



Juri Lotman

Edited by Marina Grishakova

Translated by Wilma Clark

Culture and Explosion

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Culture and Explosion



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Translator's preface

Wilma Clark

The genesis of this English translation of Juri Lotman's last work *Culture and Explosion* was in a conversation with his son, Professor Mikhail Lotman, and Professor Kalevi Kull and Professor Peeter Torop in a meeting which occurred at the 1st International Conference on Semiosphere in Sao Paolo in August 2005. Whilst there were already, at that time, a growing number of translations in other languages, most notably Estonian, Italian and Spanish, it was acknowledged by many of the prominent semioticians present that the time was ripe for an English translation of *Culture and Explosion*, deemed to be one of Lotman's most important and key works.

Lotman's tastes were eclectic and wide-ranging and he was a prolific writer. The Russian edition of *Culture and Explosion* (*Kul'tura i Vzryv*) was published in 1992 shortly before his death in October 1993 at the age of 71. At the time of his death, he had over 800 articles and books to his name. Whilst his key interests lay in literature and in particular, the works of Pushkin, Lotman's writings reflected a wide ranging interest in a variety of subjects from information and systems theory to aesthetics, poetics, art, cinema, mythology, history and, of course, culture. Many of these themes are addressed in *Culture and Explosion*, which represents Lotman's culminating thoughts on his life's work, dedicated to the development of a semiotic theory of culture.

As a student of philology in Leningrad in the late 1930s, Lotman was inevitably influenced by the 'great names' of Russian formalism: Eichenbaum, Propp, Tynyanov, and Jakobson. However, in this present work, whilst acknowledging the debt of contemporary semiotics to formalism and traditional structuralism, he clearly distinguishes between the atomistic nature of the 'closed, self-sufficient, synchronically organised system; isolated not only in time, between past and future, but also in space' of these earlier traditions and the holistic, open, modelling systems theory approach of the Tartu school, as well as his own commentaries on semiosphere and, in this volume, the explosive processes of cultural development.

Lotman's early studies at Leningrad State University were, in fact, interrupted by the Second World War, in which he served from 1940–1946, as a result of which he only managed to complete his studies in 1950. Thereafter, he moved to Estonia where he worked first of all as a teacher of Russian language and literature at Tartu Teacher Training College. He obtained a lecture-

ship in the Department of Russian Language and Literature at the University of Tartu in 1954, attaining full professorship and becoming Head of Department in 1963.

The 1960s were a prolific period for Lotman and the Tartu school and it is in these early beginnings that we trace the origins of a theoretical framework based on the concept of secondary modelling systems (semiotic models described as being ‘beyond natural language’ – which itself was treated as a primary modelling system) as a basis for the semiotic analysis of culture. The origins of this framework are located in a symposium held in Moscow in 1962 (at which Lotman was not himself present) upon which the Tartu school subsequently built a series of summer schools dedicated to the study of semiotics, with a particular focus on modelling systems and the development of a typology of culture. The summer schools were organised by Lotman from 1964, and the first of these took place in Kääriku, Estonia in August of that year. In the same year, Lotman launched the semiotics journal, *Sign Systems Studies* (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*).

Beyond the 1960s, Lotman’s work on the development of a semiotic theory of culture can be traced in a number of texts, of which *Culture and Explosion* is the final chapter. The preceding texts include *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture*, *On the Semiosphere* and the collection of articles revised and presented in *Universe of the Mind*. In these texts, Lotman moves inexorably forward from the concept of culture as a secondary modelling system to its immersion in semiotic space (the *semiosphere*) – viewed as a reservoir of dynamic processes with explosive potential.

Lotman, together with his colleagues Uspensky, Ivanov, Toporov and Pi-atigorsky produced *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture* (Lotman et al. 1975 [1973]), a conceptual framework for the systemic and semiotic analysis of culture as a ‘metasystem’ in 1973. Arguably, the origins of Lotman’s later development of the concepts of semiosphere and explosion are to be found here. He coined the term *semiosphere* in 1984, in an article published in *Sign System Studies* entitled ‘On the semiosphere’ (Lotman 2005 [1984]) in which he elaborated his interest in the spatial modelling of culture as an inextricably intertwined hierarchy of sign systems immersed in semiotic space. These initial explorations are further elaborated in *Universe of the Mind* (Lotman 1990) which drew out the salient features of the semiosphere, including the key concepts of core, periphery and boundary, alongside the notion that the sign systems of culture formed part of a semiotic continuum, dispersed in a multi-levelled, multi-dimensional semiotic space. The conceptual framework elaborated in the notion of the *semiosphere* and foregrounded in *Universe of the Mind* highlights and anticipates the complex systemic contradictions and tensions which frame

Lotman's final reflections on the nature of 'culture' and the potentials of 'explosion' explored in the current volume.

