

# On binary opposition and binarism: A long-distance dialogue between decolonial critique and the Lotmanian semiotics

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**Abstract:** While addressing the decolonial critique of Eurocentric modernity and the call for alternative cosmo-visions, this article retraces Juri Lotman's culturological exploration towards the concept of ternarity [*тернарность*]: the scrutiny of the so-called binarism is what connects – without overlapping – the two perspectives.

This long-distance dialogue will be built starting with the key notion of binary opposition, which will be analysed as a decolonial problem (Part I) and as a culturological problem (Part II). The analysis will focus on two central issues that stem from the either-or logic: the “othering mindset”, and the culture–nature dualism.

**Keywords:** decoloniality; Juri Lotman; semiosphere; otherness; religion; binary/ternary; culture–nature; Anthropocene

## Introduction

In recent years, decolonial scholarship has unearthed the issue of the either–or logic (or binary-based frame), linking it to the system of dominant–dominated relationships that still subsist in allegedly post-colonial societies. In parallel, the rise of the Anthropocene theory – to which decoloniality itself contributed, not without criticism – has highlighted the active role of binary oppositions in the “propagation” of a hierarchical knowledge which has been nurtured by and reproduced through Western culture. In particular, discursive formations having the culture–nature dualism as a focal point were (and are) instrumental to this purpose.

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Interestingly, Juri Lotman, a scholar somewhat distant in time and space,<sup>2</sup> from the 1960s to 1993 reflected on the meaning-making processes that arise in culture from the tension of the opposites. Calling this alternately as binariness [бинарность] and binarism [бинаризм], Lotman found in it a fruitful methodological orientation. At the same time, and especially in his later works, he saw this as a possible form of seeing and categorizing the world that aborts a holistic view of reality, i.e. the semiosphere. This is a concept that not only led him to (re)consider the culture–nature relationship, but also encouraged him to think about semiotics in ternary terms.

In this paper, I intend to trace the possible points of contact between decolonial critique and Lotman’s late theory, starting with the notion of binary opposition. This will be analysed as a decolonial problem (Part I) and as a culturological problem (Part II). The analysis will focus on two central issues that stem from the either–or logic: the “othering mindset”, and the culture–nature dualism.

## 1. Binary opposition as a decolonial problem

### 1.1. Decoloniality: the relevance of a historical-semiotic approach

The concept of decoloniality is a field of exploration that is drawing increasing attention in academia and beyond. It has raised and problematized topical issues such as the ecological, Indigenous, feminist, black and mestizo question, just to mention a few. While studies on *decolonization* (as a political-institutional process of emancipation and liberation of a dominated territory and its subsequent transformation into an independent and autonomous nation-state) have a long-standing scholarship worldwide, *decoloniality* is a relatively young approach (Quijano 1998, 2000, 2007; Mignolo 2000; Lander 2000; Grosfoguel 2006; Castro-Gómez, Grosfoguel 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2008). Its goal is to fill a knowledge gap regarding the epistemic “after” of a decolonized territory, in light of the socio- and intercultural relations of power sedimented over time. As Walter Mignolo (2018: 121) has pointed out, “[t]he task of decoloniality after decolonisation is redefined and focused on epistemology and knowledge rather than the state; or, in Western political theory that sustains the idea of the state”. In a nutshell, what drives the decolonial thinkers is the scrutiny and questioning of the ecosystem of Eurocentric ideas, beliefs, expectations, and values. This includes their mechanism of penetration into people’s daily lives: religion; education; science; health; nutrition; ways of experiencing conviviality; and the relationship with the environment.

<sup>2</sup> In this work, Lotman is considered an implicit harbinger of decoloniality, although he framed the commonly named semiotics of culture within a different geographical and historical context.

Decolonial reflection gained a foothold particularly in the academic circles of Latin America,<sup>3</sup> where the two-hundred-year history of transition to self-consciousness and self-determination of peoples has shown that the *dependence on the centre* – that is, Europe – continues to operate. It is a kind of deep linkage that is primarily narrative-hermeneutic in nature, which fosters and shapes a way of perceiving, interpreting, conceiving and axiologically investing reality (in a word, of knowing it), based on a contradictory worldview. A worldview that is hierarchically borrowed and thus alien and unfamiliar while being customary and natural in its everyday extraneousness.

Decoloniality not only puts resilient centre–periphery(-ies) dynamic under scrutiny, but also invites us to dwell critically on the role of the systems of consolidated–subaltern discourses. This critical point of view highlights the centrality of a properly semiotic reflection (Mignolo 2018, 2021; for a wide-ranging exploration of this topic see Deumert, Storch, Shepherd 2020). Indeed, language in a broad sense is a powerful medium able to modelize, reproduce, perpetuate, protract, and reinforce ancient inequalities and injustices that invest people’s subjectivity – body, emotions, beliefs, motivations – and the surroundings.

While semiotic-oriented decolonial inquiries have usually been conducted through a close reading of written sources (with a focus on historical plots, such as travel journals concerning colonial conquests and the practices of “civilization”), nowadays methods of analysis have expanded to other interdisciplinary frontiers. A growing emphasis has been given to *material culture* – an approach that is blurring the dividing line between archaeology, history, and anthropology, by showing the afterlife of things, as an “unruly heritage that exposes us to an abundance of *uncanny* and *involuntary* memories” (Olsen 2019: 238; emphasis mine, L. G.). As stressed elsewhere (Gherlone 2023), a decolonial gaze can glimpse in a shining marble statue the agent traces of centuries-old violence: violence against nature, by having come into existence from a human-hand extractive action;<sup>4</sup> violence against (peripheral) persons, by having embodied a canon of beauty based on the race-

<sup>3</sup> In particular, the reference here is to the “*Modernidad/colonialidad*” group, whose members have settled mainly in Latin American and U.S. academic contexts. Today, decolonial reflection is flourishing in Asia, Africa, and the countries of the former Soviet Union. This article focuses on the Latin American tradition, drawing especially on Walter Mignolo’s thought.

