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INTRODUCTION[1]

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Dialogue with Ju. Lotman: The significance of his ideas today

This special issue of *Lexia. Rivista Internazionale di Semiotica* is devoted to the internationally renowned scholar, semiotician, literary theorist, and historian of Russian culture, Juri Mihailovic Lotman (1922-1993), on the centenary of his birth. Lotman's centenary is a unique opportunity to re-think his legacy to the twenty-first century and to contextualize his thought. It is also a chance to deepen and discuss the constellation of his ideas and to track the ramifications that his work has opened up and inspired throughout his life.

The present volume is the pinnacle of a long-lasting interest in Lotman's work and its purpose is to explore and re-think Lotman's legacy to the twenty-first century. This project started at the end of 2020 as a convergence of interests of all three guest editors in the thought of Ju. Lotman. This has been the driving force and the inspiration behind the completion of the present work. The twenty articles, divided in four sections, that make up this special issue focus, from diverse and heterogeneous perspectives, on the significance of Lotman's ideas today. The

(1) Section 1 of this introduction was written by Remo Gramigna; section 2 by Laura Gherlone; the conclusive section by Massimo Leone.

essays have been arranged in four sections, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

In chapter 11 of his posthumous book *Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, Lotman quotes the writer Tjutčev, who once said: "It is not given to us to know in advance, how our word will be recalled..." (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010], p. 193). To be sure, the echo of Lotman's word has been heard and it still reverberates today. Despite the difficulties that the spreading of his ideas and the translation of his work had in the beginning of his career (Eimermacher 1977; Blaim 1998; Winner 2002), today Lotman is known worldwide, and his writings are widely accessible and translated in many languages, as his ideas continue to be relevant in many fields of research.

Lotman had many qualities, but one was very remarkable, namely, a sort of intellectual strabismus, as it were, namely the ability to move with ease between diverse scholarly fields. This quality equipped him with the proclivity to cross disciplinary boundaries and to dialogue with the hard sciences. He was himself a living example of the in-betweenness: a dweller of the boundaries. The concept of the "semiosphere" is a case in point because it is a good illustration of a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue between different fields such as biogeochemistry and the humanistic disciplines. As it is well known, Lotman's concept of "semiosphere" was inspired by Vernadsky and modelled in analogy with his notion of "biosphere".

In the domain of semiotics, as well as in neighboring disciplines such as history, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, cognitive studies, as well as the arts, the name of Juri Lotman is often associated with a plethora of different concepts. Indeed, he was a very prolific and eclectic scholar, always future-oriented and keen to bring forth conceptual and theoretical novelty, rather than a kind of thinker who strives towards the systematization of his own ideas and the consolidation of his intellectual achievements. He was constantly "on the move", although there are clear signs of "intertextuality" within his own works, especially in his last two books, *Culture and Explosion* and *Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Corti 1994, pp. 8-9). There are, however, some hallmarks that became Lotman's unmistakable signature. The study of the artistic text, the typology of cultures, intercultural relations, semiosphere and dialogue,

semiotic modelling systems, texts and textuality, memory, novelty and creativity, translation and untranslatability between semiotic languages, predictability and unpredictability in cultural processes, explosion, everyday behavior, the language of the arts, to mention but a few, are some of the linchpins of Lotman's legacy(2).

Revisiting Lotman's ideas today is not only a unique opportunity to pay a tribute to such an outstanding thinker of the 21st Century, but it takes on a very special meaning. This is so because we live in a milieu of tremendous uncertainty, fast changes, confusion, and crisis. Hence, re-thinking Lotman's ideas today is pivotal, for his critical inquiry feedbacks onto the analysis of the present. Indeed, this current time, which is characterized by accelerated social, cultural, and political change — as it is witnessed by the chronicle of the last two years, with by the planetary experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current global crisis — is a good illustration of what Lotman termed as "explosion". Lotman would define these particular moments as "critical periods when one has reached the end of old paths while new paths have yet to be determined" (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010], p. 37). For this reason, re-thinking Lotman's ideas now is pivotal. Thus, an inquiry based on the reassessment of Lotman's ideas and its application, not only is of utmost importance, but also very timely. If it is true that "the most import ideas come in moments of catastrophe" and crisis, as Vyacheslav Ivanov (1983, p. 89) wrote, let us this be the motto and the wish accompanying all those who are re-thinking Lotman's ideas in today's world. May this lead us to deepen in the least-charted waters of contemporary semiotics.

