is Eurídice Gusmão, the title character of Martha Batalha's *The Invisible Life of Euridice Gusmao*. However, she fits the category due to the absence of the city – not its presence – as she hardly ever leaves the house, and when she does, she has a specific outfit for the event. The narrative takes place in Rio in the 1940s and represents women as products of the bourgeoisie's discourse on gender and work.

In the 20th century Brazilian society witnessed the consolidation of capitalism, with greater emphasis on urban life and the rise of the bourgeoisie and their values. The difference between public and private places reduced people's interactions and increased the social distance between the bourgeois class and the people. It also valued domestic intimacy under the aegis of a religious discourse that valued a cozy and welcoming home for the husband when he comes home. Children would be safe during early childhood as they were looked after and raised by the mother, who would stay home, away from the dangers and the "questionable" social relations that exist on the streets (D'Incao 2017). The discourse that

women had to renounce themselves was reproduced. Based on it, a woman also had to give up on her interests so that she would be valued for her ability to look after other people. Eurídice was a brilliant and dedicated student. She applied her hard work to domestic life, becoming, thus, an exemplary model of internalized patriarchal discourse:

The thing is, Euridice was brilliant. Give her the proper equations and she would design bridges. Give her a laboratory and she would invent vaccines. Give her blank pages and she would write classics. But instead, she was given dirty underwear, which she washed quickly and left spotless, before sitting on the couch, looking at her nails, and thinking about what she ought to be thinking about (Batalha 2017, p. 12).

Besides being regarded as fragile, submissive, and sweet, women are usually viewed as connected to nature, nutritional sensitivity, and exaggerated feelings. Men are usually identified as cultural figures, connected to lucid reasoning and decision-making skills. Therefore, it is very interesting to see Rio as a city-woman with all the ambiguities this parallel creates: the city is warm and has an imposing nature, an enticing sea, carnival, and the girl from Ipanema who passes by and distracts men. However, it also submits itself to what is foreign and to a hygienist perspective that discards and hides what the city has as its most intimate as if it had no value.

5. Some final remarks

Our brief analysis pointed to some possible ways we can apply Lotman's and Toporov's concept of text of the city to Rio de Janeiro's culture and Brazilian literature. The presence of Rio in Brazilian literature is extremely broad and found in other artistic languages, such as architecture, painting, music, photography, and cinema.

The Carioca text is a complex semiotic structure with various centers and peripheries, comprised of several other semiospheres and traversed by countless boundaries that are in dialogue and movement. Similar to all the other urban texts, the text of Rio originates in a universal urban text, constituted by antitheses, such as our own/the other's, city/nature,

order/disorder, center/periphery, feminine/masculine, as well as by comparisons with the human body. Thus, the local is integrated into the global, once, according to Franciscu Sedda, “every semiotic formation, all the ‘meaning objects’, are the products of ‘situated’ (local) enunciations but, at the same time, the producers of a potentially global enunciate/space” (2008 p. 7). The universal urban text, in its turn, approaches the concept of semiosphere: to both, the presence of the other, the edge, and the marginal is of most importance. The “outside” element, which is vital for the self-definition of urban semiosphere, is not found solely outside its borders (as are the continuous comparisons with Europe, São Paulo and Brasília), but also inside it. Marginalized characters, guardians of city allies and corners are vital energies that nourish the urban semiosphere and promote its dynamism.

The diachronic approach made it possible to find some important inversions in the representation of the urban semiosphere: as time goes by, positive and negative assessments of each element of the antitheses (center/nature, our own/the other’s, center/periphery) undergo significant changes. Nature, once condemned as untamed, disorderly and dirty, becomes an item of luxury; foreign influence (especially European), once admired, is criticized; the center and the periphery exchange places and multiply.

We still need to answer the question about the specificity of the Carioca semiosphere. The history of its proper name shows, on the one hand, the presence of the natural and pagan element and, on the other, the desire to follow European models and the demand for divine guard and protection. Moreover, differently from many other cities where verticalization means power and wealth (Ferrara 2008, p. 40), in Rio’s skyline nature, hills and slums stand out, resisting demolition and invisibility. The same role of resistance is played by literature, which, as we have seen, insists on presenting the marginalized and the ignored elements of the Carioca semiosphere.

As the city is in endless movement and expansion, the text of the city can never be closed and finished. Therefore, we hope that this study can be expanded as other works and cultural languages contribute to it with their reflections and nuances.

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MEMORIE DI UN FUTURO PASSATO. COME L'ARTE RACCONTA L'ANTROPOCENE

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ENGLISH TITLE: Memories of a Future Past. How art narrates Anthropocene.

ABSTRACT: The paper aims to give an account of the cultural phenomenon of the Anthropocene through art. In doing so, it uses the texts of Burtinsky, Charrière and Saraceno to chart the course through the analysis of the mechanisms underlying the functioning of the texts in this semiosphere. Particular attention is paid to what has been defined as “tampering with memory” and the possibility of a culture founded on a de-anthropized multi-centric perspective based on the interdependence between humans and non-humans.