<sup>4</sup> Extractivism, as a production paradigm which relies on “large-scale, profit-driven operations for the removal and processing of natural resources” (Parks 2021), is a sensitive topic in decolonial studies since it implies a dominant vs dominated logic whereby the benefit of the few is based on the vulnerability of the many. Inevitably, extractivism represents a connecting point between decolonial studies and the thematization of the Anthropocene. For an appreciation of these considerations see Svampa 2019; Lövbrand, Mobjörk, Söder 2020; Parks 2021; Çaylı 2021; Ureta, Flores 2022.

oriented ideal of whiteness.<sup>5</sup> Still in the field of visual art, pictorial representation can offer meaningful examples. Fig. 1 shows a well-known painting of Argentine art, *La vuelta del malón* [The return of the Indian raid] (1892), inspired by South American settlers' chronicles of indigenous surprise assaults [*malones*]<sup>6</sup> during the long border warfare with local populations. The image exhibits the abduction of a light-skinned woman and the profanation of Christian religious symbols (chalices, incense burners, the crosier) while coalescing the bodies of the natives and the skies of the pampas in a wild atmosphere of brutality. A work like this, which is an active part of the country's national imagination and imaginary, unintentionally provides space for "the unwanted and stranded" (Olsen 2019: 238). This makes tangible the fact that materiality can legitimize, even today, ghostly claims of domination towards nature and the "primitive".



**Figure 1.** *La vuelta del malón* (1892), by Ángel Della Valle.<sup>7</sup> Copyright: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Argentina.

Decolonial inquiries attentive to meaning-making processes are also giving greater attention to *digital sources* and, methodologically speaking, to distant reading. This focus of investigation stems from the realization that the so-called information society, while tapping into a horizontal, distributed, and democratic idea of know-

<sup>5</sup> This affect-imbued ideal is even nowadays a source of narratives which are axiologically centred on the idea of whiteness as a term/attribute connoting wholesomeness, candidness, integrity etc. In Western culture this has also implied a certain type of typologization of femininity (white, diaphanous, pure, innocent, defenceless). For further exploration see Blickstein 2019.

<sup>6</sup> These raids were carried out by native warriors to plunder livestock, supplies, and prisoners.

<sup>7</sup> The painting is available online: <https://www.bellasartes.gov.ar/coleccion/obra/6297/>.

ledge, paradoxically continues to host mechanisms of creation and storytelling of otherness mainly through e-platforms. One well-studied case is the supremacy of the “white gaze” in digital images (see Ali 2016; Moyo 2020; Mohamed, Png, Isaac 2020; Silva 2020; Silva *et al.* 2020; Alvarado Garcia *et al.* 2021). In this perspective, the Digital Humanities, by making use of big data-driven tools and technology, can offer meaningful insights to decentralize and to some extent de-territorialize discourses on the “other”. An example is the use of linguistic-computational and geospatial techniques to re-examine and re-read the historical archives and the digital sources embedded in the cyberspace (Parr;<sup>8</sup> Synenko 2018; Murrieta-Flores, Favila-Vázquez, Flores-Morán 2021; Gupta, Nicholas, Blair 2022; *The Decolonial Atlas*<sup>9</sup>), mapping the Eurocentric lexicon and the subaltern voices involved in it.

This body of studies, methods, techniques, and ongoing research shows that a polycentric and de-familiarizing look at current reality can help shed light on pressing issues directly related to processes of decolonization/decoloniality. Examples include: religious intolerances; environmental-territorial claims; indigenous action-oriented movements; and migration policies of integration and exclusion. At the same time, it shows how necessary it is to go back to the historical-epistemological roots of such processes. Therein lies the reason why decolonial critique has put the spotlight, among others, on the concept of ‘binary opposition’. It is ‘binary opposition’ that I would now like to devote specific attention to.

## 1.2. Binary opposition and the polarization of otherness

Already in the 1970s the concept of binary opposition had been taken under scrutiny by deconstructionism and, in particular, by the Nietzschean-influenced seminal works of Jacques Derrida. Derrida emphasized this concept’s centrality for Western thought in terms of hierarchical order/value (for a further exploration of this topic, see Schrift 1996). The step forward taken by decolonial critique, through a genealogical analysis having the reception of ancient Greek tradition in the Christian Renaissance as its focal point (Dussel 1992, 1993; Mignolo 1995, 2018; Castro-Gómez 2007)<sup>10</sup>, is to have identified in this concept (and its anchoring to the law of noncontradiction) an *epistemological weapon* in the service of a totalizing “cosmo-vision”. But how did the decolonial critique come to this conclusion?

The shaping of the “myth of modernity”, which marked post-1492 time, went in fact hand in hand with the elaboration of “a new and powerful social imaginary

<sup>8</sup> Parr, Jessica M. n.d. Geospatial Work. <https://jessicaparr.org/geospatial-work/>.