In a world that is globalized and hyper connected via digital communication, it is not surprising to see Lotman's holistic semiotic approach (Lotman M. 2002) find a proper fit. As Indrek Ibrus and Peeter Torop (2015, p. 4) pointed out, "it is Lotman's original 'ecosystemic' take with regard to cultural dynamics that has re-emerged now, in the era of infinitely heterogeneous, but always immediate global digital cultures, as an up-to-date and insightful contribution to cultural theory". Today, the widespread use of digital media, the rise of the internet culture, and

(2) In order to fathom the wide range of Lotman's legacy, see the recently published collection *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Tamm, Torop 2022).

even the experience of a global epidemic, make us aware of the fact that Lotman's vision was far-sighted. Perhaps, we have not fully grasped yet, nor sufficiently capitalized on this perspective and foreseen its implications, despite the popularity that the concept of the semiosphere has gained in recent years in the study of cultures and societies.

Thematic parts

When we began reflecting on this special issue devoted to Lotman, two nodal points came to our attention. First, we wanted to explore his thought with the *image of the constellation* in mind, that is, delving into the web of interdisciplinary, historical-contextual, and (auto)biographical relations that enabled him to achieve key concepts such as those of primary/secondary modeling system [первичная/вторичная моделирующая система], memory of a culture [память о культуре], semiotic border/boundary [семиотическая граница] semiosphere [семиосфера], cultural explosion [культурный взрыв], to name a few.

Second, we felt it was important to reinterpret his culturological theory with the *magnifying glass of actuality* in order to probe the unexplored insights of his thought. If, as Mihhail Lotman wrote at the conclusion of the three-book collection *Izbrannye stat'i* in honor of his father, "[a] loaded but undischarged gun is not functionally identical with an unloaded one" (Lotman M. 1993, p. 484), we hypothesized there were potential ideas that a reading "in the present tense" could bring into focus. A case in point is that of the digital sphere: a phenomenon that Lotman was not a direct witness to but which, through his relationality-shaped worldview, can be enriched today with valuable interpretations[(3)].

The contributions have been organized into four thematic sections, representing an itinerary of reviews, in-depth studies, discussions, and

(3) Indeed, if we look at the concept of cyberspace — which implies the idea of a growing connection between people, machines, and the surrounding environment — we cannot but think of the relational fabric that integrally binds living and nonliving beings, that is, an image that underlies the semiosphere hypothesis (see Torop 2022) and gives us an idea of the forward-looking and powerfully intuitive gaze of the Russian scholar. For a recent exploration of this topic see Hartley, Ibrus and Ojamaa (2021); Ibrus and Ojamaa (2022); Madisson and Ventsel (2022).

re-readings, proposed by twenty-four authors from different disciplines. The special issue is opened by Jacques Fontanille's guest article entitled "The challenge of impossibility: explosion, history and arts of living". The French semiotician introduces the figure of Lotman by starting at the endpoint, that is, the "explosion": a conceptual pillar that marks the epilogue of Lotman's intellectual parabola. In addition to offering a re-contextualization in light of recent historical theories related to presentism and the so-called regimes of historicity, thus enriching the current scholarship on this topic (see Tamm and Olivier 2019; Lorusso 2019; Monticelli 2020), Fontanille defines this stage of Lotman's theory in terms of a *systematic exploration of negativity*. This perspective leads him to interpret the semiotic-cultural vision implied in the famous monograph *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 2009 [1992]) in a primarily energetic sense, seeing in the "minus sign" the propulsive force of the heterogeneity of information, of the individual-collective realization of the impossible, and ultimately of the freedom to creatively invent a future.

Part I. Genealogies

In the first of the four thematic sections Tatjana Kuzovkina, Franciscu Sedda, Ekaterina Velmezova and Kalevi Kull, Suren Zolyan, and Stefano Traini present Lotman's life, theory, and the evolution of his thought, familiarizing the reader with his big questions about life, human beings, culture, and nature.