KEYWORDS: cultural semiotics; contemporary art; memory-hacking; mythologies of disasters; anthropocene

1. Umanità della geologia, geologia dell'umanità

“In principio era la bomba. O forse era il vapore?!”. Così, con una battuta, potremmo sintetizzare il complesso dibattito tra biologi, scienziati naturali, geologi, geofisici, antropologi che ha posto le basi per l'individuazione di una nuova epoca geologica, l'Antropocene, che nasce dalle ceneri di un Olocene messo alla prova da una singolare “forza geologica” in grado

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di influenzare in modo determinante l'intera biosfera: l'umanità. Il termine fu coniato dal biologo Eugene Stoermer e reso celebre da *Benvenuti nell'Antropocene* (Crutzen 2005) del premio Nobel Paul Crutzen, i quali rilevavano che una traccia originaria dell'avvento di questa epoca umana è individuabile negli isotopi radioattivi del cesio 137 e del plutonio 239 e 240, residui antropici delle prime esplosioni atomiche degli anni Quaranta, che hanno per la prima volta lasciato nelle rilevazioni stratigrafiche un segno indelebile dell'attività umana. Numerosi altri studiosi, come Zalasiewicz, convengono che le sue origini vadano datate al XVIII secolo e all'avvento della Rivoluzione industriale, la quale avrebbe iniziato a immettere significative quantità di gas serra in atmosfera, e ad avviare quell'attività estrattiva di combustibili fossili depositatisi nel corso di milioni di anni sotto la superficie terrestre che ha oggi raggiunto l'acme con la produzione di plastiche, di materiali artificiali e di scorie radioattive (cfr. Zalasiewicz 2011). Questo fenomeno, la cui rapidissima espansione è concentrata in soli due secoli della storia umana, è stato definito *Grande Accelerazione* (cfr. Engelke e McNeill 2018).

Le inequivocabili tracce dei danni che il surriscaldamento globale ha inferto al pianeta, come i grandi tsunami ed uragani, i vastissimi incendi, le tempeste glaciali, oltre che una sempre maggiore consapevolezza diffusa dei pericoli causati dall'incessante aumento dell'inquinamento, come testimoniano le innumerevoli conferenze sul clima ma ancor di più i popolarissimi *Fridays for Future*, hanno favorito una rapida diffusione del concetto di Antropocene. Di conseguenza questo ha assunto significati sempre più ampi, lontani dall'originale funzione strettamente geologica, finendo per ricoprire il ruolo di termine ombrello capace di sussumere sotto di sé la totalità delle manifestazioni attuali e possibili dei comportamenti umani alla base della trasformazione del nostro pianeta, come le grandi migrazioni, le disuguaglianze prodotte dal capitalismo, l'urbanizzazione sfrenata ecc.

Oltre a vivere nell'Antropocene siamo quindi costretti, come afferma ad esempio Anna Tsing, "a fare i conti" con l'Antropocene (Tsing 2017) e con tutti i fenomeni ad esso collegati. Si intravede già come l'universo di discorso collegato all'Antropocene sia intimamente connesso all'idea di un sempre più vicino tramonto dell'attuale modo di esistenza dell'umanità, dal momento che sembra inevitabile la necessità di porre fine a quella Grande Accelerazione iniziata dopo la seconda rivoluzione industriale.

Questo universo di discorso sembra pertanto fortemente costruito attraverso una narrazione mitica dalle tendenze escatologiche, che marcano fortemente il concetto di fine, di cessazione del mondo come lo conosciamo (cfr. Lotman e Uspenskij 1975 pp. 135–141).

Tentare un confronto con l'Antropocene, tuttavia, significa misurarsi con una congerie di elementi complessa e multiforme. Se da una parte, infatti, l'Antropocene è il prodotto ontologicamente più umano ed antropocentrico possibile e non può che nascere da una consapevolezza autonoma ed autoprodotta del fenomeno, d'altra parte esso è la traccia più evidente della possibilità di un "mondo senza di noi" (Weisman 2008), di un mondo post-umano dove l'umano è parte dello stesso sistema della Natura che intenderebbe difendere e che pure ci è difficile comprendere dato il suo carattere molteplice ed inafferrabile di Iper-Oggetto. Questo sarebbe dunque qualcosa di così ampio e pervasivo che si dispiega su dimensioni spazio-temporali troppo vaste per essere quantificabili e di così "viscoso" da mantenerci immersi dentro di sé come nel ventre di una balena (cfr. Morton 2018). Ecco che allora vediamo come il concetto di Antropocene sia dotato di una violentissima capacità di destabilizzazione, al punto che per Bruno Latour siamo all'alba di una nuova rivoluzione copernicana (Latour 2020), costringendoci a ri-problematizzare dalle fondamenta il rapporto tra Umano⁽²⁾ e Natura e tra Natura e Cultura:

L'espressione stessa "rapporto con il mondo" dimostra quanto siamo, per così dire, alienati. Presentiamo spesso la crisi ecologica come la scoperta eternamente rinnovata che "l'uomo appartiene alla natura". Espressione apparentemente semplice ma di fatto molto oscura. Stiamo parlando di umani che avrebbero finalmente capito di fare parte di un "mondo naturale" a cui devono imparare a conformarsi? Sembra che il problema nasca piuttosto dalla parola "appartenenza". Nella tradizione occidentale, in effetti, la maggior parte delle definizioni dell'umano enfatizza il grado di distinzione dalla natura. Di conseguenza, ogni volta che tentiamo di "avvicinare l'uomo alla natura", siamo ostacolati dall'obiezione che