<sup>9</sup> *The Decolonial Atlas* can be accessed at <https://decolonialatlas.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> It is well known that the Renaissance, as an essentially European phenomenon, witnessed a further diffusion and reinterpretation of Aristotelian philosophy and the masters of mediaeval scholasticism, as well as the revival of Platonism and Neoplatonism (see De Candia 2022).

whereby it was assumed that modern society was on a progressive trajectory, and through rational, scientific endeavour, was destined to transcend its limitations and rise to a higher stage of human development” (Linehan 2009: 157). This optimistic conception of humankind’s path fed on a hierarchy-imbued view of reality in at least a twofold sense: on one hand, the duality between those invested in the project of modernity and those who were unable to develop the ecosystem of ideas, beliefs, practices, techniques, and material objects peculiar to post-medieval period in the Latin West; on the other hand, the duality between man and universe, whose separation fomented in the Renaissance by the rise of homocentrism (Cosci 2022), legitimated the subordination of nature to serve human purposes. By scrutinizing the system of political, military, economic, intellectual power relations that allowed colonization to self-justify and self-legitimize itself, decolonial scholars called attention to an insufficiently studied circular system of cause-and-effect relationships: if the social imaginary linked to the myth of modernity would not have been possible without the flourishing of an “othering mindset”, based on a binary cartography (Europe *vs* non-Europe, culture *vs* non-culture; centre *vs* periphery), at the same time, this mindset could not have been so globally effective without its interweaving with an organization of knowledge and discourse able to make the either–or logic a cultural-anthropological form of thinking (Mignolo 2018: 154–155). While the problem of the “other” – the non-white, non-Christian, non-human other – became the focus of enquiry of the decolonial scholars, religion (and more specifically Christianity, as a body of doctrines, beliefs, and secular views/actions of power) happened to be a key ground for colonial deconstruction(s).<sup>11</sup> As stressed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2020),<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Latin-American scholarship on decoloniality unsurprisingly entangles with religious studies, taking in most cases a polemic stance towards Christianity (such a criticism has concerned in particular the Roman Catholic Church, whose use of power through its institutional organization was instrumental in carrying out the Spanish and Portuguese colonization). Indeed, despite an increasing secularization of religious observance (Graham 1992), the centres of knowledge production institutionally linked to Christianity continued to be an active part of the Western societies in their process of cultural self-description and extension of this model to other civilizations. What was also crucial in this connection was the on-site work of the priests in the mission settlements (in particular, the so-called *curas doctrineros*). Having the task of mediating between the sacred and the profane, they were considered dispensers of precepts, arbitrators of justice, and makers of rites: that is, powerfully agentive bearers of an axiologically invested and moral-driven worldview (Cuevas Arenas 2012; see also Dussel 1981; Lockhart, Schwartz 1983: 13–15; Hoornaert 1984; Holloway 2011; O’Toole 2011; Schwaller 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Maldonado-Torres, Nelson 2020. Religious studies and/in the decolonial turn. In: *Contending Modernities: Exploring How Religious and Secular Forces Interact in the Modern World*. Available at <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/decoloniality/religiousstudiesdecolonialturn/>.

the anthropological discourse about religion was from the outset deeply implicated in the discourse of race and in projects of global expansion and socio-political control. It is thus not possible to understand the genesis and power of the anthropological category of religion without understanding race and modern colonialism, and it is not possible to understand the formation and workings of race without understanding the various uses and functions of “religion” in the modern/colonial world. (...) The classification of the religions of the colonised as primitive or irrational was instrumental to sustain the dehumanising logic that justified colonialism and slavery.

In particular, the instrumental use of the Christian cosmology – in an anthropocentric perspective (for further reading, see White 1967) – played a pivotal role in considering the civilization as a salvific path for the human and non-human (living and nonliving) world. This was: a path which implied a *spatial component* (the territorial expansion and a re-mapping of the planet) and a *temporal component* (the end-oriented conception of history). Nevertheless, according to the decolonial interpretation, it was the *epistemological component* derived from the entanglement “Christianity/modernity/coloniality” that most endured, by basing the understanding of the world on universal binary oppositions at the centre of which were and are racial taxonomies and an othering view of the non-human (i.e. culture vs nature).

Far from being a matter of the past, the Eurocentric binary frame has remained active to the present day, steeping the Western way of conceiving logical relationships between things and so shaping a precise worldview in progress, inside and outside its local geo-chrono-cultural boundaries. As claimed by decolonialists, this constituted a sort of epistemic violence since the “exportation” of *binarism* – namely the use of mutually exclusive schemes, scales and sets of categories to label the world, whose framing is *naturally* given, *commonly* accepted, and *uncritically* internalized – implied the imposition of spheres of meaning that were and are unintelligible, meaningless, and even alien within the context of other cultures. For example, as Mignolo (2021: 632) points out,

[i]ndigenous philosophies or cosmogonies do not have that problem, because for them the universe and life on Earth are in constant flow, there is no place to fix the opposition, and duality is never oppositional but complementary. There is no day without night, no happiness without sadness, no masculine without feminine, and so forth. Time is movement, not a linear display of binary oppositions.

Decolonial reflection on the concept of binary opposition highlights the problematic nature of a logic (the Aristotelian law of noncontradiction) considered *universal* – a logic that still today is claimed to be “the fundamental basis for truth,

rationality, replicability, and discursive regularity” (Müller 2019: 154), in addition to representing a form of thinking, evaluating, and acting that “structurally forced to take a position in favour of either one or the other side” (Müller 2019: 153). This inevitably gives rise to meaning-making processes that have as their driving force the sharpening of differences and as a result the continuous creation and polarization of the otherness in our societies.

In this article I would like to dwell in particular on the binary opposition ‘culture vs nature’, paying particular attention to the second of the two terms. This is not only because it is a topical research area in decolonial studies within the framework called ‘Anthropocene’, but also because it represents a gateway to and a space of dialogue with Juri Lotman’s later oeuvre.

