

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.

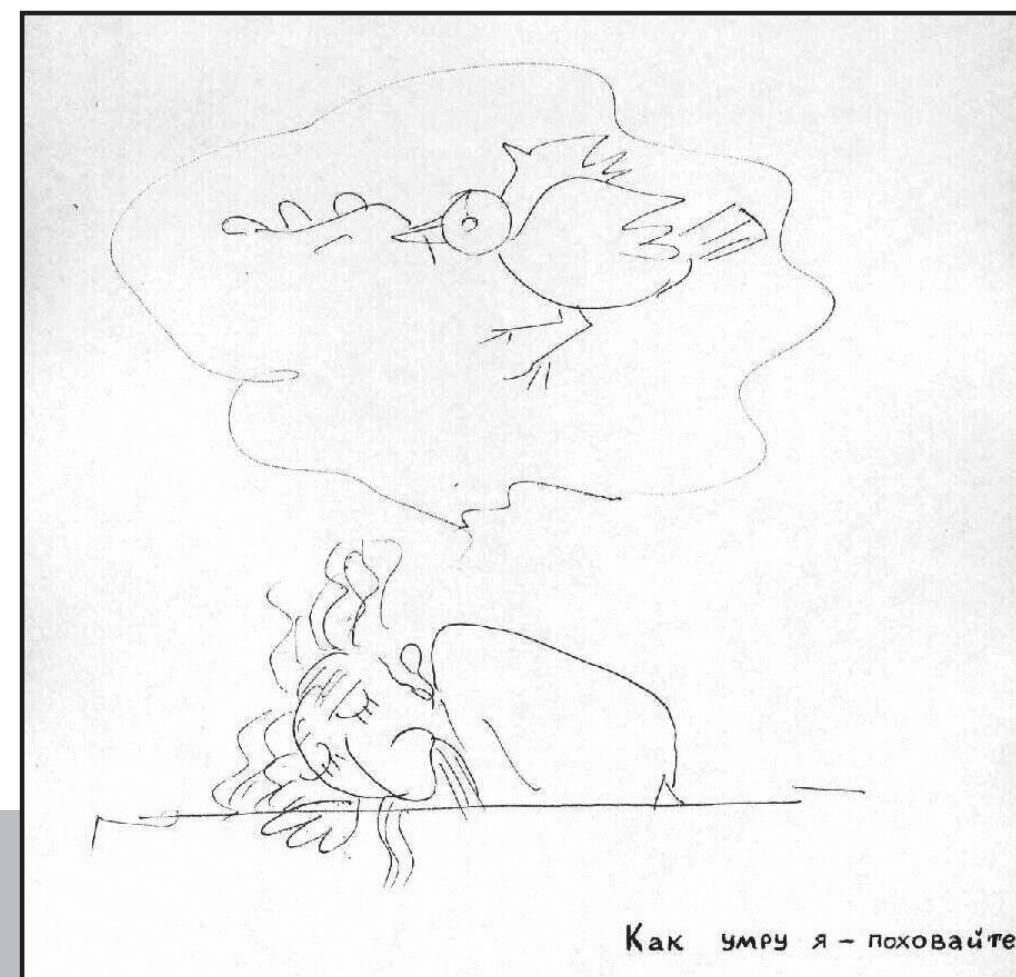


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Edited by

LAURA GHERLONE, REMO GRAMIGNA, MASSIMO LEONE



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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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An earlier version of this study was presented at the symposium *Facing narratives: Tales of the visage across cultures*, January, 29-30, 2021 (FRIAS, Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies) with the title “The face as cultural text: A semiotic appraisal”.

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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.
-

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.

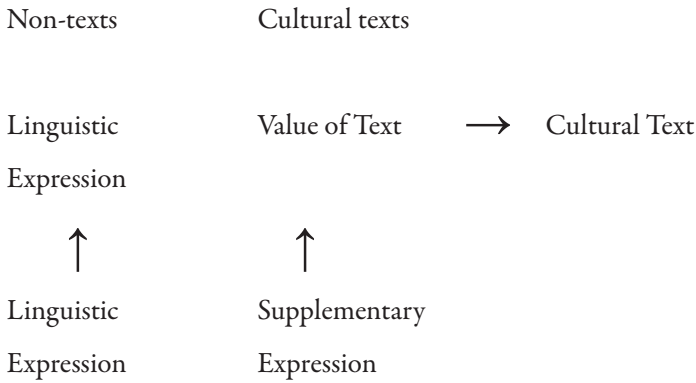


Fig. 1 Textual value is assigned to a group of texts by means of a supplementary expression.

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).

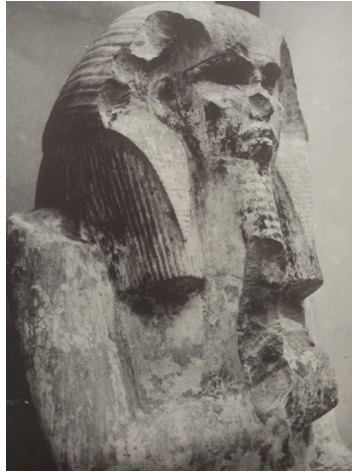


Fig. 2 Zoser, Egypt. 2700 BC.

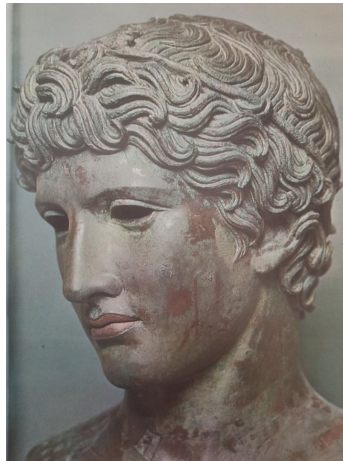


Fig. 3 Greek sculpture from Benevento, Italy, 1st century BC.

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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