(2) Nel linguaggio degli antropologi ciò significa che il termine "uomo" è una categoria non marcata: non pone alcun problema e non attira l'attenzione. È quando si utilizza la parola "donna" che l'attenzione è richiamata su un tratto specifico, ovvero appunto il suo sesso, ed è questo tratto che ne fa la categoria marcata che si distacca quindi dalla categoria non marcata che le servirà da sfondo. Di qui gli sforzi per sostituire "uomo" con "umano".

l'essere umano è prima di tutto, o è anche, un essere culturale che deve sfuggire o, in ogni caso, distinguersi dalla natura.[...] Non tentate di definire soltanto la natura, poiché vi ritroverete a dovere definire anche il termine "cultura" (l'uomo è colui che sfugge alla natura: un po', molto, appassionatamente); non tentate di definire soltanto la "cultura", poiché immediatamente dovrete definire anche il termine "natura" (l'uomo è colui che non può "totalmente sfuggire" ai vincoli della natura). Il che significa che non abbiamo a che fare con dei domini ma piuttosto con un unico concetto diviso in due parti che risultano legate, se così si può dire, da un elastico resistente. (Latour 2020, p. 38).

Vediamo come ci si trovi attualmente in quello che è evidentemente un momento di esaurimento di una esplosione culturale precedente, la Grande Accelerazione, che rappresenta non solo un momento di autocoscienza ma rappresenta anche un vero e proprio punto di svolta costituendo un punto di partenza per gli sviluppi futuri (cfr. Lotman 1993). Per fare i conti con l'Antropocene e cercare di esaurire questa non semplice impresa tenteremo di ricostruirne i formanti culturali servendoci, assecondando la nozione d'isomorfismo lotmaniano tra testo e cultura (cfr. Lorusso 2010), di un corpus costituito da alcune opere del fotografo canadese Edward Burtinsky raccolte nella sua mostra *The Anthropocene*, da alcune opere selezionate dalle esposizioni dell'artista svizzero Julian Charrière, *Metamorphisme*, *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything and Everywhere*, *For They That Sow the Wind* e da alcune opere estrapolate dalle installazioni dell'artista argentino Tomás Saraceno, *Aria* e *Cloud Cities*.

In assonanza con la teoria di Lotman secondo la quale il testo è sia un frammento e sia antinomicamente un tutto, che rispecchia l'intero programma condensato di tutta la cultura (cfr. Ivanov, Lotman, Piatigorsky, Toporov e Uspenskij 1979) l'intento di questa riflessione è quindi quello di rilevare attraverso un'analisi dei testi in che modo l'universo di discorso dell'Antropocene si realizzi nel suo contesto culturale⁽³⁾. Intenderemo soffermarci soprattutto sulla capacità che i testi che si originano all'interno

(3) Benché alla ricerca di omologie e nel tentativo di stabilire una "tipologia delle culture", "Lotman era ed è consapevole del fatto che nessun periodo storico ha un unico codice culturale (anche se la costruzione di un codice-modello può essere un'utile astrazione) e che in ogni cultura esistono simultaneamente vari codici" (Eco 1990, p.10).

di un contesto di consapevolezza di una fine reale ma percepita come lontana, di una narrazione mitica di un lento ma inesorabile declino, hanno di costruire non solo mondi possibili e realtà alternative, ma anche di rendere tangibile una catastrofe prima che questa stessa sia effettivamente avvenuta.

2. Una catastrofe a bassa intensità

Come detto in precedenza, quando ci accingiamo a trattare del tema dell'Antropocene ci troviamo a descrivere una catastrofe preannunciata. Invero, il concetto stesso di catastrofe origina una serie di problematiche di natura spaziale e interpretativa che condizionano direttamente i testi artistici, la loro vita nel contesto culturale (cfr. Migliore 2016) e la loro ricezione. Il *topic* della fine del mondo non è certamente nuovo all'interno dell'immaginario collettivo di tutte le culture del mondo, tuttavia la natura di *Iper-oggetto* dell'Antropocene, che lo rende contemporaneamente silenziosamente onnipresente ma inafferrabile, si realizza in una sostanziale svalutazione delle potenzialità distruttrici e catastrofiche di quest'ultimo, che istituisce una sostanziale anestesia diffusa nei confronti di questa lenta e impercettibile fine del mondo, configurandosi sostanzialmente come un mito a bassa intensità⁽⁴⁾ (cfr. Ortoleva 2019). Rappresentare l'Antropocene e la catastrofe significa pertanto non semplicemente rappresentare l'epoca umana ma, per via della difficile possibilità di esaurimento di una manifestazione che si realizza su una dimensione temporale così ampia, presentificare una predizione, realizzare una virtualità originando una specie di traccia che concretizzi questa narrazione mitica: per fare ciò è necessario in qualche maniera "inscenare"

