

CHAPTER 21

EXPLOSION

Laura Gherlone

Introduction

The concept of explosion in Juri Lotman's scientific thought originates from an existential experience – the vivid awareness that 'in life, unlike chess, we cannot predict even two moves ahead' (letter to Boris Uspenskij, end of January 1984; Lotman and Uspenskij 2016: 573). This conviction led him to investigate the ways in which humans culturally shape the experiences of randomness, unpredictability and creativity inherent in life.

Without doubt, Lotman's encounter in 1986 with Ilya Prigogine's theory of complex systems (Lotman [1989a] 2002: 135) was instrumental in his theorization of explosion, as demonstrated by his last two monographs, *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman [1992] 2009) and *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013), as well as a considerable and consistent body of essays. However, although it is a concept that essentially identifies the Lotman of the later years, we can find the roots of this horizon of reflection in his early writings. 'Explosion' is the tip of the iceberg of a community's intellectual path – the Tartu School's noosphere (see Lotman [1982] 2016) – marked by a strong internal evolution within the field of human communication studies: a change of vision that saw the transformation of 'static models of information theory [. . .] into a fascinating picture of interrelations, conflicts and transcoding,' which, in turn, converted 'semiotic research into a dynamic portrait of the spiritual life of society' (Lotman [1983] 2005: 76).¹

In this chapter I will address the concept of explosion in relation to two problem areas: *knowledge* and *evolution*.² I will make use of both theoretical writings and documents such as Lotman's letters, autobiographical interviews and television lectures for the general public. This array of sources will contribute to showing how his scientific thought, feeding on metaphorical images and 'explosive' insights, is inseparable from his aesthetic sensibility and, in general, from *real life* understood as ongoing creativity.

Human communication: Superfluous over-abundance or an engine of culture?

In the 1980s, Lotman postulated the idea that human semiotic activity is, in essence, an enormous communicative effort capable of generating a translation-driven intertextual sphere (or semiosphere) through which we can culturally and holistically know our surroundings (see Chapter 22).³ In other words – as he pointed out in his unpublished

article 'V otkrytom mire' (In an Open World) (Lotman 1992–93a) – in order to have access to a culturalized form of the world (or extracultural reality), we need to interact through an 'unstable, porous, non-reducible semiotic layer [which] immerses us in a world of different viewpoints. By crossing, colliding and contradicting each other, [these viewpoints] give us such a variety of different projections of the world' that they come 'to lend our knowledge a volumetric [*ob'emyi*] character'. This would explain 'the wastefulness of culture in particular, and of human knowledge in general, which we cannot otherwise justify. [. . .] Why so many sciences? Why more and more new art forms? Why do we need cinema if there is theatre and novel if there is drama? Why this monstrous squandering of the best intellectual forces of humanity?'

If it is true that the mutual translation of different ways of seeing things can offer us a multifaceted knowledge, will we ever come – Lotman wonders ([1990] 2005: 538) – to achieve 'a general encompassment [*okhvat*] of the reality'? Against the background of this question stands the issue of the unexpected; and 'the unexpected brings explosion' ([1992] 2009): 120).

The spark of the untranslatable

Despite the 'exuberance' of reality, human beings have become accustomed to thinking of knowledge as a space full of holes that must be progressively saturated. The holes represent untamed information, which is perceived as disorder, randomness, contradiction. They are under the illusion that achieving full knowledge is tantamount to *dominating information*, that is, to identifying an ordering principle and, together with it, 'unbending repetitions' (Lotman [1990] 2005: 521).

However, human beings' *real* experience of knowledge contradicts this ideal because – as mentioned earlier – life is not a chess game. While trying to model reality, giving it a sense and in some way an order, their semiotic action appears as a 'monstrous wastefulness' (*chudovishchnaia rastochitel'nost'*): an apparently entropic production of information. If human beings aspire to order knowledge, why then do they dissipate so much semiotic energy? And where does this redundancy of information go? Wouldn't it be less expensive and more 'efficient' (*rentabel'nyi*) to communicate through artificial language (Lotman [1993] 1994: 443–4)?

Lotman identified translation as the source of our knowledge of reality but included *the unexpected as a constituent element* of human communication and not as 'noise' to be ousted. He stressed that, paradoxically, translation is all the more effective the more it leaves a margin for untranslatability. This, in fact, is a symptom of the fact that the reality we mean to grasp is so semantically rich and/or culturally distant that it can only be expressed through *approximation*. The surplus of meaning that flows from the untranslatable is not actually a waste since it is never lost but rather 'hovers' in culture, entering a state of potential (meaning repository). We can picture the untranslatable like air filled with pollen: impalpable, ungraspable but potentially able to bear fruit in unpredictable times and places. When this happens, it can suddenly reveal new,

unexpected, inconceivable, apparently illogical and inexpressible relationships between things.

