SEMIOTICS OF CONFLICT

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A LOTMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Semiotics of Conflict: A Lotmanian Perspective

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RETHINKING CONFLICT
FROM A LOTMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

Daniele Monticelli and Merit Maran

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sedda in this volume). In an interview given in 1990 to the journal *Vita Aeterna*[1], Lotman emphasised that it is precisely the preeminent orientation towards complex contradictions and conflictual semiotic situations that can be seen as the distinctive feature of Tartu Semiotics (Lotman 2022 [1990]: 285). The centrality of conflict and contradiction for the Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics[2] is also acknowledged in an essay written, again in 1990, and titled "Winter Notes on Summer Schools", in which Lotman recalls the atmosphere in the Summer Schools of Secondary Modelling Systems[3] as dense with fruitful contradictions and characterised by the diversity of interests, differences in mentality and age and overall dissimilarity in everything, and how this led to a continuous and productive dialogue between the participants (Lotman [1990] 1998: 85). This characterisation applies not only to the summer gatherings but also serves to illustrate Lotman's view on the more general dynamics between the Tartu–Moscow School members as well as his own understanding of the importance of conflict as a mechanism of cultural dynamics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lotman's understanding of this topic was influenced by the work of his Moscow colleague Vyacheslav Ivanov who, in his book *Even and Odd: Asymmetry of the Brain and Sign Systems* (1978), suggests that the asymmetrical dialogue between the left (discrete) and right (nondiscrete) hemispheres of the human brain is mirrored in the asymmetrical structure of culture (see also Nöth 2022: 167; Semenenko 2012: 137–138). In addition, in the 1980s, Lotman was collaborating with a group of neurophysiologists from Leningrad – Lev Balonov, Vadim Deglin, Tatyana Chernigovskaya, and Nikolai Nikolaenko[5] – who were studying hemispheric lateralisation. While Lotman was

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