Echoing Fontanille's remarks, Tatjana Kuzovkina devotes her article to the Lotmanian reflection on explosion and the role of people in history, that is, an issue raised insistently by Lotman in his 1989-1993 works. Through a meaningful network of references and archival sources spanning fifty years of thinking, from the wartime letters to the final monograph *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Lotman 2013 [1994/2010]) —, Kuzovkina evidences the traces of Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history in Lotman's culturological vision. The article offers fresh perspectives on his theoretical and methodological hypothesis of a history-driven comparative typology of cultures and the function of the gradual/explosive processes in the lifespan of civilizations.

Franciscu Sedda, like Kuzovkina, draws on epistolary sources (specifically, the correspondence between Lotman and his friend and colleague Boris Uspensky) to highlight a perhaps less well-known and little-studied aspect of the Lotmanian theory: the creative circularity between his biographical experience and his scientific engagement. Sedda focuses on the genesis of the "semiosphere", emphasizing that this conceptual pillar was not a mere borrowing from biology but flourished in the intimacy of Lotman's everyday life — the art of *byt* becoming theory, so to speak. Only at a later time did he find confirmation (a scientific echo) in Vernadsky's biosphere, in whose cosmic vision of the living the Russian semiotician glimpsed the possibility of conceptualizing a scalar correlation between text, culture, life, cosmos.

Ekaterina Velmezova and Kalevi Kull address the notion of semiotic boundary, considering the relationship between the human and the animal world. By fixing attention on Lotman's late works (without, however, disregarding his thirty-year reflection about addresser-addressee communication), the authors notice an embryonic perspective in his theory. While admitting that animals are capable of forms of behavior and language of varying complexity, which make them an integral part of the semiosphere, Lotman excludes the nonhuman living from the horizon of unpredictability and, consequently, from the ability to generate new information. Velmezova and Kull see in this seeming paradox a research gap to continue thinking about the "semiotics of life" in Lotman, revisiting it in biosemiotic terms.

Closely related to Sedda's reflections as well as to those of Velmezova and Kull, Suren Zolyan's article offers a historical and epistemological reconstruction of how the concept of semiosphere developed through a 'distant' dialogue with Vernadsky, particularly in Lotman's writings on the history of science addressing the difference between biosphere and noosphere. Taking into consideration the notions of self-organization and self-development — which are as fundamental in Lotman's theory as in biology and complexity studies — Zolyan looks for possible parallels between the related issue of the "beginning of culture" and the "beginning of life". Ultimately, the article delves into the audacious Lotmanian idea that there is no reality without semiosis.

Stefano Traini closes this section by reviving a well-known debate in Italian semiotic circles, resulting in an edited collection devoted to Lotman and Algirdas J. Greimas (Migliore 2010). While retracing and reconsidering

the distinction between synchronic and diachronic perspective in Lotman in his genealogical conversations with Formalism and Structuralism, the author states that the Russian scholar was mainly a cultural historian in whose analyses on culture(s) we cannot encounter the development of a true semiotic method. Traini thus suggests that a cross-pollination between Lotman's culturology and Greimas's methodological approach could be a fruitful operation to think about a text-focused systematic semiotic theory.

Part II. Roots and perspectives

The second section gathers articles that, on the one hand, recall Lotman's key concepts related to the domain of information, text, and textuality and, on the other, open up perspectives that are inchoate in the Russian semiotician but able to actualize and even enlighten some core issues of our time (the digital sphere, big data, artificial intelligence, etc.).

Remo Gramigna tackles the problem of the material aspect of sign(s) and how it binds to signification in a cultural perspective, by linking this research question to the present day — that is, an age of dramatic changes in which the global society seems to be witnessing a shift from a material culture to an immaterial (technology-imbued) culture. According to the author, this issue ties in with the problem of valuable/non valuable, preservation/destruction, eternal/transitory and ultimately truthfulness/untruthfulness. Gramigna approaches his analysis by taking up the Lotmanian concept of cultural text and bringing it into active dialogue with the Russian philosopher and Indologist Alexander Piatigorsky's notion of fixation.