Lotman calls this revealing moment an *explosion*, that is, ‘the moment of supreme tension [which] removes all boundaries of untranslatability and unites the incompatible’ ([1992] 2009: 22). The explosion, while taking place in a specific space–time frame, entails the suspension of the limits within which meaning is generated and the emergence of something radically new, the result of a non-synthetic unity of differences – ‘a world of supreme clarity, which cancels out the contradictions in their particular deep-level unity’ ([1992] 2009: 22). This is the instant in which a breakthrough (*proryv*) seems to happen between cultural reality and extracultural reality (or ‘noumenal world’, as Lotman defines it in his later writings), as if suddenly what is fatally unknowable presents itself to knowledge without the need for semiotic interpolation, although in reality the latter never disappears.

Focusing on explosion, Lotman inevitably has artistic inspiration in mind (poetry first and foremost), which sprung him into action from the very beginning. In his later writings, he speaks in general of the experience of ‘unpredictable creativity’ ([1992] 2009: 20; [1990] 2001: 101) that humans can potentially live – a way of opening up to the world with the mind and the senses that allows one to grasp, ‘as if in a magnesium flare’ (Lotman to Uspenskij, late April 1978; Lotman and Uspenskij 2016: 430), the profound meaning of heterogeneity and even of the contradictions of reality.

It is no coincidence that the monograph *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* – the first version of which was titled *Physiology of Explosion: On Transitional Periods in History* (Kuzovkina and Shakhovskaia 2001: 26) – is basically a long reflection on the role of art in human history and on its epistemological significance. In Lotman’s vision, art – as a form of thinking and modelling reality – is what gives life its inexhaustible randomness. While ‘taking charge’ of the culture within which it arises (i.e. material and immaterial limits such as constraining codifications), the artistic-creative thought is endowed with an intrinsic transcendent capacity that allows it to disarticulate the expected meanings. A thing as banal as a worn-out pair of boots (just think of Vincent van Gogh’s *Shoes*, 1886) can become an uncanny subject precisely because in art objects ‘constrained by the laws of reality acquire freedom’ (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013: 172) and reveal an untranslatable vagueness that Lotman calls unpredictable explosion.

Such ‘iridescent’, ‘twinkling’ meanings, as Lotman ([1967] 2011: 264) guessed from the very beginning, are carriers of the unexpected because they shed light on facets of reality that would otherwise remain hidden or non-perceptible to most people. A depicted face can reveal, for example, the *co-presence* of mixed emotions, shifting expressions and different temporalities (Lotman [1990] 2005: 533–6; 1992–93c; [1993/1997] 2002; 2016): a glimmer of childhood can blossom between the wrinkles of a shrivelled face, thus revealing that time has a multiple, even ‘ghostly’ nature (Tamm 2015).

The ‘essence of artistic cognition’, Lotman sums up ([1994/2010] 2013: 84–5), ‘is located in the explosion in meaning that arises at the intersection of non-intersecting (in other situations) images of reality’. We can deduce that this type of cognition is an

indispensable component for humanity and, with its unpredictability, it is the closest there is to *real life*.

Otherness, freedom, imperfection

Three considerations may be drawn from what has been discussed so far. Firstly, the concept of explosion in its deepest meaning is a *thinking of otherness*. In fact, explosion implies that difference is a constitutive element of human life and knowledge, otherwise there would be no need for translation (i.e. the precondition of the explosive moment). If that were the case, we would be a mass of 'billiard balls', which can 'replace each other' without any margin for misunderstanding (Lotman [1988] 2005: 464). However, human beings' *real* experience of reality passes through the communicative exchange, where the need for incomprehension is paradoxically as relevant as the need for comprehension ([1990] 2005: 527). It is precisely because of the recognition of the other's diversity that human communication is so semiotically rich, redundant and contradictory – so much so that it generates thresholds of untranslatability but also, through the artistic cognition, moments 'of tension' which make 'the untranslatable translatable' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 23). The otherness is ultimately what makes reality knowable in its many facets.

Secondly, explosion maintains an indissoluble relation with *freedom*. Lotman writes ([1990] 2005: 532): 'as soon as we move on to real life, we enter a world where it is necessary not to get rid of contradictions or consider that contradictions are a mistake, but to understand that contradictions are our treasure.' Seeing contradictions as a treasure means thinking in an antinomic way, that is, accepting the *co-presence* of a thing and its opposite in the space of the semiosphere: for example, to recognize that past, present and future can simultaneously coexist. This refusal to compartmentalize is linked to Lotman's belief that freedom is, first and foremost, the possibility of tapping into information. Mutilating reality by dividing it into self-excluding oppositions actually results in giving up the wealth of information that a multi-perspective view can grasp: that is, depriving oneself of what can greatly influence the 'possibility of choice' ([1990] 2001: 226).