(4) Per Ortoleva, i miti moderni sono assai differenti rispetto ai miti di altre epoche poiché sono principalmente oggetti di consumo libero ed individuale, scevro dalla dimensione rituale. Questi rispondono inoltre a un incessante bisogno di "storie sempre nuove" per cui vale però la regola del "nuovo e sempre uguale" dal momento che il vasto numero di atti di consumo corrisponde a un ristretto numero di nuclei mitici. Essi differiscono inoltre poiché non si svolgono in un tempo lontano o in un mondo parallelo altro ma si collocano in un tempo cronologicamente databile che è spesso un nostro futuro programmatico poiché "nei momenti di crisi, personale e a maggior ragione collettiva si manifesta una vera e propria domanda di racconti carichi non tanto di verità, quanto di segnali; non tanto di notizie, quanto di profezie" (Ortoleva 2019 p.201).

la fine per evitarla. Ecco allora che assistiamo a tutta una serie di strategie discorsive di “manipolazione della realtà” attraverso i testi artistici, di creazione di un concentrato di “realismo esasperato” che fungano in un certo qual modo da confine che apra la possibilità di un dialogo tra la semiosfera della cultura del consumo globalizzato, la quale perpetra la dicotomia tra Cultura e Natura, ed il movimento destabilizzante che si verifica con l’inizio della fine di quest’ultima. L’arte dell’Antropocene ci sembra assumere quindi una funzione preconizzante, realizzandosi come la risultante di un vero e proprio “*time-shifting*” che attualizza un presagio rappresentandone le conseguenze.

A tal proposito, per orientarci tra i nostri testi, risulta sicuramente funzionale seguire l’analisi che Simona Stano realizza dello schema narrativo tipico di una fine del Mondo come catastrofe culturale, in un cui una “Cultura 1” è caratterizzata disforicamente e l’azione di stravolgimento della Natura causerà una violenta distruzione della Cultura 1 e la nascita di una “Cultura 2” alternativa.

Le catastrofi culturali sembrerebbero quindi concepibili come “naturali” degenerazioni entropiche delle organizzazioni complesse. Per Stano:

È in questo senso che l’immaginario collettivo relativo alla catastrofe e, nello specifico, al tema della fine del mondo pare richiamare in causa la delicata questione del “multinaturalismo” e del valore euristico e ontologico delle medesime categorie di “natura” e “cultura”: come lamenta Philippe Descola in *Oltre Natura e Cultura* (2005), non ha più ragione di esistere, né come dato di fatto né come modello concettuale. La scienza della significazione offre un interessante punto di vista su tale questione: “la natura è, semioticamente, un effetto di senso, l’esito di una serie di discorsi che, parlandola, ne costituiscono la plausibilità” (Marrone 2012). Dunque, non un dato di fatto, bensì un’evidenza costruita; non uno stato originario ma un vero e proprio “artefatto” (ovvero, il frutto di un’operazione marcatamente “culturale”).
(Stano 2018, p. 36).

È nostra opinione quindi che l’Arte che prova a raccontare l’Antropocene si muova indiscriminatamente su ognuna delle categorie temporali: se da una parte si realizza in una cristallizzazione all’interno di un testo artistico degli spazi che sono testimonianza concreta delle ferite

che l'umanità ha inferto e infligge al pianeta (v. Burtinsky), dall'altra costruisce delle e vere proprie "macerie fittizie", false rovine di un futuro passato, che preannunciano l'avvenuta scomparsa dell'umanità in quella che potremmo definire post-umanità negativa (v. Charrière). Sullo stesso piano temporale però l'Arte immagina e disegna futuri alternativi possibili, in cui l'umanità non scompare, ma evolve in un post-umano caratterizzato positivamente (v. Saraceno) capace di superare l'opposizione classica tra natura e cultura.

3. Photos taken moments before disaster⁽⁵⁾

Abbiamo visto come l'Antropocene sia il prodotto di una fase di auto-conoscenza all'interno della Semiosfera e di come marchi con una modalizzazione certamente negativa la fine dell'Olocene causata dai danni creati dalle attività antropiche. In tal senso le foto di Edward Burtinsky rispondono precisamente a questa istanza auto-descrittiva, configurandosi come quelli che secondo la classificazione di Droysen (cfr. Droysen 1994) è possibile definire come documenti, ossia come quei testi prodotti con la consapevolezza del loro ruolo nella conservazione della memoria storica⁽⁶⁾. Ecco che allora riconosciamo come le fotografie di Burtinsky (Figure 1–2) tutte realizzate con la tecnica della prospettiva a volo d'uccello, esasperano il più possibile la ricerca di un realismo che non lasci spazio a obiezioni d'incredulità, il cui effetto di senso si realizza in scene quanto più possibile de-soggettivate.

(5) Il titolo di questa sezione intende rifarsi a un popolare meme diffuso in rete "Top 10 haunting photos taken before disaster".

(6) Droysen ritiene che i reperti storici possano essere divisi in tre classi: i documenti sarebbero quei testi prodotti con la consapevolezza del loro ruolo nella conservazione della memoria storica; i resti sarebbero ciò che rimane intorno a noi delle epoche passate senza che ciò fosse pianificato; mentre i monumenti, strutture costruite appositamente per tramandare la memoria di un evento passato. Questa definizione è sicuramente semplicistica, tuttavia, ci è funzionale al fine di delineare delle linee di confine per orientarci nella congerie delle tracce, intese come tutto ciò che ci perviene del passato e viene riconosciuto come tale (cfr. Mazzucchelli 2010).



Figura 1. Oil Bunkering #4, 2016, Niger Delta, Nigeria, photo © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.