Culture and Explosion opens with the paradoxical question of how a system (here, the system of culture) can develop and, at the same time, remain true to itself.

In 'Statement of the problem', Lotman draws attention to the relational aspects of his semiotic theory of culture and the notion that culture is not a 'closed' system but, rather, proceeds to a process of self-description only in terms of its relation to the extra-system, which he describes, here, as 'the world beyond the borders of language'. This positioning of culture as but one element within a polylingual semiotic reality is used to introduce the notion of dependency and reciprocity between co-existent systems, neither of which – alone – can wholly reflect the 'space of reality'. This inadequacy points to the 'necessity of *the other* (another person, another language, another culture) and thus produces the need for a form of translation to be effected between systems and at the same time reflects the multilayered complexity of semiotic space and the tensions and boundaries that are generated between the disparate systems that occupy it.

Lotman continues this theme in Chapter 2 where he uses Jakobson's communication model to elaborate on these notions of tension and translatability in the lingual spaces of communication. Differentiating between 'code' and 'language', he suggests that the former is an artificially created structure that implies no history, whereas the latter 'is a code plus its history'. He distinguishes between the linguistic and the lingual, suggesting that 'lingual communication reveals itself to us as the tense intersection between adequate and inadequate lingual acts' and uses the example of an exchange of codes, e.g. 'cat' and 'gato' as a relatively easy translation between two closely related languages, whereas a translation from poetic language to that of music is presented as much more problematic, if not impossible. In these notions of adequacy and inadequacy of the translation act, and the concomitant increase in informativity in the system generated by ambiguity and the apparent impossibility of translation Lotman, here introducing the notion of extra-lingual reality, not only distances himself from common perceptions of the relationships between language and culture, but also begins to sow the seeds of the concept of 'explosion'.

In 'Gradual progress', Lotman returns to the concept of cultural development, exploring this in terms of predictability and unpredictability, continuity and discontinuity and the stability and instability of the system and how these dynamic processes contribute to the gradual or radical development of culture. To gradual processes, he assigns the metaphor of a fast flowing river in spring; to radical ones, he assigns the metaphor of 'a minefield with unexpected explosive points'. That these two are mutually co-dependent, complex and antithetical is

demonstrated in the examples Lotman gives of the relationships between the dandy, his artifice and his audience. In this chapter, Lotman also elaborates his view of the positive qualities of ‘explosion’ as a *creative* phenomenon reflected in the epoch of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment in contrast to the common perception of ‘explosion’ as a *destructive* tendency linked to gunpowder and nuclear fission.

The theme of ‘continuity and discontinuity’ is elaborated in more detail in chapter 4. Building on the notion of gradual and radical development introduced in the previous chapter, Lotman constructs a complex picture of the unfolding of cultural development in a multilayered synchronic space. Where gradual processes ensure succession, explosive ones ensure innovation. However, the multi-discursive nature of culture ensures that its component parts develop at different rates and, in this sense explosive moments in some layers may be matched by gradual ones in others. In this way, Lotman describes culture as being immersed in a semiotic space that is greater than the sum of its parts and which forms a unified, integrated semiotic mechanism.

In chapter 5, Lotman draws an interesting limitation in relation to the use of metaphor and mathematical models to represent the intersection of semantic spaces and the explosive tension this creates. He suggests, instead, that we have in a mind a mental model which comprises a ‘*specific semiotic mass whose boundaries are framed by a multiplicity of individual uses*’. This notion of the indeterminate structure of the *semiosphere* and its *boundary spaces* echoes Lotman’s earlier work in *Universe of the Mind* where the boundaries are described as permeable, filtering mechanisms, which intersect with the ‘other’ at multiple points and levels rather than boundaries in the sense of a solid line ‘drawn in the sand’.