### 1.3. Culture vs nature: An irreconcilable contradiction in the age of the Anthropocene?

Decolonial criticism of binarism is part of a broader intellectual context crossed by a “perspective reversal” towards complexity that also affected Juri Lotman’s semiotic vision. This aspect of Lotman’s work will be seen in greater detail later in this article. In the wake of deconstructionism – which was a pioneer in this regard (with a key role of feminist reading; see Braidotti 1994, 2002; Lugones 2007, 2010) – binarism has progressively come to be associated with a general form of knowledge incapable of grasping the contradictory nature of the real experience. Instead, it has turned out to be “myopic” in a world yearning for multifaceted narratives, elusive to the either–or logic.<sup>13</sup> The interconnectedness that surfaced from and with globalization also contributed to this switch since, despite its dark sides, it made evident that *reality* was something much more intricate than what the (dominant) Western gaze/mind was used to. In fact, what has resulted arises more from the large- and small-scale *coexistence* of many perspectives (stories, experiences, know-hows, material cultures, etc.), often opposing and conflictual.

What seemed to be a loss of confidence in solid categories and consistent storytelling *common to all*, opened the way for a re-examination of this *totality – humanity* – and the meaning this word conceals. One of the most important consequences of having put the spotlight on the concept of binary opposition is in fact the gradual displacement of the Western gaze/mind from the centre to the corner, that is, a non-central place where the word ‘humanity’ is denuded. Thereby revealing the fact that this gaze actually denoted “a small subset of humans clustered mainly” in a confined space of the planet (Baldwin, Erickson 2020: 4).

<sup>13</sup> For a balanced account of this shift in perspective, that saw the critical revision of structuralism at the centre of the debates in the 1960s and 1970s, see Danesi 2009.



This meant also to review two central issues: (1) acknowledge the localness of the concept of human “culture”, generally associated with the ecosystem of ideas, beliefs, values, and praxis belonging to the European milieu, as mentioned earlier; (2) reconsider the great, cumbersome oppositional pole of humanity, i.e. the non-human world, also called ‘nature’.

As regards in particular the second point, animal, vegetable, mineral, air, and water realms have historically been regarded as an “orange to be squeezed” till the last drop. This is according to a dominant *vs* dominated logic able to legitimize the systematic exploitation of environmental resources. It is an accomplice in the climate crisis,<sup>14</sup> which is global in extent. In recent years the artificiality of the dividing line between humanity and the nonhuman world has come to the fore, showing the interdependence and the unified nature of the Earth. It is no coincidence that, at the turn of the 21st century, the term ‘Anthropocene’ has made its appearance to denote a historical epoch whose stratigraphic-geologic labelling cannot fail to consider the direct and indirect effects of the (mainly technology-driven) actions of human beings on living and non-living ecosystems.

According to various scholars linked to the decolonial scholarship,<sup>15</sup> the Anthropocene is a notion that risks resulting in a discursive plot entrenched once again in the binary frame. To define the historical epoch that we are living through as ‘Anthropocene’ means, in the first place, to attribute to the *whole of humanity* the responsibility for a deadly cultural-technological-biological process that in fact can only be attributed to a limited portion of humankind. A subset mainly concentrated in those geopolitical areas that have impelled the industrial revolution, then the digital one.<sup>16</sup> Second, it means thinking of time in a progressive-linear perspective, according to a cosmology that sees *all of humanity* moving towards an End, merging into a single system of ideas – such as *crisis, change, life, well-being, health, growth*, etc. – that may not necessarily

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<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, the climate crisis – the effects of which can no longer be concealed or told as a hypothetical catastrophic scenario halfway between myth and a science fiction tale – and more recently the global COVID-19 pandemic have made the agenda of international scientific research increasingly focus its attention on real risks of a planetary extinction of life that would not discriminate between human and nonhuman.

<sup>15</sup> Since much has already been written on the subject, I will not dwell here on the genesis of the term and the description of its many repercussions at the level of theoretical reflection, working groups and action programmes; rather, I would like to emphasize the interpretation given to it by decoloniality, since the concept of binary opposition again comes into play.

<sup>16</sup> These are areas of the world that have based their development on (and owe their geopolitical supremacy to) huge socio-economic, technological, and environmental investments that in fact require an extraordinary number of resources (coal, oil, lithium, etc.) and transformative actions of landscapes (cf. also Footnote 4 of this article).

imply the same meaning for all humans (for further readings see Schulz 2017; Adam *et al.* 2020; Baldwin, Erickson 2020). In this sense, Man/Human of the Anthropocene, with his Culture (or Civilization), would continue to be the central pole of a fictitious duality. I again make use of Mignolo's words when, referring to Philippe Descola's famous 2005 book *Beyond Nature and Culture* [*Par-delà nature et culture*], he states that

[...] nature and culture are both cultural Western concepts that were established as ontologies. For that reason, current urgencies among Western scholars and intellectuals of moving “beyond nature and culture” is a regional and provincial Western urgency. It is welcome of course, but it is not universal. Indigenous cosmologies do not present us with such urgency, for the simple reason that in this cosmology there are neither nature nor culture and even less a cultural structure of knowledge that needed to invent the concept of nature to highlight Man/Human as maker of culture. (Mignolo 2018: 164)

For decolonialists, rethinking the culture–nature relationship in a non-binary sense thus means not so much “jumping out” of the semantic domain of these two terms and the cosmovision they encapsulate (along with centuries of Eurocentric history), but rather putting this knowledge model of the world into perspective. This results, firstly, in the deconstruction (or de-universalization and de-centralization) of narratives linked to the “abortion mechanisms” of cosmologies other than the Eurocentric one, and secondly, in the pursuit of new grounds for dialogue (Tonelli 2020). Not surprisingly, in the decolonial scholarship, the term ‘pluriversal’ is used to refer to the search for a “third way”, that is, the rediscovery, de-othering and revitalization of “alien” stories, beliefs, habits, practices, perceptions and emotions, knowledge(s) etc., while looking for a common space of conviviality averse to the either–or logic (Mignolo 2018: 166). It is a nascent field of research that, as Maldonado-Torres (2020) has recently observed, sees decoloniality engaged primarily with religious and ethnic studies, while being committed to challenge the imperishable binary meaning-making processes implied in the idea of other-than-Western civilizations.

