# Contents

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# A Note on the Text

Lotman's original notes are reproduced here as endnotes referenced by Arabic numerals. We used footnotes, referenced by Roman numerals, for our editorial comments. Each article is introduced by a brief paragraph in italics explaining its source and significance, as well as placing it in a larger critical context.

The articles included in this collection reflect various scholarly styles, including some pieces that were initially presented as television programs and that accordingly present a more conversational style, with lighter referencing. Our translation has aimed to retain these inflections of tone and style.

# A Note on Transliteration

This volume uses two different transliteration systems. For proper names occurring within the text, we have either used well-established English equivalents or applied simplified and anglicized spelling, writing, for example, Veselovsky instead of Veselovskii and Alexander instead of Aleksandr. In bibliographic references, we have consistently used the Library of Congress transliteration, even for proper names.

# Introduction

ANDREAS SCHÖNLE

Yuri Lotman (1922–1993) is one of the most prominent and influential Russian scholars of the twentieth century.[1] A cofounder of the so-called Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics, he applied his mind to a wide array of disciplines, from aesthetics to literary and cultural history, narrative theory to intellectual history, cinema to mythology, not to speak of cybernetics. He advanced highly sustained theories on structural poetics, culture, and artificial intelligence, as well as the relationship between semiotics and neurology;[2] he proposed sweeping typological generalizations, such as his opposition between Russian and Western cultures; and he excavated layer after layer of Russian literary, cultural, and intellectual history. His interests ranged from how causal connections work in a semiotic series to the role of dolls in a system of culture. He touched on Freud, Charlie Chaplin, and Lenin. His semiotic analyses of Russian culture included studies of dueling, card-playing, and the theatricality of polite society. Considered groundbreaking in the context of Soviet disdain for the nobility, his thick description of aristocratic culture devoted appreciable attention to the situation of women and their contributions to culture (his long description of "A Woman's World" is translated in this volume for the first time). Along with numerous studies of Russian high literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, he investigated the semiotics of St. Petersburg, the role of architecture in culture, and the symbolic construction of space. In a path-breaking interdisciplinary vein, he studied the interrelationship among various kinds of art, be it the impact of theater on painting or of landscape design on poetry. Perhaps his most influential ideas concerned the interpenetration of the arts and everyday life: along with several other articles, his biography of Alexander Pushkin, which demonstrated how the poet designed his social behavior as a work

of art (*Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin: A Writer's Biography*) and his article on the ways in which the Decembrists plotted their lives according to codes derived from drama ("The Decembrist in Daily Life") spawned a series of studies on various cases of theatricality and "life-creation" [*zhiznetvorchestvo*] by Russian and American scholars of all stripes.[3] This conception took hold not the least because it resonated with Russian culture's recurrent valorization of art as an existential project, the notion that art formulates not only aesthetic values, but also desirable ways of living.

Lotman was both a theorist and a historian. His uncanny command of Russian print culture not only enabled him to introduce substantial revisions to Russia's historiographic paradigms, transforming the ways in which his readers thought of Russia's identity, but also stoked one of his most endearing talents—his knack for pointing to unexpected, poorly known facts of Russian and, sometimes, world culture in support of a theoretical position. Indeed, perhaps his greatest asset was the ability to underpin history with theory and substantiate theory with history, casting a new light on everything he touched. He was a daring and imaginative thinker. He did not shy away from speculation and sometimes was prone to confusing his erudition with a license to conjecture. His skill at finding patterns and subtexts, honed on the practice of literary analysis, served him less well when applied to social behavior: some of his last historiographic ventures (for example, his richly contextual biography of Nikolay Karamzin) smack of overreading. Yet, his theoretical investigation of the role of chance and unpredictability in history and culture, which he presented in his last theoretical book, *Culture and Explosion* [*Kul'tura i vzryv*], tempered this penchant for overdetermination. He died before he could consider how this new premise would transform his interpretations of distinct episodes of Russian literature and culture.

In many ways his career offered a palimpsest of his times. After serving six years in the army, including four in combat during World War II, Lotman came back a decorated soldier, one of an estimated five percent of the enlisted men born in 1922 to survive the war.[4] He enrolled in Leningrad State University to finish his undergraduate studies, but despite his brilliant performance and glowing recommendation from the army, he could not be admitted to graduate school on account of his Jewish background.[5] For the same reason, he experienced difficulties finding a job, until he landed a position as teacher of Russian literature in a two-year pedagogical institute in Tartu, Estonia. Annexed in 1940, the fifteenth Soviet republic needed russification, and local authorities did not deem Lotman's ethnicity a liability. Becoming a resident of Estonia

proved to be a blessing in disguise. Lotman quickly began to teach classes in the Department of Russian Literature at Tartu University. In 1952, he finally was able to defend his dissertation at Leningrad University. By 1954, he was a regular faculty member at Tartu University. While ostensibly marginalized by this displacement from the two capitals, Lotman took advantage of the comparatively more relaxed atmosphere of Estonian intellectual life and progressively built the Department of Russian Literature into a pioneering theoretical and historical powerhouse.