Figura 2. Saw Mills #2, 2016, Lagos, Nigeria, photo © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

In questo senso, la scelta di tale prospettiva è funzionale a fornire allo spettatore un ambiguo senso di distanza, avendo scelto l'autore un'inquadratura che non rientra tra le possibili all'occhio umano, e contestualmente di vicinanza grazie alla *forza estetica* che si dispiega tramite l'installazione all'interno di un prodotto artistico del reale quotidiano (cfr. Boltanski 1993) affinché queste si liberino dal vincolo dell'archivio anestetico del dolore mediale quotidiano (cfr. Sontag 2003) e possano trasformarsi in uno *spazio di elaborazione memoriale* (cfr. Montani 2007).

L'ampia miscellanea di località rappresentate diventa quindi una raccolta di "porzioni esemplari" che fungono da campionario-modello rappresentativo delle aberrazioni causate dalle azioni dell'umanità sul pianeta. Proprio l'umano però, unico responsabile di tale sofferenza, è sempre fuori scena, inindividuabile, ridotto a semplice comparsa in ognuna delle fotografie: l'umanità è fuori campo e forse fuori gioco, è altrove. Qui riconosciamo quindi il carattere riflessivo di questo discorso di auto-coscienza il quale raccogliendo campioni oggettivi, attraverso l'uso di prospettive quanto meno individuali possibili, permette all'umano⁽⁷⁾ di riflettere su sé stesso estraniandosi dalla propria concezione abituale di Natura come spazio al servizio del dispiegarsi delle azioni umane. Le immagini divengono quindi delle "protesi speculari congelanti"⁽⁸⁾ che permettono di sovrapporre alla semplice constatazione del lento ed inesorabile declino della salute del pianeta, una riflessione sull'umanità e sulle sue azioni.

Se ci ricollegiamo alla nozione già affrontata di catastrofe antropocena come *iper-oggetto*, e lo rileggiamo quindi come una ferita fin troppo ampia, infinitamente ripetuta nel tempo e onnipresente per essere razionalizzata, vediamo dunque che il confinamento degli spazi del "trauma" all'interno di un testo origina la possibilità di raccontare la catastrofe generando una via di fuga che spezza le catene anestetiche del trauma che rendono impossibile ogni evoluzione verso il futuro e condannano il soggetto a ripetere compulsivamente il passato (cfr. Violi 2014). La narrazione del trauma avviene quindi in questo caso a priori, per via di un

(7) v. nota 1.

(8) Come nota Eco in *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Eco 1985), gli specchi sono protesi estensive-intrusive, gli specchi non solo ci permettono di guardare meglio il mondo ma anche di guardare a noi stessi così come ci vedono gli altri. La lastra fotografica è in un certo senso uno specchio congelante.

presagio, prima ancora che questo si verifichi ma non per questo è dotato di minore intensità traumatica. Sostiene a proposito Alexander che:

Il trauma è un'attribuzione socialmente mediata. L'attribuzione può avvenire in tempo reale, nel momento in cui l'evento accade; ma può avvenire anche prima che l'evento abbia luogo, sotto forma di presagio, o anche dopo che l'evento si è concluso, sotto forma di ricostruzione formulata a posteriori. A volte, infatti, è possibile che eventi profondamente traumatizzanti non abbiano in realtà avuto luogo; tali eventi immaginati, tuttavia, possono essere tanto traumatizzanti quanto eventi realmente accaduti (Alexander 2003, p. 138).

La catastrofe antropocenica si realizza quindi prima nell'arte che nella storia in un disperato tentativo di evitarne la concreta manifestazione, attraverso la creazione di una nuova sensibilità collettiva.

4. Rovine di un futuro passato e *hacking culturale*

Non c'è strage senza vittime, non esiste catastrofe senza macerie, non c'è estinzione senza rovine; la fine della dicotomia Natura/Cultura porterà con sé la vittima più eccellente: l'umano. Sappiamo però che la grande fine dell'Antropocene esiste al momento solo come una narrazione, come una predizione causale dell'ovvio susseguirsi degli eventi e si dispiega all'interno delle dinamiche culturali seguendo quello schema narrativo già esposto, rinvenuto da Stano analizzando la matrice tipologica mitemica della catastrofe come catastrofe culturale. Come fare quindi a rappresentare un presagio? Come si realizza concretamente un'ipotesi?

La strategia discorsiva che rinveniamo nei testi è quella di una manomissione del naturale susseguirsi spazio-temporale, adoperando un *time-shifting* che si sposta direttamente dalle premesse alle conseguenze di una catastrofe. In questo tempo manomesso, l'evento traumatico documentato da Burtinsky è oramai avvenuto, quello che rimane sono solo rovine, macerie di un futuro virtuale che è già passato attuale. Ecco che allora assistiamo alla scomparsa dell'umanità, nella cui totale assenza tutto ciò che rimane sono solo resti fittizi su cui la natura ha preso inesorabile il sopravvento,

riconquistando spazio, tempo e in un certo qual modo anche il “privilegio dell’*agency*” che per troppo tempo abbiamo riservato agli umani, come possiamo ben vedere in “*Somehow they never stop doing what they always did*” (Figura 3) in cui piccoli ammassi di eco-cemento subiscono passivamente la lenta azione degradante delle muffe e dei licheni che sempre più tenderanno a fagocitarli.