This framework of ideas, reviews, and perspectives can fruitfully enter a dialogue with the cultural semiotics of Juri Lotman: a thinker who made the binary approach a cornerstone of his theory, but who, especially in the final stage of his intellectual trajectory, felt the need to go beyond the either–or logic.

## 2. Binary opposition as a culturological problem

### 2.1. The centrality of binarism in Juri Lotman's theory

As stressed elsewhere (Gherlone, Restaneo 2022), reading decoloniality from a Lotmanian perspective or, *vice versa*, interpreting Lotman in a decolonial key is an operation that requires caution. Especially considering the different geographical-cultural contexts, historical circumstances, theoretical agendas, and political goals. In this article, I would like to offer a specific discussion of binary opposition according to Lotman's theory and see how his reading can contribute to the current debate and to the "long-distance" dialogue with the decolonial tradition.

Lotman's theory was originally impelled by the ambition to identify cultural universals that would join human civilizations trans-historically. Inspired by the structuralist method, Lotman assumed that, just as the study of natural languages had uncovered linguistic universals, so the study of cultures would have brought to light "the general system of 'culture of humanity'" (Lotman 2018[1967]: 117).

Lotman defined this field of exploration as 'typology of culture', and advanced the hypothesis that – starting from the phenomenal diversity of cultural codes of different civilizations<sup>17</sup> – it would have been possible to trace back to a sort of basic "range" of "archetypal forms [*коренные формы*] of social consciousness, collective organisation and self-organisation of the individual" (Lotman 2002[1967]: 57). This research objective aimed at *simplification* and *generalization* led him to state that "it can safely be assumed the total number of basic types [*основные типы*] of cultural codes will be relatively small and the considerable variety of cultures given historically will arise from complex combinations of fairly simple, few types" (Lotman 2002[1967]: 57). To carry out this comparative operation, Lotman adopted the Saussurean idea whereby – when studying a research object as a system – the researcher must consider its elements in a condition of mutual dependence, according to a distinctive/oppositional logic. As he declared, fully identifying himself with this assertion, "the structuralist researcher is always interested in relationships. [...] he/she always considers a fact in its relation to another fact or to the system as a whole" (Lotman 2018[1967]: 102).

From the methodological point of view, this meant fashioning his observations – some of which had been achieved together with colleagues from the Tartu-Moscow School – by using binary categories of analysis, i.e. typologizing cultural phenomena related, for example, to the idea of language, space, time, or the individual–collectivity bond. Several works, such as those contained in the articles

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<sup>17</sup> Lotman proceeded from the assumption that every culture is information "in-formed" by a hierarchy of historically stratified code systems.

“The modelling significance of the concepts ‘end’ and ‘beginning’ in artistic texts” (Lotman 1976[1966]), “On the semiotics of ‘shame’ and ‘fear’ in the mechanism of culture” (Lotman 2000[1970a]), “The ‘contract’ and ‘self-surrender’ as archetypal models of culture” (Lotman 2019[1981]), or well-known theoretical studies, such as “On two models of communication and their relationship in the general system of culture” (Lotman 2000[1970b]), “On the semiotic mechanism of culture” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978[1971]), “On two models of communication within the system of culture” (Lotman 1992[1973]), “The role of dual models in the dynamics of Russian culture” (Lotman, Uspensky 2020[1977]), “Autocommunication: ‘I’ and ‘other’ as addressees” (Lotman 2020[1990]), are in fact based on the construction of oppositional dualisms captured in the context (mainly) of Russian culture.<sup>18</sup>

In particular, ‘culture vs extra-culture’<sup>19</sup> was a distinction/opposition on which Lotman reflected extensively, to the point of making it a distinctive feature of his theory as well as one of the central topics of his last two monographs, *Culture and Explosion* (2009[1992]) and *Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Lotman 2013[1994/2010]). Thinking over this dualism, he explicitly suggested that the human being, while sharing with the non-human world (especially with animals) the communicative sphere, is the only one capable of consciously and creatively (i.e. unpredictably) transforming extra-cultural reality into a knowable and shareable space of “augmented” information. In *Conversations on Russian Culture* – a series of television lectures given to Estonian audiences between 1986 and 1992 –, Lotman drew a parallel between human beings and animals<sup>20</sup> (with art as the thematic focus) and commented:

The idea that animals are foolish since they don’t speak is a childish notion. When a child wants to assert himself, he invents another who is worse than he is. He shouts: “*I am strong, I am big, and you are small!*”, even as he is looking at a gigantic man [огромный дядя]; or “*You are stupid, I am smart, I know everything!*”. Our behavioural pattern towards animals has long been built on the example of children’s attitude towards other people. Animals are endowed with intelligence, culture, and many highly valuable qualities that we have lost. And I would add that we should treat them with respect. (Lotman 2005[1990]: 520)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The discussion of this topic can be insightfully enriched by two works that have been published during the revision phase of this article by Katalin Kroó (2022), who focuses on Lotmanian binarism in the context of literary studies, and Silvi Salupere (2022), who contextualizes the binary opposition considering Lotman’s key concept of ‘typology of cultures’.

<sup>19</sup> In several writings, the concept of ‘extra-culture’ [внекультура] overlaps with that of ‘non-culture’ [некультура].

<sup>20</sup> He referred specifically to mammals.

<sup>21</sup> The pronouns relating to the subject ‘child’ have been translated into the masculine gender so that the quotation is more faithful to the source text.