Lotman draws on the writings of Pushkin and the idea of ‘inspiration’ as a form of creative tension to illustrate the dynamic processes at work in the interactions of the individual in relation to the semiotic mass (that is the *semiosphere*). He frames ‘inspiration’ as the product of ambiguous tension in semiotic processes in which understanding is achieved and framed retrospectively as an element of ‘discovery’ that is simultaneously creative and logical. In a sense, Lotman, here, presents the notion of ‘inspiration’ as the ‘moment of explosion’ as an element which, as stated earlier, is ‘out of time’ and recognisable only in retrospect, at which stage it is no longer viewed as explosive but is framed by its participation in the gradual development of culture.

In ‘Thinking reed’, Lotman develops his notion of culture’s opposition to non-culture which he relates to ‘nature’. Lotman uses notions of harmony and disharmony in nature to frame man’s disruptive presence. Whilst he acknowledges the signifying acts of animals, Lotman draws on the work of Tyutchev to

distinguish these ritualised processes from those of man: 'as a "thinking reed" – he constantly finds himself at odds with the basic laws of his surroundings' whose behaviour 'gravitates towards the invention of something new and unpredictable'. Thus, we see in man's capacity to generate a mental model of reality, a unique form of semiosis linked to culture, memory and representation.

In chapter 7, Lotman takes up this notion of representation, focusing on man's use of language and the use of proper names to categorise and classify cultural artefacts. He uses this to highlight the concepts of choice, selection and the mental positioning of the individual within the dual framework of 'I' and 'Other'. Once again, the distinction between 'one's own' (*svoi*) and the 'other' (*chuzoi*) or alien is made, generating a sense of boundary in the individual's social and cultural construction of the world. At the same time, he makes much of the ludic qualities made available to humans in their use of language in the interplay between the general and the specific, the individual and the collective. In 'The fool and the madman', Lotman considers the positioning of semiotic value in terms of 'the norm', however, he introduces the notion of a ternary structure where the more traditional structure of the binary opposition is reframed as a semiotic continuum marked by the extremes of 'the fool' on the one hand and the 'madman' on the other, each of which is balanced or 'measured' against the notion of 'the wiseman' which is the norm. Focusing on the 'madman' as an unpredictable entity Lotman suggests that there are, nevertheless, moments (of explosion) in which the madman is able to present his 'madness' as a moment of genius or effective exploit, e.g. in extreme circumstances, such as war, where the unpredictable behaviour of the madman works to his advantage. He draws on examples from folklore, myth, war, chivalric literature and the theatre to demonstrate the use of 'folly' as permissible behaviour with alternating semiotic values and as a harbinger of explosive potential.

Whereas in the previous chapter, Lotman focuses on the unpredictability of the text (in the sense of a singular scenario), in chapter 9, 'The text within the text', he turns his attention to the unpredictability of the system as a whole. He argues that semiotic space is populated by multiple systems that are in constant and dynamic interaction not only with each other but also with fragments of those systems which have been 'destroyed' as a result of which these systems are in dialogue not only with themselves but with others with which they frequently collide, occasionally producing a third, new and unpredictable phenomenon. As an interesting example, he refers to the 'Frenchification' of the culture of the Russian nobility at the turn of the 18th century and the use of French language by Pushkin and Tolstoy as a reflection of everyday reality of the period, alongside Griboyedov's critique of the practice. In chapter 10, Lotman uses the example of the trope as a destruction or disruption of the norm to further elaborate the

value of the unpredictable as a measurement of cultural development, describing it as a 'complex dynamic reservoir' which constantly pushes 'the boundaries of the permissible'. He presents an interesting range of examples around fashion, cultural values and the 'signifying function of clothing' to demonstrate the relationship between ritualistic behaviour on the one hand and eccentricity on the other. Describing this inverted world as 'the dynamics of the non-dynamic' he makes the point that explosive moments may also arise out of unexpected shifts in fashion, ritual, and other forms of behaviour which pass beyond the bounds of the norm (e.g. tyranny, role-swapping – whether by gender, status or intellect, and homosexuality) which are subsequently 'normalised' as forms of social ritual.

In 'The logic of explosion', we are returned to the paradox of language and culture and the struggle to free ourselves from its limits. Lotman writes:

We are immersed in the space of language. Even in the most basic abstract conditions, we cannot free ourselves from this space, which simply envelops us, and yet it is a space of which we are also a part and which, simultaneously, is part of us.