Le opere di Julian Charrière consistono pertanto in quelli che potremmo definire resti plausibili della catastrofe, ovvero troviamo riproduzioni artificiali delle alterazioni metamorfiche che il degrado delle materie plastiche potrà creare nei prossimi anni come in *Metamorphosis XVII* che si collocano parallelamente alle piante crio-conservate di *Tropisme* (Figura 4) che originarie del Cretaceo sono uno degli unici reperti di quell’epoca geologica in una facile assonanza tra Antropocene e Cretaceo come epoche oramai concluse; in *For they that sow the wind* (Figura 5) falsi rottami di aeroplano sono ammassati a terra adagiati di fronte ad un trittico fotografico che riproduce in tre scatti temporalmente susseguenti gli effetti di esplosione nucleare su quei fabbricati d’osservazione che l’esercito statunitense aveva costruito durante gli esperimenti nucleari nell’Atollo di Bikini.



Figura 3. *Somehow, They Never Stop Doing What They Always Did*, 12th Art Biennale de Lyon, France, 2013 © Julian Charrière.

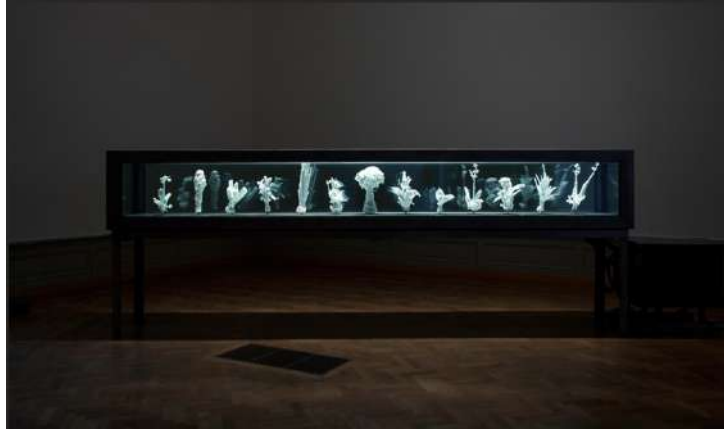


Figura 4. Tropisme, 2016 © Julian Charrière, Dittrich & Schlechtriem, Berlin, Germany, 2016



Figura 5. For They That They Saw The Wind, 2016, Parasol Unit © Julian Charrière.

Le riproduzioni fittizie e le testimonianze autentiche si incrociano dunque in una esasperata ricerca di un effetto di realtà per assimilazione, la coesistenza tra testi artistici assimilabili ai documenti e resti fittizi crea dei confini confusi che presentificano la storia possibile e mettono in discussione la memoria culturale finora consolidatasi. Come abbiamo suddetto il *realismo esasperato* ci sembra essere un tratto preminente all'interno dell'arte dell'Antropocene e questo effetto di senso è inseguito attraverso diverse strategie discorsive di cui la prima e più importa è sicuramente la *mimetizzazione*. Questa strategia di mimetizzazione, che ora cercheremo di esplicitare più nel dettaglio, si realizza principalmente attraverso pratiche di ri-semantizzazione e di manipolazione percettiva dello spettatore sfruttando la complessità degli schemi sociali e culturali che condizionano la nostra capacità di determinare la veridicità.

Il primo momento di manipolazione degli abituali schemi percettivi avviene attraverso l'iscrizione delle singole opere all'interno di una dimensione espositiva museale. Tale dimensione condiziona fin dal principio la capacità del visitatore di riconoscere autonomamente la veridicità di un'opera, se questa si trova collocata in uno spazio come quello museale regolato da complessi codici enunciazionali convenzionali, che se rispettati, trasformano i testi artistici da *reperiti plausibili* a *reperiti autentici*. Difatti, come già scriveva Violi, l'autenticità non è altro che un "effetto": "è la risultante di un'attribuzione culturale all'oggetto, costruito per contrattazione e negoziazione (Eco 1997), o manifestato dai discorsi che lo "accompagnano (Prieto 1991) e ne attestano la tradizione" (Violi 2014, p. 105). Affinché si conferisca l'aura di autenticità la *musealizzazione* si rivela dunque un passaggio determinante.⁽⁹⁾ Invero, se consideriamo gli spazi del museo come gli spazi privilegiati per la conservazione del patrimonio culturale, questi divengono fondamentalmente gli spazi per eccellenza dedicati alla trasmissione dello stesso, in cui l'istituzione museale o il curatore dell'esposizione assumono il ruolo di destinanti che fanno-vedere allo scopo di far sapere (cfr. Violi 2014). Pertanto, ci sembra che avvenga in questo senso un tentativo di duplicazione delle dinamiche classiche che regolano la costruzione

(9) La musealizzazione e il suo rapporto con la costruzione della memoria è sicuramente un tema molto interessante che tuttavia per via della sua complessità avrebbe reso molto difficile una trattazione esaustiva negli spazi a nostra disposizione. Per un qualche spunto di approfondimento rimandiamo a Krauss 1986, Gamboni 2005, Damisch 1992.

di una memoria culturale del passato al fine di costruire una memoria plausibile di un futuro possibile ma per forza di cose ancora da realizzarsi.