However, he continues, despite the parallelism between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ animals prove to be different from humans, since

they act ideally, to use a Platonian term. They think cyclically and perform cyclically. [...] When something major happens, we, human beings, can take an unexpected turn. Precisely at such important times do not animals do anything unexpected. Love scenes, battles during the mating season, the breeding of the offspring, fights among themselves are ritualized. They are usually performed according to strict, almost ballet-like, rules. When observing an action made by one participant in the ritual, we can immediately predict the subsequent action (it is very easy, therefore, to describe animal contacts as dancing, like a ballet). (Lotman 2005[1990]: 520)

The human semiotic universe remained the ultimate term of Lotman’s inquiries, leaving implicit (not a separation but rather) an irreducible distinction between culture and “nature” (for further information on this issue, see Zylko 2001 and the ecocritical readings of Lotman’s semiotic theory in Maran 2014; Kull 2015; Hartley, Ibrus, Ojamaa 2021; Velmezova, Kull 2022; Boria 2022; Machado 2022).

## **2.2. Foreshadowing decoloniality: Juri Lotman’s switch towards complexity**

Up to this point, a decolonial interpretation might define Lotman as a thinker steeped in Western narratives, a scholar unable to escape *from* the ambition of universalizing explanations, *from* a methodology imbued with binary categorizations, and *from* a fundamentally anthropocentric view of reality. There is, however, a *caveat* to this interpretation. Although the binary approach was the spring that allowed Lotman to think of a culturological methodology, it should also be emphasized that he showed his awareness of the risks it could lead to: first and foremost, the risk of conceptual reductionism (Lotman 1984) and, most importantly, of the need to re-articulate this approach. In the early 1980s, he felt compelled to “complexify” his structuralist roots (for a recent discussion of this topic, see Haidar 2019; Gherlone 2021; Rickberg 2022).<sup>22</sup> During this period, he

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<sup>22</sup> While recognizing the achievements of its application in the humanities and social sciences (above all in the context of structuralist analysis), the post-structuralist current gradually challenged the binary opposition as a method of investigation. This “switch” is also visible in Lotman, who interestingly shows no explicit references to the deconstructionist approach, in particular that of Derrida (which influenced postcolonial studies and, more contradictorily, the decolonial critique). However, as Daniele Monticelli (2022: 326) has pointed out, since “[d]ifference is the ontological ground of Lotman’s dialogical epistemology”, his semiotic theory inevitably finds points of contact with deconstructionists.

began to emphasize the concepts of ‘isomorphism’ and ‘asymmetry’, ‘identity’ and ‘difference’. Inspired by the studies on the workings of the human brain in the field of biocybernetics and then by the reflections on the enantiomorphic principle in the chemical-biological field, he recognized the urgency to grasp the binary opposition through a holistic look. This change of perspective not only allowed him to formulate the famous concept of the ‘semiosphere’ (Lotman 2000[1983], 2005[1984]) – the space of the multiplicity of spheres of meaning, where contradiction is not inconsistency but the very life of culture(s) (see Gherlone 2022a: 282–283, 2022b) –, but also enabled him to develop the concept of ‘ternary model’<sup>23</sup>. With this term, Lotman intended to define a way of looking at reality in which there is no opposition that cannot be contemplated from the perspective of *higher plenitude*<sup>24</sup> (Lotman 2013[1994/2010]: 80): a plenitude that does not annihilate the differences of opposites but rather is capable of grasping them as a whole (in their irreducible diversity), without denying conflict. To explain this concept, he used the image of the Holy Trinity (Lotman 2013[1994/2010]: 80), not so much in a theological sense as in an iconic-plastic sense able to express figuratively the ternary dynamics. This is a sort of illustration that Lotman had already used in 1981 when he wrote in the essay “Brain – text – culture – Artificial Intelligence”:

There is a structural contradiction at the heart of a thinking device: a device capable of producing new information must be both unified and dual. This means that each of its two binary structures must be both a whole and a part of a whole. The ideal model becomes the Holy Trinity where each whole is part of a higher-order whole, and each part is a lower-order whole. (Lotman 2000[1981]: 586)

The importance of this idea was such that Lotman included it in “Monostructures and binariness”<sup>25</sup> (Lotman 1991), an unpublished article which was supposed to open the collection of writings from the 1990–1993 period. To explain his view of binarism from a ternary perspective, Lotman here used the example of the visual field of the left and right eyes, i.e. a binary system whose functioning

<sup>23</sup> While in *Culture and the Explosion* the substantive ‘*ternarnost’* [тернарность] and the adjective ‘*ternarnyy’* [тернарный] were translated as ‘ternarity’ and ‘ternary’, the translator has opted for the word ‘triadic’ in *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*. In this article I adopt the former option.

<sup>24</sup> Lotman talked about ‘*vysshaya polnota’* [высшая полнота], that is, highest completeness, supreme fullness, utter plenitude.

<sup>25</sup> Lotman uses the terms ‘binarism’ [бинаризм] and ‘binariness’ [бинарность] synonymously. In this article I adopt the substantive ‘binarism’ but other well-known works on Lotman, such as Edna Andrews’s introduction to *Culture and Explosion* (Andrews 2009: xix), prefer ‘binariness’.

guarantees a volumetric view of reality (a *complex unit*<sup>26</sup>) but which requires two simultaneously similar *and* functionally distinct poles/structures. This is a dynamic diversity since, “although each of these structures tends towards the absolutization of its functions, in a real ‘normal’ state they operate in a conflicting unity. Any element of the structure needs, to be actively functioning, an equally active antithesis” (Lotman 1991).

