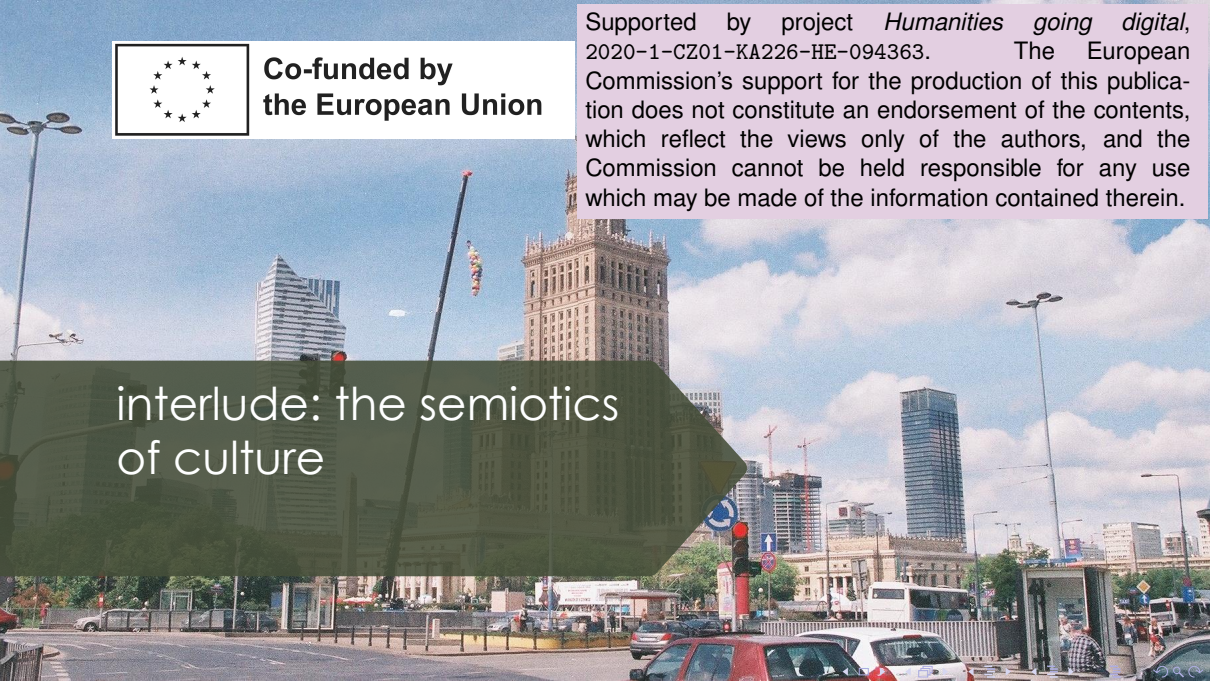




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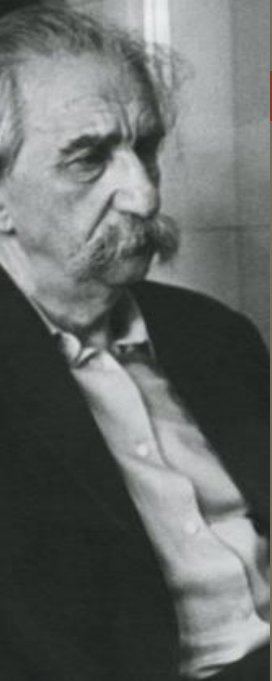
## interlude: the semiotics of culture





# IN THIS CLASS

- Yuri Lotman and cultural semiotics
- The concept of text
- Literature as a sample of cultural discourse
- Media and its analysis



# YURI M. LOTMAN

- The semiotics of culture have an important landmark in the works of Yuri Lotman
- Petrograd 1922-1993 Tartu
- Notable works include:
  - Semiotics of Cinema*
  - The Structure of the Artistic Text*
  - Universe of the Mind*
  - Culture and Explosion*

# WHAT IS THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE?

- The semiotics of culture, from Lotman's scientific standpoint, is a research program based on structural linguistics
- It studies the meaning-making and significative processes that take place in a given cultural system
- It creates a series of concepts to understand culture and non-culture as a dynamic system

# THESES ON THE SEMIOTIC STUDY OF CULTURES

- As a manifesto and theoretical framework for a research program, Lotman et al. (1973) make the assumption that “all human activity concerned with the processing, exchange, and storage of information possesses a certain unity” (53)
- This means that one basic principle for understanding culture in this sense is that *sign systems* do not work individually: Human activity requires a plurality of signification systems to work
- In an abstract manner of speaking, no human activity is ever solely carried in one mode of signification: Nothing is *purely* linguistic—no linguistic description is self-sufficient because it depends on non-linguistic factors to be actualized

# DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

- In the Theses from 1973, there is a distinction between culture as self-described and culture as meta-systematically (scientifically) described
- The self-description of culture operates on the dichotomy of culture and non-culture, but it is dependent on specific values of a culture (think of the Greco-Roman concept of *barbarian*)
- What would count as non-culture within your own cultural sphere nowadays?