Thirdly, accepting the contradictions inherent in life means assuming that human semiotics is fundamentally imperfect and incomplete – Lotman speaks of *nepravil'nost'* (incorrectness, irregularity). But it is precisely this imperfection that enables the explosive moment to constitutively include a crisis of meaning, that is, what allows human beings to evolve. During an interview between Kalevi Kull and Lotman, the latter stated the following:

It happened to a Greek philosopher who was not from Athens. He arrived in Athens and there at the market a vendor told him: 'You are a foreigner.' Of course, he was Greek, but not from Athens. He said: 'How do you know?' 'Because your Greek is *too correct*', he replied. You see, so *too correct* is a clue that reveals the alien, while what is ours keeps a reserve for permissible incorrectness, admissible variants, uniqueness. So [. . .] this freedom of the system, its irregularity, is what

The Companion to Juri Lotman

ensures its survival, its possibility for evolution and, in general, makes it live. You see, life is incorrect by nature, but it is incorrect because it is profoundly correct. If it was only incorrect, it would be death. (Kull and Lotman [1992] 2015: 176–7)

Here we find the basis of Lotman's question: Can humans ever come to achieve a general comprehension of reality? The answer is no if the model of knowledge is the *too correct* one of a 'great teacher' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 158) who knows everything in advance, but it is yes if the model is that of a scientist open to unpredictability.

The arrow of time: Entropic death or creativity?

A model of knowledge that excludes the unexpected becomes, from a historical perspective, an interpretative framework through which humans self-describe their development over time, idealizing it as a path towards a state of predictability.⁴ The movement of history takes on a predetermined character, thus affirming a vision of time in which life progressively takes possibilities away: 'a person comes into the world being able to choose many paths; as this opportunity for choice gradually runs out, to the extent that it is reduced, also the information decreases. The longer a person has lived, the easier it is to predict what will happen to him/her in the future' (Lotman [1990] 2005: 539).

It is a *Weltanschauung* based on the idea of irreversible time as 'entropic death': an idea that is, in humans' sociocultural life, continuously questioned by the daily experience of reality, where *instability* and *uncertainty* as well as the *need for choice* in conditions of *high improbability* and the *creative implications* of the decisions taken are commonplace, right up to the 'last exam', as Lotman defines death (Lotman [1983/1995] 2005). It follows that this vision hinged on predictability is extremely inconsistent and therefore lacerating for people.

When making this reflection, Lotman has in mind the work of Nobel laureate in chemistry Prigogine, who studied the so-called dissipative structures – typical of living organisms – that is, 'ordered systems maintained far from equilibrium by external constraints' (Lebon, Jou and Casas-Vázquez 2008: 136). Since they exist in a dynamic state, during their evolution these thermodynamic systems may encounter points of instability (or bifurcation) – which are also the most unpredictable and therefore only probabilistically treatable – and change direction *unexpectedly* and *irreversibly*, bringing to light their creative dynamic. In Lotman's vision, Prigogine's great teaching is to have highlighted that life stands out as a non-linear something and that the arrow of time (or irreversibility) is not necessarily synonymous with time-degradation (as the second law of classical thermodynamics postulates), but can manifest itself as time-creation.

The thought of the Belgian scientist of Russian origin had an explosive effect on Lotman, who had already been reflecting for some time on the role of chance in the dynamics of culture and, more generally, on the relationship between culture and history, which led him to question the structuralist-semiotic approach to culture

oriented towards regularities (see also Chapter 25). Following Prigogine, he came to think – as he observed in his unpublished article ‘Evoliutsiia: uslozhnenie ili uproshchenie?’ (Evolution: Complexification or Simplification?, Lotman 1991–92) – that evolution is a cosmic extensive laboratory: something extremely *dynamic*, the result of the liminal position in which the human being finds himself ‘situated in the boundary of the “dual abyss” (Tiutchev’s expression) of the world that creates him and the world that he creates’ (where the first one, Lotman writes in *Culture and Explosion*, ‘is transformed into an inexhaustible source of information, like the Psyche, in which dwells the inherent self-growing Logos about which Heraclitus spoke’, [1992] 2009: 159). This ‘dual abyss’ – the threshold between extracultural and cultural reality – is what coalesces the history of cosmos and the history of humanity in a single evolutionary-information process.

History, in Lotman’s vision, is in fact the path of ‘appropriation’ (through the semiotic sphere) of the potentially infinite information contained in extraculture. This path advances with the development of thought (the precondition of the semiosphere; see Lotman [1990] 2001: 150), which ‘is by no means direct and fatal and is not unambiguously predictable’ as it includes ‘a great deal of chance and disorder’ (Lotman 1991–92). The randomness inherent in the evolutionary process continuously opens up the *possibility of choice* to human beings. And choice – as has already been partly highlighted – is what, on the one hand, extends the ‘space of information’ ([1992] 2009: 122) and, on the other, amplifies (i.e. enriches, refines and educates) thinking consciousness, without which this process would be a mechanical and uncreative movement.

Lotman’s postulate is the ‘translation’ in historical-culturological terms of the Prigoginian idea of ‘bifurcation’, whereby periods of predictability are interrupted by explosions whose outcome is unpredictable – a translation that led him, like Pushkin, to see in ‘Chance, the god of invention’ (Lotman 1991a; [1992/1995] 2019: 123) but also to ask himself: Why is history often perceived and described as a ‘train travelling at an unusually high velocity’ ([1990] 2005: 519) when in fact it is ‘an irreversible (unstable) process’ (Lotman 1991b: 173), open to creativity?