In her article on artificial intelligence, Giusy Gallo pins down Lotman's interest in the mechanisms/workings of the human mind, an interest that he cultivated since the 1970s and then culminated in his famous 1990 book *Universe of The Mind* (Lotman 1990)[4]. The conception of intellect [интеллект] — understood as (interpersonal) reason [разум] rather than (individual) brain [мозг] — is perhaps one of the most futuristic horizons of Lotmanian theory (for an in-depth exploration see Semenko 2015). As Gallo

(4) The book was released only later in Russian under the title *Inside the Thinking Worlds* (Lotman 1996). For an in-depth study of this topic see Semenenko (2015).

points out, in fact, it implies a dialogical dynamic able to produce new information, whose value consists not only of novelty in itself but also in satisfactory results in terms of adequacy and response to unpredictability. This perspective can be applied to current studies in AI and social robotics.

Like the previous two authors, Auli Viidalepp too reinterprets Lotman's theory on textuality, text, and its functions within the framework of the Information Society and the person-machine relationship. Specifically, the author puts it in dialogue with current research on generative texts (that is, algorithm-driven automatic verbal texts that should appear indistinguishable to human-like text), by analyzing the case study of GPT-3. While contextualizing and understanding the computer-generated narrative plots in light of the Lotmanian metaphoric concept of text as a meaning-making monad (a self-sufficient intellectual unit with its own immanent structure), the article critically highlights the contrast between the idea of unpredictability and the mechanisms of predictability in deep learning, and specifically in statistical language models.

Mirko Lampis's article offers a review of the notion of "chance" (or contingency), expressed by Lotman through the predominant use of the Russian word *sluchainyi* [случайный]. As Caryl Emerson underlines it (2008, p. 105), this concept refers to a central characteristic of the Pushkinian Weltanschauung; it synthesizes "[l]ife's myriad events, confusions, coincidences, accidents", rendered symmetrical and coherent by the poet's quill, as if in a kaleidoscope. Lotman, who was a great scholar and follower of Pushkin, never lost sight of the role of randomness in life, art, and history, thus bequeathing — as Lampis emphasizes — an extensive examination of this conceptual horizon, so topical in the natural sciences as well as in the social sciences and humanities.

Federico Camizzi takes up the famous concept of "modeling system" to frame the manifesto phenomenon in the context of art history and criticism. Indeed, his research question aims at investigating the line of tension between a medium of expression that seems designed to set rules and codes (to "grammaticalize", in Lotmanian terms) the avant-garde movements while giving voice to a (sub)culture deliberately delinked from the past and free from any tradition, shared memory, conventions, and common sense. The author interprets the art manifesto as a self-describing device capable, on the one hand, of presenting the avant-garde as an integral and unified

semiotic organization and, on the other, of preserving the innovative features of its programmatic purpose (that is, to shape a future-oriented platform, almost "devoid of history").

Part III. Interdisciplinary bridges

The third section of this special issue is focused on "bridges" and gathers articles that connect Lotman's perspective with other authors, theories, and disciplines, deterritorializing his thinking and making it flourish in different contexts.

In her effort to reread Lotman through the lens of history writing, Valentina Pisanty focuses on the epistemological value of the alternative, that is, the suspension that follows the "bifurcation points" of history and potentially allows for the de-automatization of seemingly irreversible processes — in a nutshell, the tension between probable and possible, which is inherent to the flow of events. The author emphasizes the analytical complexity involved in considering historical non-facts at the methodological level. Finally, like Fontanille in his systematic exploration of negativity, Pisanty too dwells on uncertainty, a space-time full of meanings that can be a harbinger of new paths as well as conspiracy fantasies.

Laura Gherlone and Pietro Restaneo see in Lotman's questioning of history as a science that deals with facts (i.e., an objective form of knowledge) a body of reflections able to nurture the decolonial scholarship. Starting from an exploration of the multi-perspectivist epistemology developed by the Russian semiotician through his engagement with, among others, Soviet Oriental Studies, the two authors link this theoretical approach to Lotman's growing impatience with and challenge to the idea of a universal Western historiography. His search for untold stories, marginalized events, and the invisible figures of the past offeres a point of contact and a space for dialogue with the decolonial analysis on persistent power-driven Eurocentric narratives, which are still active and performative today.