# CULTURE, WITHIN AND WITHOUT

- From within, culture is the “sphere of organization (information) in human society and the opposition to it [is] disorganization (entropy)” (54)
- From outside though, culture and non-culture “appear as spheres which are mutually conditioned and which need each other” (54)
- Let’s try to explain this further:
- The cultural description of culture sees it as an organized scheme in which its elements have specific meanings (and usages). Outside of culture there is chaos, non-values
- The scientific description of culture sees culture as a system of interconnected signification(s), but it also sees non-culture as a system that depends and defines culture

# THE MECHANISM OF CULTURE

- ▶ When we describe culture 'from outside', we do not give primacy to culture as a system. Instead, we put both culture and non-culture as systems with specific features
- ▶ As we have defined both systems in opposition, we describe them as 'mutually conditioned' and 'mutually necessary'
- ▶ Under this description, the *mechanism* of culture transforms the outside into a part of the inside, it turns *entropy* into *information*
- ▶ Think of it this way: If there is no non-culture, there is no culture either
- ▶ In Lotman's view, this opposition is the *minimal unit* in the mechanism of culture

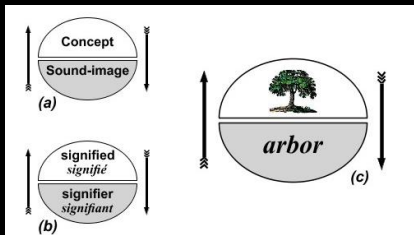


A vertical image on the left side of the slide showing the silhouette of a statue against a clear blue sky with some light clouds at the bottom. The statue appears to be a group of figures, possibly a religious or historical monument, with one figure prominently raised in the air.

# FIRST CONSIDERATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

- Culture is *dynamic*
- Culture is expansive
- Extracultural space is in an active position to change cultural space
- Culture is *hierarchical* and *multilayered* in terms of the semiotic systems that populate it

# THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL SEMIOTICS



- Semiotics usually deals with signs
- However, Lotmanian cultural semiotics deals with groups of signs
- These groups of signs are termed *texts*
- The reason to avoid singular signs as the unit of analysis lies in the idea that a singular sign is uninformative and that meaning requires a non-singular set of signs

# THE CONCEPT OF TEXT

- Lotman (1977) does not give us a straight definition of the concept of text, but instead states that there are three axes that lay its conceptual foundations:
- *Expression*: A text belongs to the realization of a communicative system. For instance, in literature, the text is expressed through the signs of a natural language
- *Demarcation*: A text has boundaries, opposing materially embodied signs that are not part of its composition
- *Structure*: A text has an internal organization. “In order [...] to recognize a certain aggregate of phrases in a natural language as a text, we need to be convinced that they form a secondary structure on the level of artistic organization” (53)

# SO WHAT IS A TEXT THEN?

- Any “carrier of integral [...] meaning – to a ceremony, a work of the fine arts, or a piece of music” (1973: 58)
- Not every message in a natural language is a text though, at least from a cultural point of view: Only messages belonging to a speech “genre” would possess textuality
- Texts can be *discrete* and *indiscrete*: Discrete texts are clearly composed of specific signs, whereas indiscrete texts have no discernible specific, individualized signs



## THE ARTISTIC TEXT

- Take the following example:
- *Portrait of Innocent X, by Diego Velázquez, c. 1650*
- What are the features of this work of art that make it a *text* in Lotman's view?
- What is its expression?
- What is its demarcation?
- What is its structure?



## WHAT ABOUT THIS ARTISTIC TEXT?

➤ And is this a text too?



# WHAT TEXTS DO IN CULTURE

- In the organization of cultural space, texts move through culture as well as in and out
- Texts have three functions:
- Transmission of available information
- Creation of new information—information that is not easily deduced from available information or unpredictable information
- Memory—the capacity to preserve and reproduce information



# THE ORGANIZATION OF CULTURAL SPACE

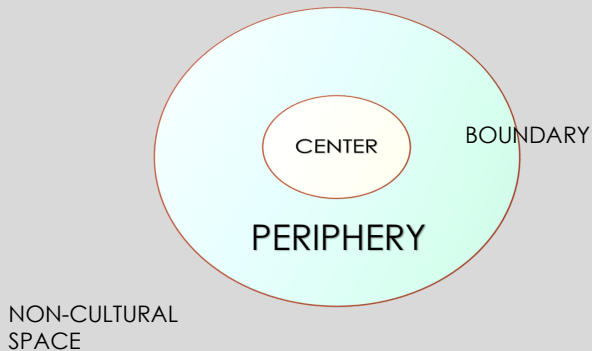
The space where culture exists is semiotic space by virtue of its communicative properties

This semiotic space is defined as a *semiosphere* by Lotman (1990)

The semiosphere is defined as “the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other”



# STRUCTURE OF THE SEMIOSPHERE



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- Lotman, Juri M., Ivanov, Vjacheslav V., Pjatigorskij, Aleksandr M., Toporov, Vladimir N., Uspenskij, Boris A. 2013 (1973). Theses on the semiotic study of cultures (as applied to Slavic texts). In: Silvi Salupere, Peeter Torop and Kalevi Kull (eds.), *Beginnings of the Semiotics of Culture*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 53-77.