How does explosion act?

From the second half of the 1980s, the discovery of Prigogine’s thought stimulated Lotman to rethink his cultural theory from a historical perspective. Although this idea had been present since his linguistic-typological writings of the 1960s and 1970s, in the Lotman of the later years this perspective is amplified and bears an ethical-anthropological reflection on the triad *knowledge–memory–self-consciousness* caught in the individual-collective antinomy. This is a necessary and urgent reflection as it is only through the awareness of their action and ‘performativity’ in history that humans can learn to protect themselves from the blind alleys that have often characterized their historical-cultural journey. How? By learning to interpret *uncertainty* through different eyes. This alternative look is explosion.

We may synthetically say that explosion, in Lotman's history-oriented later writings, is a sort of breakthrough in humans' historical path, which is seen as a combination of gradual (or predictable) development and unexpected contingencies.⁵ When it occurs, 'the moment of explosion breaks the chain of cause and effect, causing an entire area to rise up and a collection of identically probable events to come into view. Following from the logic of the preceding developments, it is essentially impossible to predict which of those events will actually occur' (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013: 64).

Explosion is that moment when humans, finding themselves at a crossroads (perceived as vagueness of information), choose a direction. What looked like a spatial-temporal force field, an 'array of possibilities' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 13), becomes retrospectively for the individual-collective self-consciousness 'the only possible option' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 154). It is as if the moment of explosion is variably (i.e. neither rigidly nor deterministically) articulated into two stages. In the first one, the space of the possibilities – the unpredictable – opens up in all its extension and informativity, thus bringing down the law of causality. In the second stage, which is 'the turning point of the process' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 15), the observers involved in the explosion are inclined to drive back to the starting point and to interpret the image of the explosion that took shape in their consciousness. This gives rise to a new, powerful process of description (and self-knowledge) able to 'explain what has occurred' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 15). Failing that, 'innovation would remain unnoticed, lessons from the explosion unlearned' (Torop 2009: xxxvi).

Reality presents itself as a *limit* (since choice necessarily implies the exclusion of other possibilities) but also as an opportunity to increase information through selection. The appearance of two divergent artistic paths, like Pushkin's and Gogol's, can be seen as the cut-off point for multiple potentialities ('why him and not others?') but, at the same time, as a selection that led humanity to take a huge leap forward: the moment when – Lotman writes (1993) in the unpublished article 'Odin: Ob iskhodnykh poniatiiakhi' (One: On Basic Concepts) – the demon of art seemed to have raised Russian literature to the mountain top.

Explosion is presented by Lotman through three main properties. Firstly, he generally speaks of '*moment* of explosion', suggesting that it is a shifting, transitory temporal conformation. At the same time, it is spatial because it implies the existence of a (collective and individual) subject who perceives, interprets and evaluates it and who is inevitably situated in the geographic-social-symbolic location of a given culture. Secondly, rather than giving a definition of explosion, Lotman describes it through the actions it performs, that is, through its agency. If we consider the two main monographs mentioned earlier, we can observe that explosion 'breaks', 'changes', 'carries over', 'throws', 'involves', 'forces', 'occurs', 'renders', 'creates', 'generates', 'ends', 'results in', 'changes', 'expels', 'loses', 'penetrates', 'ruptures'. Thirdly, as an agent force – almost with its own intentionality, which encounters/clashes with the individual-collective subject's force – it seems to be a mnemonic-affective-sensory intelligence that makes use of familiar images-symbols from the past (something similar to archetypal schemas) to become present and graspable.

In light of these properties, the Lotmanian concept of explosion is very close to that of *atmosphere*, if we understand the latter as ‘a contingent and fluid outcome of our perpetually configured surroundings, sensory perceptions, subjectivities and imaginations’ (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, loc. 187; see also Trigg 2020) – an outcome that, in the *hic et nunc* of its manifestation, releases meanings able to ‘move forward with people, continuing to shape [the] understandings of their experiences’ (Sumartojo and Pink 2019, loc. 211) (different reminiscences and anticipatory insights into the future, pre-existing views of things, bodily capacities, cultural narratives via daily discourses and objects). Such ‘atmospheric eruption’ or explosion does not always present itself as the space of a free choice (and therefore bearer of newness and generator of original meanings), but can be conditioned by a mnemonic-cultural load that undermines the result. This is because ‘the moment of explosion is not only the point at which new possibilities take shape but also the point at which one becomes conscious of another reality, a moment of dislocation and of the reinterpretation of memory’ (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013: 69).

