

## Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory for Beginners

Oleg Sobchuk

*University of Tartu, Comparative Literature*

**Aleksei Semenenko, *The Texture of Culture: An Introduction to Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xvi + 177 pp.**

According to Aleksei Semenenko, one of the main objectives of his book is “to make Lotman accessible to a larger (academic) audience not limited only to specialists in Slavic studies and semiotics” (1). Perhaps this is the reason the book is quite short and divided into small chapters and subchapters, each devoted to a specific aspect of Yuri Lotman's semiotic theory. The author emphasizes that his study is neither a history of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school nor a biography of Lotman; it is, rather, an attempt to bring together those parts of Lotman's theory that are still cogent, in Semenenko's opinion, and useful for contemporary research.

Nor does the book follow a chronological line, typical of many similar works, but is organized thematically. This reflects Semenenko's focus “on the continuity and integrity of Lotman's ideas and the connections of his earlier works with later ones” (2). Many topics are left out of the picture, such as Lotman's theories of verse, film, and other particular semiotic systems; only the most general aspects of his theory are presented.

The first chapter, “Contexts,” is a historical introduction describing the situation in which the semiotics of the Tartu-Moscow school arose. The chapter especially discusses the academic context of Soviet semiotics, which, unlike its French or American equivalents, was from the very beginning closely related to cybernetics. Semenenko even makes the interesting observation that “to some extent semiotics mirrored the fate of cybernetics” (14),

being similarly successful in the 1960s and 1970s but growing unpopular and marginal in the 1980s. Another subchapter discusses the sociopolitical context of Soviet semiotics: the difficult conditions in which it had to survive as a school in constant opposition to the dominant Marxist trends in academia. Overall, the introduction provided in the first chapter is clear and systematic but fails to take into account the “formalist context” of Lotman’s theory. To a large extent, his conceptions rest upon the preceding theories of Russian formalists, such as Viktor Shklovsky’s idea of defamiliarization or Yury Tynianov’s views on literary evolution. Mentioning this framework in the introduction would have helped avoid some later presentational difficulties. For example, on page 54 the notion of defamiliarization (or deautomatization) is mentioned, but the idea of automatization is explained as late as page 103, though logically it should appear first.

The second chapter, “Culture as System,” is the longest in the book. It discusses the most general aspects of Lotman’s semiotic theory: the concept of system and his views on communication, for example, which differed from the traditional models found in Roman Jakobson (1960) or Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949). The chapter covers the notions of a modeling system (the “trademark” of Tartu-Moscow semiotics), autocommunication, myth, translation, and core-periphery opposition, and it also extends to Lotman’s later ideas regarding unpredictable, explosive moments in the history of culture.

The following three chapters (“Culture as Text,” “Semiosphere,” and “Universal Mind”) are quite short and do not introduce any notably new ideas of Lotman but rather add some details to the early notions presented in the second chapter. Again, readers may detect some inconsistencies or discontinuities here. For example, the third chapter presents various basic structuralist concepts, such as sign, system versus text dichotomy, invariant, binary opposition, and so forth. However, it would be easier to explain the semiotics of Lotman to the general reader if the book started with these concepts. (Chronologically, they even appeared in Soviet semiotics earlier than the notions described in the second chapter of the book.) In addition, the third chapter contains a description of Lotman’s ideas about the isomorphism of culture and mind, but the whole fifth chapter, “Universal Mind,” is devoted to this problem.

At the same time, it is difficult to criticize Semenenko for these disorders, because Lotman’s theory does not seem to be the best object for systematic presentation. In the course of his life, the semiotician was constantly rethinking and developing his own ideas, so that one does not find it easy to deploy Lotman’s theories as a coherent whole. At least to a certain extent, the

structure of the book thus reflects the complicated structure of Lotman's thought itself.

Interestingly enough, the book attempts to combine Lotman's ideas with those of Charles S. Peirce and Jakob von Uexküll (a German biologist, a precursor of ethology, zoosemiotics, and biosemiotics). Particularly, Semenenko uses Peirce's (1984 [1867]) typology of signs to explain Lotman's ideas about cultural memory; he also compares Uexküll's (1909, 2001 [1937]) notion of *Umwelt*, which is the subjective perception of the world by an organism, to the notion of semiosphere, one of the main concepts in Lotman's semiotic theory. Such comparisons follow the lead of contemporary Tartu semiotics, which also draws connections between Lotman, on the one hand, and Peirce and Uexküll, on the other (see, e.g., Kull 1998, 2005; Lotman 2002). In sum, despite its somewhat unsystematic method of organization, Semenenko's book is a valuable attempt to popularize the theory of one of the most interesting and thought-provoking semioticians of the twentieth century.

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