Here, again, Lotman draws a contrast between the seemingly stable, isolated texts of formalism and early structural studies and the heterogeneous, dynamic and (at least partially) chaotic nature of the semiosphere. Lotman presents the work of Charlie Chaplin as an example of 'a chain of sequential explosions, each of which changes the other, creating a dynamic multi-levelled unpredictability'. He points to the transfer of circus language (pantomime and gesture) to the film screen, which then developed into a completely different genre characterised by the sharp contrast between gesture and theme, e.g. the comic origins of pantomime and the depiction of life in the trenches during the First World War. The latter, in turn, paves the way for Chaplin to develop further semiotic distance between his initial forays into film and the complex melange of language and topic theme apparent in his later movies such as 'The Great Dictator'. Thus, in this final satirical frame, we find traces of the previous semiotic systems framed by circus language and early cinematic slapstick comedy.

In 'The moment of unpredictability' Lotman reiterates the view that the 'moment of explosion' is unpredictable not in the sense of randomness but in terms of 'its own collection of equally probable possibilities. . . from which only one may be realised'. At the point in which the explosive moment is realised, the 'others' are dispersed into semantic space, whereupon they become carriers of semantic difference. In chapter 13, Lotman explores culture from the point of view of its internal structures and external influences. He argues that culture is traditionally viewed as a bounded space and suggests that it is wrong to view

culture this way. He posits culture as a dynamic entity which is in constant collision with the extra-cultural sphere within which it is immersed, whose development is the result of a 'constant transposition of internal and external processes'. In this sense, culture is seen to be in constant dialogue not only with itself but also with the greater *semiosphere*. What is internal is regarded as orderly, one's own (*svoi*), whereas what is outside is regarded as chaotic or alien (*chuzoi*). The perception of chaos is relative to culture itself and, Lotman suggests, the chaotic space is nevertheless organised in its own terms, albeit in a language unknown to the culture of origin. When the spaces of culture and extra-culture collide in this way, new texts are drawn into the cultural space, generating an act (or multiple acts) of explosion. In the avalanche of possibilities this presents, some elements are assimilated, whilst others are rejected and expelled. Those that are assimilated by the culture contribute, in turn, to the gradual or radical development of the cultural space.

In 'Two forms of dynamic' Lotman returns to the distinction between explosive and gradual processes. He is particularly at pains to emphasise that neither concept should be taken literally. In chapter 15, Lotman returns to the unique human trait of consciousness, contrasting this to the natural impulse of stimulus-response, which he links to the notion of memory and the development of the activity of mental representation and the translation of activity into a sign. The important element here is the notion of abstraction, the unique ability of man to generate meaning independently of the immediacy of the stimulus-response action. However, in this chapter, Lotman does not journey from symptom to language but rather, points to the threshold of meaning previously suggested in the chapter on 'inspiration' which is, here, evidenced as the dream. Interestingly, and almost in analogy to the phrase 'semiotic mass' used in chapter 5, Lotman uses the Russian word *klubok* (literally 'woollen ball') to describe the tangled web of meaning potentials and the polylingual nature of the dream space. In a beautifully expressed metaphor, he suggests that the space of the dream 'does not immerse us in visual, verbal, musical and other spaces' rather, it immerses us in their 'coalescence'. The 'coalescent' space is unpredictable, uncertain and indeterminate and, in Lotman's word equates to 'zero space' or a space absent of meaning, except in its correlation to the 'carriers of communication' which occupy it and which, in turn, are dependent on the 'interpreting culture' which generates them. To this 'zero space' Lotman assigns the value of an essential function in the development of culture, the provision of a 'reserve of semiotic uncertainty' which may act as a stimulus for creative (explosive) activity.

Following on from this Lotman, focusing on the artistic text, looks again at culture from the point of view of the move from the individual (unique) to the

universal (general) and suggests that the structure “I” is one of the basic indices of culture. He points to the rationalist tendency to ‘streamline contradictions’ and to ‘reduce diversity to singularity’ but suggests that more needs to be understood about the contradictory nature of the artistic text.