The agency of explosion, as mentioned earlier, can push towards the ‘exhumation’ of ancient experiences (symbolized by familiar images) which, instead of helping to embark on the path to novelty, *reproduce* a pernicious past in an apparent new guise: a sort of reinterpreted script. This may happen especially in those moments marked by high uncertainty, when “‘historical memory’ can lead to errors that are at times tragic in their consequences’ (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013: 166). We may define such a situation as a *fallacious explosion* because, while presenting itself as a moment of suspension, it actually does not break the chain of cause and effect, nor does it generate substantially new information (or generates it at a very high cost, i.e. the cancellation of previous information). On the contrary, an authentic explosion, as Lotman underlines in the unpublished article ‘Monostruktury i binarnost’ (Monostructures and Binariness) (1991a), entertains a fertile bond with the past because it can awaken in it latent, unexploded forces with great information capacity – forces capable of *healing the past* itself.⁶

Starting from this vision, Lotman worked on two lines of research: the issues of (1) historical self-description and (2) collective emotion(s), with a particular focus on mass fear.

Binary and ternary systems

Those moments when historical memory proves to be a poor guide are the junctures in which the individual-collective self-consciousness thinks of binariness (cf. note 3) not in terms of coexistence of ‘one’s own’ and ‘the other’ but in terms of exclusion of one of the two poles. Binariness turns into a way of interpreting historical development that absolutizes the (apparent) newness by declaring ‘the alien’ – namely what preceded it – non-existent.

In such sociocultural situations – called ‘binary systems’ – utopia prevails, that is, the conviction that the unrealizable ideal can be concretely actualized and that, in the name

The Companion to Juri Lotman

of such ideal, it is necessary to annihilate everything that exists as it is 'considered to be irretrievably corrupt' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 166). The 'cleaning' – from circumscribed symbolic objects, such as religious images or books of poetry and literature, to entire peoples, with their language and their set of spiritual and material-cultural values – becomes the strategy to achieve the utopia.

Explosion entails a transforming effect in the sense that the binary system actually takes an *irreversible path*, but the 'bifurcation point' is retrospectively described as an *inevitable and necessary choice*, not as one among many possibilities. This feeds in the individual-collective self-consciousness a model of historical path as fatalism (or eschatologism) whereby the moments of suspension – when space-time 'is no longer' and 'is not yet' (Lotman 1994: 220) – are emptied of their creative possibilities.

In the so-called ternary systems, on the contrary, there is a sort of mediation between the ideal and the reality whereby 'certain values from the antecedent period' are preserved and transferred 'from the periphery to the centre of the system' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 166). In spite of not embarking into a deep analysis of the concept of ternarity (*ternarnost'*) from a historical viewpoint, Lotman succeeds in conveying that it is linked to his reflection on the need to think of reality in terms of a 'complex unity' (Lotman 1991a). The application of a complexity filter makes it possible to see the poles of binariness from a holistic perspective, that is, of grasping them in their reciprocity and unity, albeit the existing diversity – Lotman talks indistinctly about 'deep unity', 'higher unity' and 'dynamic unity', taking inspiration from the image of the Holy Trinity ([1994/2010] 2013: 80). The concept of ternary system in a historical sense is therefore an attempt (only sketched) to explain how in certain periods of transition *thinking ternarily* means identifying 'variable geometry' solutions to achieve a non-destructive change.

The dynamics of binary and ternary systems could not be explained, Lotman realized between 1988 and 1993, without considering an agent force that seems to have a collective face: fear.

The issue of mass fear

At transitory historical junctures – both in binary and ternary systems – society *feels* that the complex of discursive and material relations that sustains it has entered into crisis (in the etymological sense of the term, as an 'act of separating'). Objects (like a flag) or words (like 'roots'), which until recently had been constitutive elements of its unifying 'great narrative', are now perceived as something strange. Several reasons can trigger crisis: the emergence of a new and unpredictable threat, the conflictual nature of border areas (such as subcultures) that push towards a radical break, the unleashing of ancient pernicious experiences that act as a script, the change of image and function of the 'alien culture' (see the unpublished writing 'Chuzhoi mir, chuzhoe povedenie' [Alien World, Strange Behaviour], Lotman 1992–93b).

The void created in the *interim* (Lotman 1994: 220–3), that is, the shadow of *insignificance* over the meaning built up until that moment, releases cognitive, emotional and semiotic-pragmatic energies aimed at the reunification and reconstruction of

meaning. These periods generally present themselves with a high degree of *vagueness*; it is difficult to decipher them, and the *nebulousity* they carry brings innovative forces, but also diffused affective waves (insecurity, fear, suspicion, etc.). These are periods when, according to Lotman (1989: 480–1), a ‘psychology of the “fortress besieged”’ may be more easily developed, a kind of spatial-temporal and sensorial configuration that pushes people to let themselves be carried away by an impalpable but real air of fear (Lotman speaks of an *atmosphere* of collective hysteria); to unearth ‘atavistic myths’, that is, to feed discursive plots soaked in fictional elements (which speak of ancient but living traumas); to search for ‘dangerous but invisible enemies’, by identifying a category or a sector of society often already persecuted in the past; to transfer to this dangerous figure the image-symbol of the ‘culprit of all the troubles, the participant in an invisible conspiracy’; to extend this guilt to all those who, in some way, defend or are involved with the stigmatized subject; in the most extreme cases – as in the case of binary systems – to accept that legal guarantees be cancelled, legitimizing repressive actions (for further exploration, see Gherlone 2019). Lotman observes: ‘it is not surprising then that a rigidly binary model is so conducive to displays of intolerance and destructive social emotions. Expressed with classic completeness in the formula “If you’re not with us, you’re against us”, this model historically comes to the surface whenever creativity is pushed aside by destruction’ (Lotman [1994/2010] 2013: 79–80)