The fundamental tension between what Lotman called the ‘one’s own’ [*свой*] and ‘the other’ or ‘the alien’ [*чужой*], continued to represent a kind of dialectical “engine” in his theory. Such dynamism is, at the same time, a source of permanent conflict within a culture and the driver of change and transformation, at least until it becomes a mechanism of cyclical destruction – that is, a “psychology of binarism” (Lotman 2019[1992]: 228).<sup>27</sup> This binary perspective remained intact in Lotman’s mind, as we can see from his later writings, in particular the unpublished text “Alien world, strange behaviour” (Lotman 1992–1993).<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the ‘one’s own’ and ‘the other’ went beyond the strictly methodological realm and became the object of ethical reflection, which invested Lotman’s way of seeing reality, conceiving science, thinking about the world after his death (i.e. the post-Soviet world): it became a systematic critique of the “othering mindset”. It is no coincidence that when speaking of the wholeness of the ternary model Lotman (2013[1994/2010]: 80–81) made a fundamental clarification:

[t]he antithesis of a binary opposition can likewise be negated by an absolute unity. Then the sublation – *Aufhebung* in Hegelian terminology – of an initial binary opposition by an ideal unity is proclaimed the essence of progress. Here one might recall the image of the androgyne that developed in Ancient philosophy as the personification of wholeness, as well as of an entire chain of political concepts representing absolutism, despotism, and autocracy as ideal structures of human society.

The concept of ternary model has therefore to be grasped in the context of a personal intellectual development, in the search for a path – only sketched out on a theoretical level but not on an existential level – to heal, overcome, elevate, renew, and rediscover the relationship between the ‘I/we – others’ space, without simplistic solutions.

<sup>26</sup> Lotman talked about ‘*slozhnoe edinstvo*’ [*сложное единство*]. In this article, as in numerous other texts, he included the male/female sexual difference in the examples of binary terms that give rise to a *complex unit*. This topic would deserve a separate discussion which, for reasons of space, could not be offered.

<sup>27</sup> In the quoted source the term has been translated as ‘psychology of the binary’.

<sup>28</sup> On closer inspection, despite Lotman’s repeated criticism of Idealism and, in particular, the Hegelian philosophy/method, he kept being influenced by this school of thought.

### 2.3. The culture vs extra-culture contradiction in a semiospheric perspective

It should be emphasized that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Lotman paid particular attention to ‘history’, understood as narrative interpretation(s) of the time dimension. He sought to give voice to that intimate perception of change that scholars have defined as a weakening of “the unitary Logos of traditional historiography” (Westphal 2011: 14) – a characteristic feature of postmodernity: not the end of history, but the end of a cosmo-vision in which events “worthy of note” are firmly anchored to a strong and teleological idea of linear time, and thus of destiny, progress, irreversibility. It is no coincidence that Lotman, like the decolonial thinkers, detected in Renaissance theology and philosophy a system of thought/action that contributed to engendering and radiating an “othering mindset” beyond the borders of Europe, through the idea (and imaginary) of the absolute otherness of the “New World” (Lotman 2019[1988]). In particular, he recognized in Christian cosmology a powerful temporal narrative which, with the invention of Modernity, took the shape of a secular eschatological thinking: a progress-oriented Eurocentric frame, fuelled by Western textuality, that created the “primitive” and, in parallel, the Great Craftsman, the Master of History.<sup>29</sup> While not dissolving the arrow of time like the postmodernists, in his later writings Lotman gave the temporal linearity a synchronic depth (an expanded present) full of possibilities that he called “explosion” (see Gherlone 2022a).

In parallel during the same period, though treasuring his structuralist roots, this shift led Lotman to desist from the idea of identifying a “culture of humanity” and a universal semiotic “law” to study human civilizations; rather, he devoted himself to rethinking culture in an “eco-systematic” way. Thus, re-examining the relationship between human being and the surroundings. Keeping in mind what has been said previously about the dualism culture vs extra-culture, in the final stage of his intellectual trajectory Lotman’s attention to textual interrelatedness (that, in his view, makes the world intelligible) led him to consider culture as a “peculiar ecology of human society” (Lotman 2005[1989]: 470), marked by a bio-cultural continuum.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For further Lotmanian insights, see Lotman 2009[1992] and Lotman 2013[1994/2010], several essays in Lotman 2019 and Lotman 2020, as well as Lotman 2016[1982].

<sup>30</sup> I use the expression ‘bio-cultural continuum’, notwithstanding that the distinction between culture and nature remained a cornerstone of Lotman’s theory. When talking about human intelligence, he specified that the concept of culture “originally meant ‘cultivated field’, that is, something made by human hands. Indeed, culture is, in a certain sense, in opposition to nature. Nature is what is given to human beings and culture is what human beings have made. But not everything produced by human hands denotes culture. Human beings create culture but can



As we can gather from his unpublished article “Evolution: Complexification or simplification?” (Lotman 1991–1992), culture and extra-culture (nature) would not be two separate entities connected by a domination-subordination mechanism but would coexist, creating and re-creating each other continuously against the background of the fundamental principle of the universe that is the *dynamic diversity*. In Lotmanian language, this principle (quite akin to the decolonial pluriversality) makes it possible for different, even antithetical positions, to co-signify through their mutual relationship, thus engendering ever-shifting semiotic spaces. It is not a coincidence that Lotman, a great connoisseur of visual arts, adopted the geometric term ‘объемный’ (three-dimensional) to describe semiosphere.<sup>31</sup> In the absence of a complex vision driven by dynamic diversity, human life, in its permanent semiotic-textual interchange with the surroundings, would otherwise appear as a flat two-dimensional picture, which needs “conventional rules of equivalence” (such as highly codified rules for projection) to express reality (Lotman 1998[1973]: 292).

The concept of the semiosphere led Lotman not only to reject any idea of humanity’s journey that does not include chance, disorder, contradiction, plurality, ternarity, but also to question a cosmo-vision that, as previously said, owes much to the “myth of modernity”. Indeed, in the aforementioned article “Evolution: complexification or simplification?”, he pointed out how nowadays semiotics needs to move away from the human-centred model, according to which Man, the “masterpiece of Creation”, would represent the pinnacle and the inevitable result of the evolution of the universe (Lotman 1991–92).

