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in Yuri Lotman's later works:
A way forward for new
epistemological dialogues**

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últimas obras de Iúri Lotman:
um caminho a seguir para novos
diálogos epistemológicos***

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The center-periphery dynamics in Yuri Lotman's later works: A way forward for new epistemological dialogues¹

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Abstract: In this contribution I will explore an aspect of Lotman's culturological method, which consists of his unwavering focus on the conflictual-energetic dimension of the semiotic life of human beings: a dimension he identified, since the 1970s works, in a kind of "original" tension, that is, the center-periphery dynamics. Taking up this idea extensively in his later writings and emphasizing the concept of "conflict" (*конфликт*) with all its synonymic variants (*бинарность* - binarity, *противоречие* - contradiction, *столкновение* - collision, *борьба* - struggle, *драка* - fight etc.), the Russian-Estonian semiotician seems to suggest that oppositional tension (difference) is a primary, maybe ancestral, energy that drives the semiosphere. In this perspective, the vision of conflict in Lotman, in addition to finding its highest expression in the conceptualization of the "explosion", can be a way forward for new epistemological dialogues.

Resumo: Nesta contribuição, exploro um aspecto do método culturoológico de Lotman que consiste em seu foco inabalável na dimensão conflitiosa-energética da vida semiótica dos seres humanos: uma dimensão que ele identificou, desde as obras dos anos de 1970, em uma espécie de "tensão original", ou seja, a dinâmica centro-periferia. Adotando extensivamente essa ideia em seus últimos escritos e enfatizando o conceito de "conflito" (*конфликт*) com todas as suas variantes sinônimas (*бинарность* - binaridade, *противоречие* - contradição, *столкновение* - choque, *борьба* - luta, *драка* - briga etc.), o semioticista russo-estoniano parece sugerir que a tensão oposicional (diferença) é uma energia primária, talvez ancestral, que impulsiona a semiosfera. Nessa perspectiva, a visão do conflito em Lotman, além de encontrar sua expressão máxima na conceituação/ conceitualização da "explosão", pode ser um caminho a seguir para novos diálogos epistemológicos.

Keywords: Conflict; Semiotics; Energy; Explosion

Palavras-Chave: Conflito; Semiótica; Energia; Explosão

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The center-periphery dynamics is one of the most productive concepts in Juri Lotman's theory, undoubtedly one of the most cited.² It is a tension that reveals the deepest semiotic mechanism of culture³ and that ultimately attributes conflict (*конфликт*) – or elsewhere ambivalence⁴ (*амбивале́нтность*) – an agent and primary role for the functioning of human communication.

In this perspective, one of Lotman's most prolific insights is to have grasped that this conflict between dominant and peripheral semiotic forms is an *energy* that is deposited in culture and remains *actively latent* in its depths. In his 1974 article, *The Dynamic Model of Semiotic System* (*Динамическая модель семиотической системы*), Lotman emphasized that

1 This paper has been written for the International Study Day "The Lotman Method": a celebration event for Juri Lotman's 100th birth anniversary, organized by Silvia Burini and Angela Mengoni and held at the Centre for Studies in Russian Art of the Ca' Foscari University (Venice, 12 May 2022). It was later reworked on the basis of the special issue "Lotman Across Frontiers: Dimensions of a Renaissance Thinker" of that Journal.

2 The concept is covered extensively by various authors in Schönle, 2006; Frank, Ruhe & Schmitz, 2012; Tamm & Torop, 2022; Barei & Gómez Ponce, 2022. Furthermore, see Žytko, 2001; Andrews, 2003 (especially chapter 4); Sedda 2006 and 2019; Monticelli, 2012; Kim, 2014; Nöth, 2015; Machado, 2015; Restaneo, 2016; Vólkova Américo, 2017; Schönle 2002 and 2020; Miranda de Oliveira; Nakagawa, 2020.

3 See the article entitled *On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture* (О семиотическом механизме культуры), co-authored with Boris Uspenskij (1978).