Speaking of "bridges", Sebastián Moreno Barreneche too suggests a connection between Lotman's notion of semiosphere and Michael Freeden's conception of ideology. After a historical introduction on the relationship between language studies and ideology studies, the author

focuses on Freeden's morphological approach, paying special attention to "the four Ps of ideology" (proximity, priority, permeability, and proportionality). This framework allows Moreno Barreneche to comparatively identify some Lotmanian echoes, in particular through topological categories of analysis (border, center, periphery, inside-outside dynamics, etc.), while offering fresh perspectives on populism studies.

Raffaele Picione's article covers the topic of border/boundary [граница] from a psychoanalytical perspective, thus contributing to an active research area in Lotmanian studies. Indeed, the Russian semiotician's interest in the spatial dimension of culture led him to focus on the semiotic function of the "binary division" to the point of making it explicit in his 1984 essay "On the semiosphere" (see also Lotman 1990, pp. 131-42). The examination of this concept leads Picione to argue that, while considering some irreducible differences and distances, the Lotmanian viewpoint and the psychoanalytic approach converge in assigning to the notion of "border" a whole range of functions and operations (distinction, differentiation, separation, framing, protection, mediation, transformation, regulation), which are key to study the processes of meaning-making.

Education science represents an incipient field of inquiry within the Lotmanian scientific legacy. In this perspective, Merit Rickberg inaugurates a potentially fruitful dialogue by cross-fertilizing learning studies, complex thinking theory, and Lotman's reflections on dynamic cultural processes, where the concept of "creativity" is central. Once again, the horizon of unpredictability proves to be one of the most productive and far-sighted ideas of the Russian semiotician. The article not only contributes to rethinking Lotman in the 21st century but also provides a theoretical framework to support programmatic roadmaps such as the Education 2030 Agenda in the face of a post-Covid 19 world.

Part IV. Lotman in context

The last of the four thematic sections contains articles that contextualize Lotman's thought through case studies on specific cultural milieus, showing the versatility and the "adaptability" of the heuristic tools offered by his semiotics of culture.

Marianna Boero and Cristina Greco propose a comparative analysis of the representation of women in advertising taking into consideration Italy and Saudi Arabia. In this article, Lotman's theorization of explosion (in particular, the distinction between gradual and accelerated development) offers an insightful framework to think about the cultural transformation of the "gaze on the female figure", and decode the why and how of different speeds of change, grasp the link between novelty and tradition, and interpret in a socio-semiotic perspective the holistic relationship among various social factors (feminist movement, changes in the system of women's rights, existing models and trends, emerging and consolidated values, etc.).

As other empirical studies have already shown, key notions related to semiosphere theory (border/boundary, translation filter, binary system such as Center vs. periphery, chaos vs. order, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity, etc.) are particularly fruitful in geopolitical inquiries (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017). Anand Raja contributes to this scholarship, offering a reflection on the Indian electoral ecosystem. The author focuses on the figure of the Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi, trying to cast light on his discursive arrangements and strategies and the construction of a "traction" between collaborative consensus and hegemony. The author emphasizes the role of collective emotions and feelings as one of the major drivers for the strengthening of this semiosphere.

Encouraged by Lotman's writings on urban space as a meaningful textual fabric, Ekaterina Volkova Américo and Vanessa Leal Nunes Vieira analyze the city of Rio de Janeiro through an extensive body of sources in Brazilian literature (Machado de Assis, Lima Barreto, João Rio, Olegário Marianno, Noel Rosa, Nelson Rodrigues, Clarice Lispector, Rubens Figueiredo, Martha Batalha). This study is not only an opportunity to identify oppositional tensions and the "other's gaze" as it shapes the physiognomy of the city (just think about the presence/persistence of the colonizing perspective) but also to grasp its transformative, always in-progress character. As Lotman (2005 [1993], pp. 84–85) would say about (the eternity of) St. Petersburg, the city "is a living organism. [...] only what changes remains. Those who do not change leave no trace"(5).