In ‘The phenomenon of art’ Lotman outlines the transformative interaction between the ‘moment of explosion’, the modelling of consciousness and the act of memory, which he describes as the ‘three layers of consciousness’. Turning from the realm of the dream, he focuses on the nature of art, its relation to freedom of action and, through this its ability to transform the real to the unreal, the illegitimate to the legitimate and the forbidden to the permissible. Art is construed as an experimental domain which creates its own world. As such, and like the inverted world of the trope discussed above, it generates a reservoir of dynamic processes which contribute to the explosive potential of the semiotic space of art. Here, too, Lotman provides with a much greater degree of clarity his understanding of the dynamic processes of the semiotic world.

... the dynamic processes of culture are constructed as a unique pendulum swing between a state of explosion and a state of organisation which is realised in gradual processes. The state of explosion is characterized by the moment of equalisation of all oppositions. That which is different appears to be the same. This renders possible unexpected leaps into completely different, unpredictable organisational structures. The impossible becomes possible. This moment is experienced out of time, even if, in reality, it stretches across a very wide temporal space. [...] This moment concludes by passing into a state of gradual movement. What was united in one integrated whole is scattered into different (opposing) elements. Although, in fact, there was no selection whatsoever (any substitution was made by chance) the past is retrospectively experienced as a choice and as a goal-oriented action. Here, the laws of the gradual processes of development enter into the fray. They aggressively seize the consciousness of culture and strive to embed the transformed picture into memory. Accordingly, the explosion loses its unpredictability and presents itself as the rapid, energetic or even catastrophic development of all the same predictable processes.

In chapter 18, the notion of the ‘end’ and the principles of continuity and discontinuity are reflected in the stark boundary between life and death. Death is marked out as both the beginning and the end. Lotman speaks of the ‘special semantic role of death in the life of man’. It is the boundary which frames all meaningful activity and which, simultaneously, marks the contradiction between life in the general sense and the ‘finite life of human existence’. And yet, what is finite, is continued in the memory of the ‘son’ so that even the boundary of ‘death’, as it were, is permeable and filtered.

In 'Perspectives', Lotman reiterates the view that explosion is part and parcel of linear dynamic processes. He distinguishes between binary and ternary structures, emphasising that explosion in the latter takes the form of a specific form of dynamic, whereas in the latter it permeates the multiple layers of semiotic space at different speeds and different intervals, such that whilst its effects are felt throughout all the layers of culture, traces of the old remain to which the ternary system strives to adapt itself, transporting them from periphery to centre. In binary structures, by contrast, the explosion penetrates life in its entirety, replacing all that previously existed in an apocalyptic manner. In these concluding remarks, Lotman expresses the hope that the events of the early 1990s in Russia reflect a shift in Russian culture from a binary structure towards a more accommodating ternary system, capable of generating renewal and innovation.

In the final chapter, Lotman offers his concluding remarks on the paradox of cultural development, returning to his initial question as to how a system (culture) can develop and at the same time, remain true to itself. He argues that the starting point of any semiotic system is not the isolated sign or model but, rather, semiotic space which itself is characterised as a 'conglomeration of elements whose relations with each other may be encountered in a variety of ways'. This interconnectivity of the system and the polylingual elements which populate it can, he argues, only be understood 'in terms of the ratio of each element to the other and all elements to the whole'. The foregrounding of the relational and interactional elements of culture in its immersion in semiotic space, and the sense that in these terms, culture is viewed as embedded in a semiotic network far greater and more inherently dynamic than itself, coupled with the heterogeneity and explosive potential of that structure, has important implications for the future study not only of culture, communication, and new trends in technology but also for the generation of new strands of interdisciplinary research into the ever expanding world of semiosis. In particular, this dynamic systemic approach to cultural analysis and semiosis offers interesting potential in the realm of new media technologies (Buckingham 2007), cultural studies (Schönle 2006), and recent streams of semiotic study such as multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Iedema 2003; Jewitt and Kress 2003; Thibault and Bauldry 2005), nexus analysis (Scollon 2001), semiotic remediation (Prior et al. 2006) and, of course modelling systems theory (Sebeok and Danesi 2000) itself.

In the closing chapters of the book, Lotman reflects on endings and new beginnings. It is particularly poignant in the titling of chapter 18 – '*The end! How sonorous is this word*' if we consider that at the time the book was produced, Lotman himself was sufficiently ill that this book was dictated rather than written by him and, indeed, he died less than a year after the book was published. In addition, his wife of many years had died shortly before the book was produced.

