

Integration and Explosion: New Perspectives on the *Cultural Semiotics* of Yuri Lotman

While the observation of social order has for a long time been based upon the term of *integration*, the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman is directed toward the interdependence of regular and irregular conditions, stable and unstable semiotic processes, and the socially and semiotically highly tense relationship of center and periphery. Irregularity, anomie and disintegration are phenomena which in the description of social conditions usually have a deviant status outside the boundaries of the normative. In Lotman's cultural theory, they can be understood as core moments of social dynamics and cultural semiosis using such terms as entropy, explosion and periphery. In this way, we can overcome a hierarchical conceptualization of integration and disintegration as norm and deviation while foregrounding uncertainty as a central factor of cultural dynamics.

The planned conference, which will take place from the **23th to the 25th** of October 2008 at the University of Konstanz, will attempt to contextualize the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School with reference to the program of the Konstanz Excellence Cluster "Cultural Foundations of Integration." An additional goal of the conference is to "inspect" cultural semiotics from a comparative and scientific-historical perspective as well as to test the usefulness of its theses and concepts in current formulations of new culture theories. The following thematic areas will be focused on in the conference:

1. Culture and Power

Orders of power have an important but implicit value in Lotman's semiotics of culture. By applying case studies (in the areas of European colonial and imperial history, for instance) we will attempt to understand the operability of the aspect of power implied in the concept of center versus periphery as its view of the difference between social structures and cultural semantics (in connection with other analytical categories of Lotman's such as "culture typology," "memory," "communication" or "dialogue," and "explosion"). In the process, we will also address the relationship between cultural semiotics and recent theories of hegemony and power (M. Foucault, M. Mann).

2. Poetics of Culture

With "poetics of culture," the term that Stephen Greenblatt appropriated from Lotman in designating his own approach, two aspects are in particular to be addressed. First, the use of the term "code" and an open concept of "text" makes it possible to analyze indefinite and chaotic domains as dynamic

semiotic orders. Second, “poetics of culture” refers to the special position of literature and art in Lotman’s cultural semiotics. Central theses and basic concepts are developed with a preference for aesthetic examples (*I-to-I communication; mythological thinking; explosion*). In addition, Lotman’s late work is concentrated on the “grand narratives” of historiography and philosophy of history, attempting to map out a cultural-semiotic alternative. For this, he borrows terms from thermodynamics (*open, dynamic systems, irreversible processes*), making possible a historical narrative that avoids teleology as well as totalizing claims. In the relativity of the observer’s standpoint and the involvement of every observer into the observing process, self-reflexivity appears as a core moment of historical reflection in cultural semiotics, nearer to the postmodern criticism on historiography and philosophy of history (H. White, Lyotard etc.).

3. Discursive Asymmetry

One of the starting points of Lotman’s approach is formed by his understanding of communication as translation, which presupposes a productive (and creative) asymmetry between instances of communication and conceiving of the non-communicated (or non-communicable) remainder as a source of added semiotic value. Culture as a whole becomes a “polyglot mechanism” when understood as a dynamics of translation between codes (on different levels and between levels). Lotman’s conception of communication as a process of translation has far-reaching implications for the understanding of intercultural relations. From this perspective, it is to be seen on every level as normal and as a condition of culture itself. We will be discussing the usefulness of this approach and its applicability to current conceptualizations of communication and interculturalism.

4. “Explosion,” “Entropy” etc.: The Metaphorics of Cultural Semiotics

In analyzing and (above all) interpreting cultural phenomena, cultural theories prefer to transfer terminologies and concepts from non-cultural-scientific disciplines such as medicine, psychology, and economics. Lotman is eclectic in the way he avails himself of an arsenal of terms from scientific disciplines (such as neurology, biology and thermodynamics) as well as from information theory. He also uses terms from these contexts in order to explain the dynamics of culture. Here it is less of a matter of “hardening” the semiotic understanding of cultural in natural-scientific terms and more of an issue of pointing out the connection and analogy between culture and nature and between natural and cultural processes which manifest themselves particularly in factors such as uncertainty, explosion and irreversibility. Here we will be debating the productivity and operability as well as the cultural-historical symptomatology of Lotman’s metaphorics (“asymmetry,” “isomorphism,” “enantiomorphism,” “open system,” “dissipative structure,” “entropy,” “explosion” and “mine field,” “biosphere,” “semiosphere”) which have hardly been discussed to date.

Abstracts of no more than 300 words on these topics can be submitted until March 15, 2008 (by email to Susi.Frank@uni-konstanz.de and Cornelia.Ruhe@uni-konstanz.de). A detailed conference program will be sent out at the end of May 2008. We plan to publish a selection of the conference proceedings.

Further information is available from:

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