Se i sistemi della memoria, per Mazzucchelli finiscono per costituire una serie di credenze sul nostro passato, condizionando quindi ciò che siamo disposti a ritenere “reale”, veramente avvenuto (Mazzucchelli 2015), ci sembra che quella che viene messa in atto sia una manipolazione, un *hacking* di quelli che Peirce definiva come *habits* e poi credenze, ovvero una serie di cose che siamo disposti a ritenere vere e sulle quali sospendiamo il dubbio, in modo che possano funzionare come criteri regolatori delle nostre abitudini e azioni⁽¹⁰⁾.

Pertanto, per Mazzucchelli è possibile:

coerentemente con i presupposti teorici dell’edificio filosofico peirceano, accostare la nozione di memoria culturale a quella di *credenza* e *abito*. In questo senso, i ricordi condivisi di una collettività, ad esempio quelli riguardanti determinati eventi storici, possono essere assimilati ad un sistema di credenze più o meno stabilizzatesi presso una comunità di interpreti, determinato dalla reiterazione o dalla permanenza di “abiti interpretativi”. (Mazzucchelli 2015, p. 282)

Se tali credenze condizionano quindi il funzionamento del nostro *memoryscape* (cfr. Phillips e Reyes 2011) e le modalità attraverso le quali costruiamo una memoria del passato, lo stesso ci sembra possibile possa avvenire se con la stessa modalità viene manipolato il *futurescape*, lo sguardo sul futuro, disseminando una serie di tracce fittizie che condizionano la capacità di autenticazione della realtà. Scrive a questo proposito Lorusso:

(10) Ci rifacciamo qui a ciò che scrive Lorusso: “Peirce non parla mai, a mia conoscenza, della società e di come questa condizioni la formazione degli *habits*. In *Some consequences of four incapacities* (per citare uno dei suoi saggi più noti) parla del ruolo della comunità nella costituzione del reale, ma la comunità di cui parla non ha i tratti di un gruppo socio-culturalmente definito; essa anzi è *senza limiti definiti* (CP 5,311) ed è un’istanza ideale, regolativa, garante della continuità di un reale che va al di là della contingenza dell’individuo. Ogni volta che Peirce parla di *habit*, dunque, lo fa in rapporto all’individuo, alla sua coscienza e ai suoi processi inferenziali. Egli ci offre però una teoria che ci consente di connettere una teoria semiotica radicalmente interpretativa con l’osservazione culturologica della regolarità di certi pattern interpretativi. Ci offre una teoria semio-cognitiva che, evidenziando il carattere generale degli *habits*, il fatto che essi agiscano in noi habitualiter, ci spiega il loro potere condizionante: gli abiti sono ‘potenti’ perché sono generali e consistono in “tendenze a””. (Lorusso 2015, p.278).

Per Lotman la memoria ha, infatti, una duplice direzionalità; essa non è volta solo al passato, come siamo abituati a pensare; non è, in questo senso, puro recupero e riattivazione di qualcosa che sta dietro di noi. Essa è progetto, apertura di futuri possibili: essa può svolgere anche la funzione di programma e di istruzione per costruire nuovi testi. È inoltre possibile, dato l'orientamento fondamentale della cultura all'esperienza futura, la costruzione di un certo punto di vista convenzionale dal quale il futuro compare come passato. [...] La "potenza modellizzante" della memoria agisce, dunque, sia in modo prospettivo che retrospettivo. Prospettivamente, la memoria modellizza i codici con cui si vive nel presente e si pensa il futuro. (Lorusso 2010, p. 97).

Manipolare retroattivamente i codici con cui viviamo nel presente e pensiamo il futuro è esattamente quello che ci sembra il *telos* a cui tendono indiscriminatamente tutte le opere che raccontano l'Antropocene. Come prodotti risultanti dall'onda lunga di un'esplosione culturale essi sono capaci di una grande forza modellizzante che gli conferisce una elevata capacità di influenzare e rinnovare le pratiche e i modi delle relazioni sociali all'interno della cultura di riferimento. Il processo di riscrittura del canone ecologico che regola il rapporto dell'umano con la natura si realizza quindi grazie alla manomissione attraverso l'arte di quei codici social-culturali che rendono l'umano sordo alle sofferenze di Gaia.

5. Di ragnatele ed ecologie del possibile

Abbiamo visto come e in che modo l'arte dell'Antropocene sia un'arte del post-umano, accezione che spesso assume toni decadenti ma che qui intendiamo recuperare in una lettura positiva del caos susseguente una grande destabilizzazione. Pertanto, per far questo, con l'aiuto del lavoro artistico e ingegneristico di Tomás Saraceno, inferiremo un modello possibile di approccio all'esplorazione della struttura stessa della cultura.