And, last but certainly not least, the former Soviet bloc was undergoing a period of immense change. The final chapter, '*In place of conclusions*' is particularly interesting as Lotman, rather than drawing conclusions, invites us, instead, to look forward . . . with an eye to the past, and our feet firmly in the present.

And to finish, a parting remark made by Professor Mikhail Lotman in the closing discussions of the 1st International Conference on Semiosphere, which may serve to illustrate Lotman's contribution to our ongoing researches:

"For my father there were two types of scholar - the one who has the questions and the one who has the answers. He belonged to the first."

Thanks

Just as translation in the semiosphere is effected through dynamic interaction on multiple levels, so too this translation is the fruit of many voices, although responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies or omissions are, of course, solely mine. I would like to thank Professor Winfried Nöth, Professor Peeter Torop, Professor Irene Machado and Dr Martin Oliver for their support and shared belief that the translation of this book into English was an important and valuable task. I would also, and more particularly, like to thank Professor Kalevi Kull and Dr Paul Cobley, as series editors, for their enthusiasm and encouragement for this project. And a final heartfelt thank you to Associate Professor Marina Grishakova for her painstaking editorial assistance in checking, proofreading and verifying the translated manuscript.

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Introduction

Edna Andrews

In 1990 Umberto Eco wrote a brilliant introduction to Ann Shukman's remarkable translation of Lotman's book, *Universe of the Mind* (*Внутри мыслящих миров*). By focusing on the emergence of the terms *semiotics* and *structuralism* in the European academic community and their interrelationship, Eco contextualizes Lotman's work historically and presents a slice of Lotman's contributions that successfully captures the essence of this powerful scholar and thinker (1990: vii–xiii). It is difficult to imagine an introductory article that can attain the profundity and scope of Eco's evaluation of Lotman's work, which makes the present task quite daunting. However, the central ideas given in what was to be Lotman's final monograph, *Culture and Explosion* (*Культура и взрыв*), which he dedicated to his wife, the notable literary scholar Zara Grigorievna Mints, are sufficiently robust that they have already been the subject matter of a series of analyses attempting to further the study of the semiotics of culture, and it is to these ideas that we turn the readers' attention.

It would be impossible to discuss the ideological fundamentals of *Culture and Explosion* without evocation of Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere*, originally introduced in 1984. The *semiosphere* is the prerequisite space that guarantees the potential for semiosis, which is in essence the generation of meanings. In Lotman's own words, the semiosphere is "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... a generator of information" (Lotman 1990: 123, 127). Semiospheric space is the precursor to and the result of cultural development (Lotman 1990: 125). Lotman outlines the fundamental organizing principles of the semiosphere in *Universe of the Mind* as *heterogeneity* of the space, *asymmetry* of internal structures, *binariness* of internal and external spaces, *boundaries* defined as bilingual filters that allow for the exchange of semiotic processes, and the "development of a metalanguage" as the final act of the system's structural organization (1990: 124–140). Of these five points, only one is discussed in *Culture and Explosion*. (In fact, the term *semiosphere* only appears in *Culture and Explosion* on two occasions.) Specifically, in the chapter entitled *The Logic of Explosion*, Lotman focuses on the notion of heterogeneity as a characteristic of not only spatial differentiation, but even different rates of change between and within individual subspaces of the semiosphere (see below and 1992a: 177):

Semiological space is filled with the freely moving fragments of a variety of structures which, however, store stably within themselves a memory of the whole which, falling into a strange environment, can suddenly and vigorously restore themselves...

Completely stable invariant semiotic structures apparently do not exist at all.