This destructive emotional wave goes hand in hand with, and contributes to feeding, the construction of a *monolithic truth* (Lotman 1989: 479), which basically means loss of information as it severs a multi-perspective, creative look. Only the rehabilitation of such generative creativity can overturn the course of events.

Conclusions: On astonishment

All these reflections led Lotman (1991b: 175) to assert the need for a ‘semiotics of history’, that is, a science capable of providing ‘an analysis of how [. . .] the human individual, in the process of making choices, imagines the world’. Interestingly, he does not talk about description but *imagination* of the world. This means that the process of making choices involves not only the realized occurrences but also the imaginable ones, namely the intuitive ‘anticipation of potential “future states”’ ([1992] 2009: 172). How? Lotman sees in art a form of thinking and modelling reality capable of (re)presenting to humans *pictures of the world of unrealized paths*. Art becomes a space of freedom because it is capable of opening up a range of possible choices (e.g. through the cognitive-emotional dialogical relationship with literary characters’ voice) that real life inevitably limits.⁷ Moreover, it shows that the ‘history of *what-might-have-been* [*nesluchivshegosia*] is a great and fundamental history’, offering us the chance to experiment ‘an immense second life’ (Lotman [1990] 2005: 522), an overcoming of the inevitability of death (see also Lotman 1992b).⁸

Finally, embracing artistic thought means *educating* ourselves to conceive reality as ongoing possibility, escaping from the temptation to evaluate the future through the lens of the past. When explosion occurs, art-educated thinking is able to see in uncertainty

The Companion to Juri Lotman

and even in crisis not closing routes but horizons that open up. After explosion, one 'discovers with astonishment that the most likely paths have been bypassed, and what was realized is the least probable or even considered impossible' (Lotman 1993). In other words, one discovers that a leap has been made in knowledge and evolution.

Notes

1. I quote Lotman describing Jakobson's intellectual path, which he deemed similar to his own.
2. For further reading, see Deotto et al. 1996; Avtonomova 2009, 2015; Torop 2009; Grishakova 2009; Lotman M. 2013; Pilshchikov 2013; Kim 2014; Kull 2015; Lorusso 2015; Semenenko 2016; Gramigna and Salupere 2017; Kull and Velmezova 2018; Restaneo 2018; Tamm 2019; the essays in Machado and Barei 2019; Demuru 2020; Monticelli 2020; Salerno and Lozano 2020; Zolyan 2020.
3. This idea is based on Lotman's belief that human thought is grounded on the fundamental opposition between 'one's own' [*svoi*] and 'the other' or 'the alien' [*chuzhoi*], specifically the *co-existence of two poles* 'simultaneously similar and functionally separate' (Lotman 1991a) or principle of binariness and asymmetry. This generates an infinite range of binary oppositions from a micro one between two languages modelling a text to a macro one between culture and extraculture (Lotman 1992–93b), whose mutual dynamism (or tension to translation) is at the basis of our knowledge of reality.
4. For an overview of this topic, see the essays included in Lotman 2019 as well as Lotman 1989; 1998; [1989b] 2002; [1992a] 2002; [1992b] 2002).
5. In *Culture and Explosion*, the process of gradual development is seen as an 'objective narrative of the third person' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 35), that is to say, something codified, consolidated and common to the observers, and therefore predictable – Lotman talks about 'space of common nouns' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 117). The explosion, on the contrary, is the realm of the 'first person' (or the 'space of proper names'), namely of uniqueness and particularity, a reason why it calls into play a tremendous collective effort of decoding and interpretation. Furthermore, 'it is no accident that historically explosive epochs push "great people" to the surface' (Lotman [1992] 2009: 136), by symbolizing the irreplaceability of 'individual creativity' (especially in art).
6. It is noteworthy that Lotman's theory offers a set of interesting ideas for nourishing a cultural affect theory and decoloniality (Gherlone, forthcoming).
7. In the realm of art, reality is transformed into the 'world of proper names', that is, a world 'experienced in an emotional and intimate way', where 'the "alien" is always our "own" but at the same time our "own" is also always "alien"' (Lotman ([1992] 2009: 118). In this way humans can live subjectively and personally even those experiences with which they might not in principle be familiar, such as the death of a son, a psychiatric illness, a situation of captivity or exile, and so on.
8. A detailed study of this topic can be found in Kuzovkina 1999.

References

Avtonomova, N. S. 2009. 'Pozdnii Lotman', in N. S. Avtonomova, *Otkrytaia struktura: Iakobson – Bakhtin – Lotman – Gasparov*, 215–23, Moscow: ROSSPEN.