4 LOTMAN, 1977, pp. 201-205. The term "ambivalence" implies the simultaneous existence of two opposed and conflicting poles which have an axiological value.

the significance of this clashing tension between the center and the periphery, that is,

[t]he functioning of ambivalence as the dynamic mechanism of culture [...] lies in the fact that the memory of the system in the light of which the text was forbidden, does not fade, but is preserved on the periphery of the system's regulators.⁵

This would be what assures culture of possible future transformations.

The idea of a mnemonic zone *subtly acting* within the culture, in its periphery, was key for Lotman, so much so that he returned to it in the pivotal writing *Monostructures and Binariness* (*Моноструктуры и бинарность*), one of his later works:⁶

All the facts of history, the events of the past, do not lie behind us as immovable and unequivocal blocks. [...] events [...] suddenly reveal *hidden springs* in the past, which previously seemed accidental [*СПОНТАННЫЙ*]. The future can *awaken such dormant forces* of the time gone of which the historian and the politician, hypnotized by the present, have not even a clue. Thus, history that recreates the past, fortunately for historians, does not lose its informational power [*ИНФОРМАТИВНОСТЬ*]. It is as unpredictable as the future.⁷

In other words, the center-periphery dynamics and the conflict unleashed by it has to deal, on the one hand, with cultural memory and the residual energy deposited in seemingly

5 LOTMAN, 1977, p. 205.

6 The quotation is from the 1991 unpublished paper *Monostructures and Binariness*, which was to introduce a potential collection of 1990-1993 reflections. The volume should have been published by the Alexandra publishing house of Tallinn. Tatjana Kuzovkina wrote in this regard: "[o]n October 7, 1993, in the hospital, Ju. M. [Lotman] compiled his final articles into a collection. [...] The main topics of the collection are predictability and unpredictability in historical and cultural processes, the mechanisms of randomness, the role of art as a workshop of unpredictability, and the philosophical exploration of death. The collection was supposed to open with a general theoretical preface ("Monostructures and Binariness"), focused on culture as a special object of description and the difficulties arising in the analysis of its actual functioning. Generally, theoretical works of the first part of the collection, from a thematic point of view, are a continuation of the monograph *Culture and Explosion*. Like the other works [from this period], global historical and cultural processes, in the development of which phases of predictability and unpredictability alternate, are the epicenter of Juri Mikhailovich's attention" (KUZOVKINA, 1999, pp. 259-260).

7 LOTMAN, 1991, p. n.d..

insignificant or accidental semiotic forms and, on the other hand, with detonating possibilities for the reactivation of this energy – Lotman refers to dormant forces which revive, hidden springs which reappear, that is, marginal, liminal, forbidden, incorrect texts making their way to the center of culture.

Such “illegitimate” texts, by moving toward the cultural center, not only manifest themselves as something familiar that was back asleep – undermining the “grammar” and thus the cultural self-consciousness (i.e. its normatively enduring memory and its narrative of the past) – but also challenge the future, which loses the appearance of a causal and predictable path, and emerges rather as a nebula of uncertainty and possibility, in a retroactive (and potentially transformative) interplay between past and future.

The very idea of conflict or ambivalence, with all the synonymic variants used over time by Lotman – struggle (*борьба*), fight (*драка*), collision (*столкновение*), contradiction (*противоречие*) –, progressively pervaded the Russian scholar's writings as he was elaborating the concept of “unpredictability” (*непредсказуемость*). It is not by accident that, when speaking of these ruptures⁸ of expected and ossified meanings, he used *energetic similes*, that is, images that allowed him to vividly express his tension-driven semiotics:

like a lawless comet flaring⁹

like a wayward comet¹⁰

like a shower of meteorites¹¹

like a volcano¹²

like the sun¹³

[like] exceptionally vivid, almost spasmodic outbursts¹⁴

8 I use the word “rupture” in the sense of *разрыв*.

9 LOTMAN, 2009, p. 105.

10 LOTMAN, 2013, p. 57.

11 LOTMAN, 1990, p. 18

12 LOTMAN, 1990, p. 145.

13 LOTMAN, 1990, p. 150.

14 LOTMAN, 2019, p. 137.

like a magnet¹⁵

like the [self-expanding / self-emerging / self-growing]
Psyche/Logos¹⁶

like [...] the divine phoenix bird¹⁷

This energetic vision of semiotics, propelled by a dynamic idea of culture and related to the center-periphery “friction”, dialogues fruitfully today with at least two perspectives. First, Lotman’s focus on the mnemo-creative agency of cultural texts invites rethinking a model of time according to which the past would be concluded, lost or extinct, while contributing to new perspectives in historical studies, such as presentism. Second, his attention to energetic heaps of culture, which appear as emotion-imbued texts, invites re-reading Lotmanian scholarship considering the current studies on the so-called cultural affect theory (which in part echoes Aby Warburg’s hypothesis of pathetic formulas).¹⁸

What has been said so far is accompanied by another formidable Lotman’s insight, again related to the centrality of conflict as an agent and primary force for the functioning of human communication. To introduce it, I use Jacques Fontanille’s words, according to whom the Lotmanian reflection on explosion,

in its definitions as well as in its particular realizations, presents itself as a kind of *systematic exploration of negativity*, first of all, in the vocabulary of description: the *indeterminate*, the *unpredictable*, the *inexpressible*, the *unrepresentable*, the *illogical*, the *irreducible*; then, in the explanations of the explosion: the irruption of the foreign, the heterogeneous, the otherness, the invasion of other texts, other languages, of *non-semiotic*, *non-cultural*, *non-*

15 LOTMAN, 2005, p. 498.

16 LOTMAN, 2009, p. 159; LOTMAN, 1990, p. 42.

17 LOTMAN, 2005, p. 543. For clarity, I display the quotation in full: “Каждое новое открытие для искусства – болезнь роста, но оно обогащает и ставит новые трудные задачи. Таким образом, искусство каждый раз движется, как, знаете, в легенде о божественной птице феникс, – сгорает в собственном огне и воскресает заново” (Each new discovery for art is like a disease of growth: it enriches and, at the same time, presents new challenges. So, each time art moves like, you know, in the legend of the divine phoenix bird – it burns in its own fire and rises anew).

18 For further exploration see GHERLONE, 2022a and 2022b.

-interpretable, *non*-translatable forms; finally, in the emblematic roles of the explosion: the fool and the madman, the cheat and the eccentric, the scandalous and the drunkard. All things considered, this negativity is necessary for the rate of informativeness to increase, but it has many other effects!¹⁹

The focus on conflict and negativity in Lotman's reflections caused he has often been categorized as a theorist of binary thinking – a paradigm of knowledge that, in recent years, has received sustained criticism especially from scholars of complex thinking, feminist and posthuman critique, decolonial turn and the Anthropocene. Actually, as we can infer from the aforementioned paper *Monostructures and Binariness* and several writings of the 1989-1993 period, the Russian-Estonia semiotician always speaks of a “dynamic binariness”: a tension that does not end in the conflict/synthesis between opposite poles, but always seeks a “complex unity” (*сложная единица*) or “higher unity” (*высшее единство*). To understand this idea figuratively, we can refer to an example from Lotman himself, who has in mind the human visual field, which is the result of the partial intersection of the left and right visual fields – i.e., simultaneously similar and functionally separate binary systems that operate as a holistic and conflicting unity (*конфликтная единица*), giving us a volumetric view of reality.²⁰

This perspective, projected on a large scale, is what allows Lotman to think of culture as a space of distributed and polycentric knowledge, exuberant and often contradictory in this exuberance: a space where the dominant-peripheral dynamics is grasped with a complex, de-centralizing and de-territorializing gaze.²¹

19 FONTANILLE, 2022, p. 32, my translation.

20 As Lotman remarked, although each of these structures tends to absolutize its functions, in the real “normal” state they operate in a conflicting unity. Any element of the structure needs an equally active antithesis in order to function actively (LOTMAN, 1991, p. n.d.).