Le opere di Saraceno, a metà tra arte e ingegneria, constano di inestricabili intrecci di fili intessuti replicando fedelmente ciò che fanno i ragni, i quali costruiscono incessantemente intelaiature complesse fatte di reti e sfere interconnesse l'una all'altra in un inesauribile gioco di sovrapposizioni, riaggiustamenti, cesure ed aggiunte (Figura 6). Queste sono, secondo

Engelmann (Engelmann 2019), una delle poche testimonianze esemplari di quelle che Anne Sauvagnargues definisce come “*artmachines*” ovvero esempi di “un’arte che produce un vero e proprio campo di espressione ecologico” (Sauvagnargues 2015, p. 48). Vediamo dunque come in *Cloud Cities*, tramite una simulazione topologicamente adatta all’uomo dello spazio della tela di ragno, che è a sua volta simulazione nel senso deleziano (cfr. Deleuze, Smith e Greco 1997) della ragnatela dell’universo⁽¹¹⁾, si compia, attraverso il florilegio di vibrazioni prodotte dall’agire dei visitatori umani, un movimento di traduzione tra linguaggio oscuro e primordiale delle vibrazioni proprio dei ragni nelle loro tele e il linguaggio umano dell’arte. Per Engelmann, pertanto, pensare con l’*artmachine* è “meno una questione di cambiamento radicale o addirittura di un salto teorico, quanto un’amplificazione a spirale di ecologie espressive che non possono essere delimitate da definizioni di arte, tecnologia o scienza”. (Engelmann 2019, p. 10).



Figura 6. Tomás Saraceno, On Air © Studio Tomás Saraceno.

(11) Secondo le ultime ricerche in ambito di astronomia ed astrofisica, l’universo non è un insieme casuale di oggetti: ha una struttura composta da galassie e gas. I cosmologi definiscono questa struttura rete cosmica. La rete cosmica è composta da filamenti interconnessi di galassie e gas raggruppati che si estendono attraverso l’universo e separati da vuoti giganti che rassomigliano visivamente le ragnatele intessute dai ragni.

Le tele di ragno funzionano pertanto esattamente come una cultura, che si dispiega secondo Geertz (cfr. Geertz 1983) come una rete di significati: non c'è quindi isolamento di elementi dotati in sé stessi di un'identità, ma interdefinizione e relazione reciproca, in funzione della quale ogni elemento assume senso. Il significato, insomma, non è né un'essenza né una proprietà intrinseca degli oggetti, ma una funzione che cambia in virtù delle relazioni in cui è inserita, e che dunque non può essere compresa mai isolatamente ma sempre e solo contestualmente (Lorusso 2010). In questa struttura reticolare della cultura incontriamo degli agglomerati, delle sfere, tentativi di chiusura più difficili da penetrare che rappresentano, secondo Sloterdijk, i contenitori attraverso i quali l'umano pensa sé stesso nel mondo, alla ricerca di una protezione dai pericoli esterni (cfr. Sloterdijk 2014), e che con agilità possiamo associare al concetto di semiosfera come lo spazio in cui una cultura può vivere, e al di fuori della quale non è possibile semiosi.

Quello che emerge da una simile somiglianza è che dalle innovazioni introdotte dalla ragnatela artistica probabilmente potrà giovare, *mutatis mutandis*, anche la cultura che l'ha prodotta. Ma quali sono nel dettaglio queste innovazioni? Secondo Bruno Latour:

La caratteristica notevole dell'opera è che sebbene ci siano molti ordinamenti locali - incluse le sfere all'interno delle sfere - non c'è alcun tentativo di annidare tutte le relazioni in un ordine gerarchico. Ci sono molte gerarchie locali, ma sono collegate in ciò che appare visivamente come un'eterarchia. Annidamento locale, sì; gerarchia globale, no. Per me, questo è un potente tentativo di dare forma all'ecologia politica di oggi, estendendo le vecchie forze naturali per affrontare il problema politico umano di formare comunità vivibili. [...] Le reti non hanno un interno, solo connettori che si irradiano. Sono tutti bordi. Forniscono connessioni ma nessuna struttura. Non si risiede in una rete, ma ci si muove verso altri punti attraverso i bordi. Pensare in questi termini è trovare un modo per evitare il modernismo ma anche per evitare, oso dire, il postmodernismo - nel qual caso non ci sarebbero gerarchie locali e nessun principio omogeneo per stabilire le connessioni. (Latour 2011, pp. 3-4).

Quello che Latour ci propone è un approccio multi-prospettivista che scardini l'idea di una cultura costruita attraverso la visione antropocentrica

ma che sulla scorta delle teorie antropoceniche si fondi come una cultura *simpoietica*, simile nell'agire a quel pensiero tentacolare del ragno che Haraway assume come modello: per la simpoiesi, il ragno è la figura più adeguata. “La tentacolarità è sinctonica, lacerata da aneliti, sfilacciamenti e intrecci spaventosi e abissali, da continue staffette e riprese, nelle ricorsività generative di cui sono fatte la vita e la morte.” (Haraway 2019, p. 97). Potremmo in un certo qual modo affermare che similamente a ciò che rappresentano le opere di Saraceno, ovvero uno spazio ecologico in cui abitare l'era post-fossile inteso come prodotti artistici mediati tra agency umana e non-umana che ci aiutano a pensare un presente alternativo, la nuova prospettiva culturale de-anthropizzata si configura come una prospettiva che privilegia gli spazi di confine a quelli di conservazione e che si apre all'interdipendenza del tutto, sia questo umano e non-umano, vivente e non-vivente.

La proposta culturale che possiamo mutuare dalle “artmachines” di Saraceno è quindi quella di una prospettiva ecologica della cultura che rigetta qualsiasi configurazione gerarchica e si costruisce rizomaticamente secondo prospettive sempre nuove ed attuali, in una continua commistione tra arte, tecnica, scienza, interazione umana e non umana.

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