Lotman's reiteration of the importance of a complex *dynamic* within and around the semiosphere speaks to its critical role in capturing the essence of its explanatory power as a modeling system. Peeter Torop, one of the central figures of contemporary Tartu semiotics, explains the multiple perspectives from which the concept of *semiosphere* is explicated, which include a universal research level, a concept encompassing all facets of cultural semiotics, and as a functional mechanism to understand diachronic and synchronic dynamic processes. Although the term itself is hardly mentioned, it is clear that there is a profound relationship between Lotman's earlier work on the semiosphere and his work in *Culture and Explosion*. It is precisely this relationship that will be the focus of the following remarks.¹

We are constantly reminded of the fundamental tenet of Lotman's approach to semiotics, which is the importance of semiotics as a dynamic process of *semiosis*, which is a system-level phenomenon engaging multiple sign complexes that are given simultaneously across spatio-temporal boundaries, and not merely the study of individual signs artificially frozen into one slice of the space/time continuum. As Lotman's work is contextualized into the broader fields of structuralist and non-structuralist semiotic paradigms (e.g. comparisons with the works of Saussure, Hjelmslev, Peirce, Jakobson and others) and even the cognitive sciences, it is crucial to understand Lotman's decision to target his theoretical models at the system level, and not at the individual sign level. This fact may explain, for example, why Lotman does not devote more works to explications of sign types using iconicity, indexicality and symbolic distinctions.

Lotman's work has often been read through the prism of other semiotic contributors of the twentieth century, resulting in what often appears to be an attempt to position Lotman as more of a borrower of ideas than an innovator of ideas. While it is certainly true that Lotman was deeply influenced by his own professors and some of the most outstanding intellectuals of his day, Lotman's work is unique in its achievement of a broadly-based metalanguage for the *mod-*

1. The term *semiotics* is also rarely used throughout the text of *Culture and Explosion*. I would suggest that Lotman wanted to present his ideas as fundamental not only to a semiotic approach to language, culture and text, but as more general concepts that are applicable within a variety of methodological approaches to the study of cultures.

elling of cultures, a system of systems.² Lotman's formulation and explication of semiospheric space is the single most powerful contributing factor to his success in presenting a usable metalanguage for cultural analysis. Vjacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov, Lotman's colleague and co-founder of the Tartu-Moscow School, is very emphatic in his refocusing of the semiotic agenda to contextualize itself within the defining principles and mechanisms of the semiosphere itself (1998: 792).

The discipline of cultural semiotics as viewed by Lotman has caused a significant shift away from more traditional structuralist models of semiotic space. Specifically, Lotman defines this new discipline as focused on analyzing the interaction and mutual influence of diversely-structured semiotic spaces, the ever-present irregularities and unevenness (неравномерность) contained in the structures of semiotic space, and an obligatory shift to cultural and semiotic *polyglotism* (1992b: I. 129). It is precisely the last point that is featured early on in *Culture and Explosion* and emerges many times throughout the book. In the opening chapter, Lotman outlines the importance of a minimum of two languages in order for semiotic space to realize its meaning-generation potential, and it is precisely these languages ("a minimum of two, but in all actuality the list is open-ended" [see below and 1992a: 9–10]) that, by definition, mutually require each other in order to provide the inevitability of the *other*. Furthermore, he notes that those spaces beyond the boundaries of a given semiotic space (which he calls "reality" or the "external world") also can never be captured by a single language; rather, only an aggregate of languages can meet this requirement (see below and 1992a: 9). The idea of a single, ideal language is, at best an illusion and must be abandoned (*ibid.*). Ironically, the desire to achieve a single, universal language is one of the trends that helps create cultural space (see below and 1992a: 10).

Lotman's requirement of multiple languages as "the minimal meaning-generating unit" may be interpreted in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels (see below and 1992a: 16). For instance, these different languages could be the languages of the internal spaces of the semiosphere and the surrounding spaces in which the semiosphere is situated or could include Lotman's fundamental distinction between I–I (also called *autocommunication*) and I–s/he models of communication as presented in *Universe of the Mind* (1990: 21–33). Although not mentioned in *Culture and Explosion*, the concept of *autocommunication* is

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2. Lotman's interest in modelling systems involves two major trajectories: (1) the creation of metasemiotics, which focuses more on modelling the text than the text itself, and (2) the specific semiotic functioning of actual texts (see below and 1992a: I. 129). It is the second trajectory that gives rise to a developed discipline of cultural semiotics.

one of the most powerful concepts given by Lotman for defining mechanisms for the generation of meaning within the semiosphere. The primary function of autocommunication is to create new information at both the cultural and individual levels. This new information displays an important series of characteristics, including (1) its qualitative reconstruction, (2) not being self-contained or redundant, and (3) the doubling and redefinition of both the *message* and the *code* (1990: 21–22).³

This is an appropriate point to mention Lotman's baseline requirement, which is actually a corollary of the requirement of a minimum of two languages: all phenomena must be translated in order to be perceived in semiospheric space. Such a formulation brings Lotman close to the non-structuralist semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce. Furthermore, all translations necessarily change meaning, and the act of non-comprehension is as salient as the act of comprehension. The importance of non-comprehension deserves further explication.