(5) "это живой организм. [...] чтобы остаться, надо измениться. Тот, кто не меняется, тот и не остается".

Luca Vannucci's ecocritical article on artistic representations of the Anthropocene closes the special issue devoted to Lotman, shifting the perspective from culturally localized case studies (Italy, Saudi Arabia, India, Brazil) to the global sphere. Taking inspiration from the Lotmanian idea that each individual text is a mirror of the entire culture and its mechanisms of self-description, self-consciousness and ultimately self-awareness, the author argues that contemporary art can detect a universe of discourse that talks about an end that is real but still perceived as distant. This agency of the visual semiosphere could make tangible a catastrophe before it happens and so encourage the search for alternative realities.It is worth mentioning that, when there was still no talk of Anthropocene, the Russian scholar had sensed that there was need for a both new and ancient way of thinking and living [интеллигентность], based on non-aggressive, non-hierarchical, and polyvocal relationality (Lotman 2005, pp. 478–479). Especially in Lotman's late works, culture becomes a term to express the communication-driven mutual and circular relationship of the human being with the universe that hosts and in-forms him/her, and that involves concepts such as dialogue, creativity, development of consciousness, tolerance, but also vulnerability and destruction (it is not surprising that Lotman speaks on several occasions of the weak, fragile, marginalized, defenseless, humiliated, despised subject).

Conclusions

Quickly scrolling through the titles of the articles in this collection, and taking a bird's-eye view of them, as has been done in this brief introductory text, confirms the impression that has emerged throughout 2022, a year marked by initiatives dedicated to Lotman and his legacy. On the one hand, there seems to be no object or aspect of current research that cannot be connected in some way to the work of the great Russian thinker and, what is more important, that cannot be nourished and enlivened by it. On the other hand, it seems equally evident that this feeling is heightened in this historical phase that many perceive as a watershed, fraught with dramatic tensions, marked by the pandemic and the threats of a global war, and thus open to an uncertain, darkly hued future. If Lotman were a navigational

instrument, it would not be a nautical chart, with its precise gnomonic projections, capable of rendering exhaustively, albeit in the abstract, the vastness of the oceans and the conditions of their navigability. Among the great semioticians of history, Umberto Eco is surely the one who would be most represented by this instrument, by a majestic and triumphant oceanic chart, deploying its Mercator projections to illustrate all the recesses of the planet. But Lotman would also not be an astrolabe, tracing the complexity of the celestial sphere back to the two dimensions of the text, as might be, metaphorically, the case with Greimas, with his rotating network of concepts all tightly woven to capture the subtleties of a portion of meaning. On the other hand, neither would Lotman be a dreamy astral chart, looking to the stars and their movement to draw the ultimate destinies of human thought, as Peirce's philosophical semiotics can be interpreted, in a sense. Neither nautical chart nor astrolabe nor astral chart, Lotman is essentially an azimuthal circle: through the multiplication (or repetition) of angles, by successive shifts of the two telescopes over the reference points whose angular distance is to be known, he determines a multiple of the angle sought. And indeed, Lotman's semiotics or theory of culture does exactly that: he fixes certain landmarks by extrapolating them from the observed historical or cultural reality, then hyperbolically multiplies them through the abstraction of metalanguage, and transforms them into azimuths, from the Arabic السمت "as-sumūt," "that which signifies directions." This is why Lotman's thought so fascinates especially in an age such as ours, where the directions in which to look seem to multiply to the point of dizziness, and the changes accelerate causing vertigo, and the points of reference all become relative to one another, to such an extent that we are all left with the impression of a magma with no solid footholds. Lotman has bequeathed us an azimuthal metalanguage, which does not cartograph meaning as Eco did, which does not measure it as Greimas did, which does not evoke it as Peirce did, but suggests an essentially topological machine to multiply and enhance the points of observation in order to indicate a possible direction of the gaze even in the confusion, in the acceleration, in the congeries, in the apparent elusiveness of meaning in motion. We will continue to navigate with Lotman for many more years, especially through stormy waters.

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