- Avtonomova, N. S. 2015. 'Le Lotman des derniers travaux: à l'arrière, au front ou tout simplement "en route"?' in E. Velmezova (ed.), *L'École sémiotique de Moscou-Tartu / Tartu-Moscou. Histoire. Épistémologie. Actualité*, 311–35 (Slavica Occitania 40), Toulouse: Université de Toulouse.
- Demuru, P. 2020. 'Between Accidents and Explosions: Indeterminacy and Aesthesia in the Becoming of History', *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* 15 (1): 83–109.
- Deotto, P., Nortman, M., Pesenti, C. and Verch, I. (eds) 1996. *Slavica tergestina (Nasledie Ju. M. Lotmana: nastoiashchee i budushchee)*, 4, Trieste: Edizioni LINT.
- Gherlone, L. 2019. 'Lotman Continues to Astonish: Revolutions and Collective Emotions', *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* 14 (4): 163–83.
- Gherlone, L., forthcoming. 'Semiotics and Cultural Affect Theory', in A. Biglari (ed.), *Open Semiotics*, Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan.
- Gramigna, R. and Salupere, S. 2017. 'Umberto Eco and Juri M. Lotman on Communication and Cognition', in T. Thellefsen and B. Sørensen (eds), *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, 248–57, Berlin, Munich and Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Grishakova, M. 2009. 'Afterword: Around Culture and Explosion: J. Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School in the 1980–90s', in J. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, trans. W. Clark, ed. M. Grishakova, 175–87, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kim, S.-H. 2014. 'Lotmanian Explosion: From Peripheral Space to Dislocated Time', *Sign Systems Studies* 42 (1): 7–30.
- Kull, K. 2015. 'A Semiotic Theory of Life: Lotman's Principles of the Universe of the Mind', *Green Letters* 19 (3): 255–66.
- Kull, K. and Lotman, Y. [1992] 2015. 'Au sujet de la sémiotique de la vie et de l'évolution. (Entretien de Kalevi Kull avec Youri Lotman. Tartu, juin 1992)', in E. Velmezova (ed.), *L'École sémiotique de Moscou-Tartu / Tartu-Moscou. Histoire. Épistémologie. Actualité*, 165–82 (Slavica Occitania 40), Toulouse: Université de Toulouse.
- Kull, K. and Velmezova, E. 2018. 'O paradokse "semiotiki zhizni": raboty poslednikh let Iurii Lotmana', *Slovo.ru: Baltiiskii aktsent* 9 (4): 6–14.
- Kuzovkina, T. 1999. 'Tema smerti v poslednikh stat'iakh Ju. M. Lotmana', in B. Egorov, *Žizn' i tvorchestvo Iu. M. Lotmana*, 259–70, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie.
- Kuzovkina, T. and Shakhovskaia, T. 2001. 'Lotman, Juri. Fond 136. Inventarinimistu'. Available online: http://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/46412/f136_lotman.pdf (accessed 21 November 2020).
- Lebon, G., Jou, D. and Casas-Vázquez, J. 2008. *Understanding Non-Equilibrium Thermodynamics: Foundations, Applications, Frontiers*, Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer.
- Lorusso, A. M. 2015. 'Unity and Pluralism: The Theory of Jurij Lotman', in A. M. Lorusso, *Cultural Semiotics: For a Cultural Perspective in Semiotics*, 67–115, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lotman, J. [1967] 2011. 'The Place of Art Among Other Modelling Systems', trans. T. Pern, *Sign Systems Studies* 39 (2/4): 249–70.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1982] 2016. 'Universitet – nauka – kul'tura', in Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, *Perepiska 1964–1993*, 679–88, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1983] 2005. 'Poslednii ekzamen, poslednii urok . . . (Neskol'ko slov o Romane Osipoviche Iakobsone)', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Vospitanie dushi*, 74–7, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1988] 2005. 'Besedy o russkoi kul'ture. Televizionnye lektzii – Tsikl vtoroi. Vzaimootnosheniia liudei i razvitie kul'tur', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Vospitanie dushi*, 414–69, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1989. 'Vykhod iz labirinta', in U. Eco, *Imia rozy*, 468–81, Moscow: Knizhnaia palata.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1989a] 2002. 'O roli sluchainykh faktorov v literaturnoi evolutsii', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Istoriia i tipologiia russkoi kul'tury*, 128–35, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.