The relationship between translatability and nontranslatability in Lotmanian theory is an important source of *tension*, which is a basic structural principle of all semiotic space that plays an integral part in the realization of discontinuities in the dynamic form of *explosions*. In the introductory chapter of *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman describes the interrelationship of the multiple languages that lie at the heart of semiotic space and their mutual untranslatability (or limited translatability) as the "source of adjustment of the extra-lingual object to its reflection in the world of languages" (see below and 1992a: 10). Lotman expands this description in his definition of semiotic space (see below and 1992a: 42)

Semiotic space appears before us as the multi-layered intersection of various texts, which are woven together in a specific layer characterized by complex internal relationships and variable degrees of translatability and spaces of untranslatability.

While it is generally true that the internally distinct and bilingual filter-like boundaries within semiotic space provide a baseline for potential translatability, it is also the case that cultural spaces and texts in a diachronic perspective may contain pockets of information that are not accessible to particular synchronic spaces because of the different languages and codes used, or even due to a breakdown in the cultural knowledge of the codes defining the internal spaces. In each of these cases, the heterogeneous structure of semiotic space gives rise to different types of *tension*, including the tension that gives value to the "translation of the untranslatable" (see below and 1992a: 15). In short, there are two types of contradictory *tension* that are at work simultaneously in

3. The terms *code* and *message* are borrowed by Lotman from Roman Jakobson's communication act model (Jakobson 1987 [1960]: 62–94).

all communication acts: (1) the attempt to make comprehension easier by expanding the intersecting spaces of the addresser and addressee, accompanied by (2) an attempt to increase the value of the communication by maximizing the non-intersecting spaces of the addresser and addressee (see below and 1992a: 14). Extracting knowledge and new meanings from these less accessible textual spaces increases the value of the content of the utterance.

One of the most significant outcomes of the interplay of *tension* in the semiotic act is reiteration of the fact that the semiotic process does not guarantee a veridical outcome. It is on this point that Lotman and Peirce are in profound agreement. Lotman notes that misunderstanding and breakdown in communication are as significant as successful transmissions (1992b: I. 18), while Peirce talks about the role of *false signs* and *underdeveloped signs* (Peirce 8.315; Savan 1980: 257–260; Short 1981: 200; Andrews 2003: 147). And thus, “misunderstanding (conversation in non-identical languages) is as valuable a meaning-generating mechanism as understanding” (Lotman see below and 1992a: 16).

Lotman’s definition of *tension* and *explosion* are at the heart of his final monograph. Tension, as we have shown above, is manifested in a variety of guises, some of which are contradictory in nature. It serves as a structural principle for endless dynamic change in semiotic space that leads to different levels of information growth. Tension is at the basis of the primary mechanisms of *gradual* and *explosive* cultural change (Lotman see below and 1992a: 17–43). These two mechanisms are inextricably linked, both coexisting and alternating in space-time, and illustrate and explain cultural evolution. One of the ways to contextualize the importance of these two types of mechanisms is to look more closely at the connection between discontinuity and explosion conceptually. As we noted earlier, the notion of *boundedness* is one of the central defining characteristics of the semiosphere. With boundedness comes the implication of discontinuity and discreteness of structures. In any given cut of semiospheric space, Lotman guarantees that both continuous and discrete (explosive) processes occur in an feedback configuration, such that continuity guarantees discontinuity, and discontinuity guarantees future continuity (1992a: 26–27). I have argued elsewhere (2003: 35–39, 167) that the “moment of explosion” clarifies Lotman’s understanding of gradual and explosive processes. Specifically, the inception of the explosion (discontinuity) is the beginning of a new stage of development for the semiotic system that is a focal point for extraordinary expansion of information on the one hand, and a signal of the beginning of a new era on the other; however, this new stage is of a cyclic, not linear, nature, and the force of change in one area evokes an equally powerful change in the other (see Lotman see below and 1992a: 26). Furthermore, Lotman is careful to distinguish between *actual discontinuity* and the *perception of discontinuity*. Periods