21 For further exploration see GHERLONE & RESTANEO (2022). See also RICKBERG (forthcoming).

As Lotman pointed culture would thus be 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 [объёмный] 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?”²² This search for conflict as the agent force of a “volumetric” world makes Lotman the theorist of a kaleidoscopic thinking and a seeker of negativity as something extremely fruitful and positive. If we talk about the topicality of his figure in terms of a “Renaissance Thinker”, I believe that Lotman’s “ternary” approach to culture is productive today for all those epistemological approaches that are trying to embrace a complex, polycentric vision of the world while questioning a hierarchical and classificatory paradigm of knowledge, where there is no room for contradiction, uncertainty, unpredictability and heterogeneity. By exploring the anticipatory insights of this great twentieth-century scholar, we come across a final reflection on the importance of “border thinking.”

Lotman’s fascination with a volumetric world, i.e., with the textual interrelationships that, in his view, make the world intelligible, led him to formulate the concept of the *semiosphere*, for which a “text can exist (i.e., be socially recognized as a text) if it is preceded by another text” just as “thought cannot be derived by evolution from non-thought”.²³ This also led him to recognize the need for a complexification of the center-periphery dynamics, while considering culture as “peculiar ecology of human society”²⁴ marked by the symbiotic relationship

22 LOTMAN, 1992-1993, p. n.d.

23 LOTMAN; USPENSKIJ, 2016, p. 544.

24 LOTMAN, 2005, p. 470.

between human beings and the environment. These, as we can gather from his unpublished article *Evolution: complexification or simplification?*, would not be two separate entities connected by a relationship of domination-subordination, but would coexist, creating and re-creating each other continuously against the background of the fundamental law of the universe that is, according to Lotman, the *dynamic diversity* (where chance and disorder are as important as predictability and order). Consequently – the author observes –, we are far from the human-centered model, according to which man, the “masterpiece of the creation”, represents the pinnacle and the inevitable result of the evolution of the universe.²⁵

Starting from this assumption, we can glimpse in Lotman's final reflections a yearning toward a “border thinking” – a non-compartmentalizing view of reality, where conflict and negativity are indispensable for the coexistence of (both living and inanimate) things –, together with the re-foundation of the concept of “intelligence” or, to be more exact, “intellectuality” [интеллигентность / intelligentsia-ness]. It is no coincidence that he dedicated six of his thirty-three television lectures on Russian culture – given to Estonian audiences between 1986 and 1992 – to the topic “Culture and Intellectuality”, the latter being understood as a way of knowing the world (and of generating meaning individually and collectively) that is the result of a “non-aggressive” relationality, namely a “high sociality [...] based on mutual respect and unconditional love”.²⁶ Culture became a term for expressing the communication-driven mutual and circular relationship of human beings with the universe that hosts and in-forms them and that calls into question not only concepts such as dialogue, creativity, development of consciousness and tolerance, but vulnerability and destruction as well (it is not surprising that Lotman speaks on several occasions of the weak, fragile, marginalized, defenseless, humiliated, despised subject). At the same time, the center-periphery dynamics turned into the discursive “strate-

25 LOTMAN, 1991-1992, p. n.d..

26 LOTMAN, 2005, p. 478.

gy” to give voice to the forgotten, silenced, banished culture(s), i.e., the “negative” half of an original tension.

To conclude, I think that this vision truly makes Lotman a “Renaissance Thinker”, namely, a thinker who, as he remarked in his *Non-memoirs*, aspires “to sow the good, the reasonable, the eternal”.²⁷

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²⁷ LOTMAN, 2014, p. 78. Lotman qualified himself as an “enlightener” and, to define his work as such, used a line from Nikolaj Nekrasov’s 1876 poem “*To the Sowers*” (“[...] Сейте разумное, доброе, вечное, / Сейте! Спасибо вам скажет сердечное / Русский народ...”).

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