The Companion to Juri Lotman

- Lotman, Ju. M. [1989b] 2002. 'V perspektive Frantsuzskoi revoliutsii', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Istoriia i tipologiia russkoi kul'tury*, 371–5, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, Yu. M. [1990] 2001. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. A. Shukman, London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1990] 2005. 'Besedy o russkoi kul'ture. Televizionnye leksii – Tsikl chetvertyi: Chelovek i iskusstvo', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Vospitanie dushi*, 515–44, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1991a. 'Monostrukturnost' i binarnost', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 268, 6 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1991b. 'Semiotics and the Historical Sciences', in B. Göranzon and M. Florin (eds), *Dialogue and Technology: Art and Knowledge*, 165–80, London: Springer.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1991–92. 'Evolutsiia: uslozhenie ili uproshchenie?', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 271, 14 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1992a. 'Povtoriaemost' i vzryv v dinamicheskikh protsessakh', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 279, 15 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1992b. 'V ozhidanii iazyka (nakanune vzryva)', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 272, 21 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1992a] 2002. 'Povtoriaemost' i unikal'nost' v mekhanizme kul'tury', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Istoriia i tipologiia russkoi kul'tury*, 67–70, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1992b] 2002. 'Iskusstvo na persechenii otkrytykh i zakrytykh struktur', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Istoriia i tipologiia russkoi kul'tury*, 174–88, Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB.
- Lotman, J. [1992] 2009. *Culture and Explosion*, trans. W. Clark, ed. M. Grishakova, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1992–93a. 'V otkrytom mire', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 273, typewritten version, 10 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1992–93b. 'Chuzhoi mir, chuzhoe povedenie', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 289, 4 pages.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1992–93c. 'Ogon' v sosude', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 278, 26 pages.
- Lotman, J. [1992/1995] 2019. 'The Role of Art in the Dynamics of Culture', in J. Lotman, *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics*, trans. B. J. Baer, ed. M. Tamm, 115–30, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1993. 'Odin. Ob iskhodnykh poniattiakh', Tartu University Library, Collection 136, n. 294, pages 4 of 174.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1993] 1994. 'Nam vse neobkhodimo. Lishnego v mire net . . .' in A. D. Koshelev (ed.), *Iu. M. Lotman i tartusko-moskovskaia semioticheskaia shkola*, 442–51, Moscow: Gnozis.
- Lotman, Ju. M. [1993/1997] 2002. 'Portret', in Ju. M. Lotman, *Stat'i po semiotike kul'tury i iskusstva*, 349–75, Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt.
- Lotman, Yu. 1994. 'Theses Towards a Semiotics of Russian Culture', *Elementa* 1 (3): 219–27.
- Lotman, Ju. M. 1998. 'Okhota za ved'mami. Semiotika strakha', *Sign Systems Studies* 26: 61–82.
- Lotman, J. [1994/2010] 2013. *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, trans. B. J. Baer, ed. I. Pilshchikov and S. Salupere, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Lotman, J. 2016. *Juri Lotmani autoportreed. Avtoportrety Iu. M. Lotmana. Juri Lotman's Self-Portraits*, trans. P. Peiker, ed. T. Kuzovkina and S. Daniel, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Lotman, J. 2019. *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics*, trans. B. J. Baer, ed. M. Tamm, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lotman, Ju. M. and Uspenskij, B. A. 2016. *Perepiska 1964–1993*, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Lotman, M. 2013. 'Afterword: Semiotics and Unpredictability', in J. Lotman, *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, trans. B. J. Baer, ed. I. Pilshchikov and S. Salupere, 239–78, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.

- Machado, I. and Barei, S. (eds) 2019. *Bakhtiniana: Revista de Estudos do Discurso* 14 (4), available online: <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/bakhtiniana/issue/view/2280/showToc> (accessed 21 November 2020).
- Monticelli, D. 2020. 'Thinking the New After the Fall of the Berlin Wall: Juri Lotman's Dialogism of History', *Rethinking History* 24 (2): 184–208.
- Pilshchikov, I. (ed.) 2013. *Sluchainost' i nepredskazuemost' v istorii kul'tury: Materialy Vtorykh Lotmanovskikh dnei v Tallinnskom universitete (4–6 iyunia 2010 g.)*, Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Restaneo, P. 2018. 'Lotman, Leibniz, and the Semiospheric Monad: Lost Pages from the Archives', *Semiotica* 224: 313–36.
- Salerno, D. and Lozano, J. 2020. 'Future: A Time of History', *Versus: Quaderni di studi semiotici* 2: 189–205.
- Semenenko, A. 2016. 'Homo polyglottus: Semiosphere as a Model of Human Cognition', *Sign Systems Studies* 44 (4): 494–510.
- Sumartojo, S. and Pink, S. 2019. *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge (Kindle File Format).
- Tamm, M. (ed.) 2015. *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tamm, M. 2019. 'Introduction: Juri Lotman's Semiotic Theory of History and Cultural Memory', in J. Lotman, *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics*, trans. B. J. Baer, ed. M. Tamm, 1–25, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Torop, P. 2009. 'Foreword: Lotmanian Explosion', in J. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, trans. W. Clark, ed. M. Grishakova, xxvii–xl, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Trigg, D. 2020. 'The Role of Atmosphere in Shared Emotions', *Emotion, Space and Society* 35: 1–7.
- Zolyan, S. 2020. *Iurii Lotman: O smysle, tekste, istorii. Temy i variatsii*, Moscow: Izdatel'skii Dom IASK.