Like decolonialists, Lotman engaged in an “ecocritical” dialogue with religious studies, aiming at – to use the words of Ronald Simkins (2014) – putting humans in their place while rethinking the relationship between culture and nature. An attempt to semiotically reconfigure this relationship through a re-foundation of the concept of “intellectuality” can in fact be traced in Lotman’s late thought. It is no coincidence that he devoted six of his thirty-three television lectures on

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also destroy it. Culture [...] is a peculiar ecology of human society. This is the atmosphere, which humanity creates around itself in order to exist further, to survive. In this sense, culture is a spiritual concept: a concept related to ideas, perceptions, emotions, not to things, devices, and machines” (Lotman 2005[1989]: 470–471).

<sup>31</sup> The term ‘объемный’ appears in the conclusions of *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 2009[1992]: 172) to define the semiosphere in light of the ternary and binary models of meaning-making. However, its use in the Lotmanian language dates back to much earlier, and, specifically, to the framework of Lotman’s studies on Pushkin, in whose work he discovered the ability to create a volumetric, three-dimensional world of viewpoints (Lotman 1983[1980]: 185; see also Lotman 2005[1993]: 226).

Russian culture to the topic of “Culture and Intellectuality” – the latter being understood as a way of knowing the world (and of generating spheres of meaning individually and collectively) that is the result of a “non-aggressive” relationality, namely a “high sociality [...] based on mutual respect and unconditional love” (Lotman 2005[1989]: 478). In Lotman’s final works, culture became a term to express the mutual, circular and holistic communicative bond of human beings with the environment that hosts and in-forms them, and which involves concepts such as dialogue, creativity, development of consciousness, tolerance (intended as *‘терпимость’*) but also vulnerability and destruction. It is not surprising that Lotman spoke several times of the person placed in a condition of weakness, marginalization, and defencelessness.<sup>32</sup>

### Final remarks

In this article, I put the spotlight on the concept of ‘binary opposition’, not only because it represents a space for reflection to reconsider – or rather un-learn – a specific form of thought and narrative that shapes, envelops and ultimately overlaps with the time of Western Anthropos (labelled, not without criticism, ‘Anthropocene’), but also because it epitomizes a notion-bridge that productively joins the decolonial scholarship and Lotman’s intellectual path in their attempt to rethink human culture in a complex (multi-perspectivist and non-reductionist) key.

I emphasized that these two traditions – the so-called decoloniality and Lotmanian semiotics –, albeit in different terms and with different theoretical agendas and political goals, are connected by a critical approach to what we might call the ‘othering mindset’, where the focus of attention is placed on the hierarchy-imbued binary view of reality, which can be summarized in the duality culture *vs* nature (or culture *vs* extra-culture). Finally, I have pointed out that, although “traces” of anthropocentrism remain in Lotman’s thought when framing the connection(s) between culture and extra-culture, over time the dividing line between culture and nature becomes decidedly more porous. This is especially noticeable after the formulation of the concept of the ‘semiosphere’ and the outline of what he called the ‘ternary model’. Such an internal evolution of his semiotic theory does not make Lotman a decolonial thinker but transforms him into an interlocutor for our times – times of change, as he would call them –, in which the ‘Anthropocene’ can turn into a term that conceals an underlying utilitarianism. Indeed, its popularization runs the risk of triggering

<sup>32</sup> The last paragraph of this section was published in Gherlone 2022b.

an instrumental logic whereby the basic problem of the current era would be to “fix” the time of the Anthropos, i.e. to succeed in maintaining the same level of wealth, well-being, and power of the few (to the detriment of the many) without annihilating the environment and thus taking a chance on a self-implosion. This concern is senseless if we look at reality with “mutual respect and unconditional love” (Lotman 2005[1989]: 478): an attitude for which, as underlined by many decolonial thinkers, it is necessary to *lose* when trying to *re-find*. Put in other words, an attitude which implies a switch towards a total revision of social living – and its mesh of narrations – in a spiritual, convivial, and solidary sense, where pluriversality becomes a *conditio sine qua non* of mutual co-existence.

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### **Sobre la oposición binaria y el binarismo: Un diálogo a distancia entre la crítica decolonial y la semiótica lotmaniana**

Al tiempo que aborda la crítica decolonial de la modernidad eurocéntrica y la reivindicación de cosmovisiones alternativas, este artículo examina la exploración culturológica de Juri Lotman hacia el concepto de ternariedad [тернарность]: el escrutinio del llamado binarismo es lo que conecta –sin que se solapen– las dos perspectivas.

Este diálogo a distancia se construirá partiendo de la noción clave de oposición binaria, que se analizará como problema decolonial (Parte I) y como problema culturológico (Parte II). El análisis se centrará en dos cuestiones centrales que se derivan de la lógica binaria o/o: la “mentalidad de la alterización” y el dualismo cultura-naturaleza.

**Binaarsest opositsioonist ja binaarsusest.  
Kaugdialoog dekoloniaalse kriitika ja lotmanliku semiootika vahel**

Käsitledes eurotsentrilise modernsuse dekoloniaalset kriitikat ja üleskutset alternatiivsetele visioonidele maailmast, vaadeldakse käesolevas artiklis Juri Lotmani kulturooloogilist uurimistööd ternaarsuse [*тернарность*] mõiste suunas: nn binaarsuse uurimine on see, mis ühendab – ilma kattumisteta – kahte perspektiivi. See kaugdialoog luuakse, lähtudes kesksest binaarsusmõistest, mida analüüsitakse kui dekoloniaalprobleemi (I osa) ja kui kulturooloogilist probleemi (II osa). Analüüs keskendub kahele kesksele teemale, mis tulenevad ‚kas–või‘ loogikast: „teisestavale hoiakule“ ning kultuuri ja looduse dualismile.