In the 1950s Lotman worked on a reconceptualization of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century intellectual and literary history. Inspired by the emergence of structuralism in Moscow, he began publishing on theoretical issues in 1962 and the following year made contacts with Moscow colleagues.[6] The institution of biannual summer schools on "secondary modeling systems"[7] near Tartu helped establish intellectual and personal links with Moscow scholars, which enabled the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics to coalesce.[8] In the 1950s and 1960s, Lotman's scholarship was first published in scientific journals at Tartu University, although Lotman was never completely barred from mainstream publication in Moscow or Leningrad. Despite small runs and poor distribution, his articles on semiotics drew the attention of elite intellectual circles in Moscow and Leningrad, and, subsequently, abroad. Starting in 1964, translations of his articles began to appear in various Western European countries, the United States, and Japan.[9] His reputation steadily grew over the years, and by 1988 he had become a TV star, presenting his study of the culture of the nobility in a series of televised lectures. When he died on October 28, 1993, Estonian president Lennart Meri interrupted his state visit to Germany to deliver an oration after the funeral: the Jewish scholar who had been hired to assist in russifying the Republic had become a pillar of Estonian national pride.[10]

Since then, Estonian and Russian academic circles have engaged in a lively and spirited reevaluation of Lotman's legacy. While his colleagues and former students at Tartu continued to work broadly within his conceptual frameworks, two different lines of succession coalesced institutionally and methodologically. Work on semiotics proceeded apace in the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu, while work on Russian cultural history was carried forward in the Department of Slavic Studies. This division reflected a breakdown of the unique synthesis between history and theory Lotman had attempted, as literary and cultural historians in the 1990s and 2000s in Russia engaged in much more empiricist, text- and archive-based, and theory-adverse studies. Lotman's semiotic legacy found a home on the pages of *Sign Systems Studies*, a journal

Lotman had founded in 1964 under the title of *Trudy po znakovym systemam* and which was rebranded as an English-language semiotics journal in 1998.[11] The work in literary and cultural history by Lotman's former students and colleagues was dispersed across various journals, but came together in the four thick issues of the *Lotman Volume* [*Lotmanovskii sbornik*].[12] Meanwhile, the history of the Tartu-Moscow school became a contested site, with various participants making contradictory claims about its emergence and development.[13] Nonetheless a series of recurring major conferences—the yearly "Lotman Seminars" in Tartu; the "International Lotman Congresses" in 2002 and 2012, also in Tartu; the "Annual Lotman Conference" in Tallinn; and the "Lotman Readings" [Lotmanovskie chteniia] in Moscow, which had their 26th occurrence in 2018—testify to Lotman's continuing relevance, even if not all the works presented at these meetings are directly indebted to his methodologies. In the last ten years, the Estonian Semiotics Repository Foundation, which holds Lotman's personal archive, has enabled the publication of archival texts and the incipient exploration of Lotman's yet unstudied international networks.[14]

In parallel with these scholarly developments, Lotman's public posture and ethical stance also began to attract scrutiny. Lotman's own self-fashioning strategies came into view, which helped debunk some of the partly self-forged mythology that surrounded his public aura. Andrey Zorin analyzed how Lotman's work on Karamzin was inflected by his carefully honed stance of stoic, if not heroic, disengagement from public affairs, while projecting a front of scrupulous moral integrity and commitment to preserving high culture's historical legacy for future benefit.[15] Some people tried, perhaps not quite successfully, to impugn this image of moral probity. Somewhat scabrous anecdotes about Lotman's everyday behavior at Tartu reached the pages of an elitist glossy magazine in 1998.[16] More recently, the publication of Faina Sonkina's memoirs revealed that from 1968 until his death, while married to Zara Mints, a fine scholar of the Silver Age, Lotman conducted an intense, if geographically distanced amorous relationship with Sonkina, one interlaced with earnest and agonizing reflections on morality.[17] From a sociological perspective, Maxim Waldstein drew an interesting if somewhat overwrought portrait of Lotman as a savvy operator working existing institutions and networks to carve out a position of power and relative freedom, in contrast to his more widespread image as a victim of state ostracization and as a heroic defender of core humanist values.[18]

During the 1970s and 1980s, Lotman's works and those of other Soviet semioticians became broadly influential in American and West European academia; next to Mikhail Bakhtin, Lotman was the most widely read and translated

theorist of the former Soviet Union.[19] He spoke to an astonishing range of disciplines and authors: the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, new historicist Stephen Greenblatt, semiotician Umberto Eco, reception theorist Wolfgang Iser, feminist critic Julia Kristeva, and marxist critic Frederic Jameson, to name a few, have productively used Lotman's concepts. Nonetheless, his brand of semiotics never became as prominent in the English-speaking world as did French Structuralism, and Lotman received his most intense hearing in Germany and Italy, rather than in the United States or the United Kingdom. There are many reasons for this state of affairs, ranging from the fact that mainstream book-length translations of his works appeared after the structuralist wave had already swept over the United States, to his unique blending of theory with (Russian) history, which rendered access to his scholarship more difficult and less urgent to a non-Russianist.[20]

In the 1980s Lotman began to develop a theory of culture no longer based on the Saussurean distinction between code and utterance, but rather on how messages are embedded in a fluid semiotic environment from which they draw their meaning. Lotman calls this semiotic environment the *semiosphere*, a concept he developed in English translation in *Universe of the Mind*, a volume published in 1990. Internationally, however, Lotman's reputation was wedded to that of structuralist semiotics, and as a result, his later works have not found the audience they deserve. Most scholars continue to reference primarily his earlier pieces.[21] Yet, after the English publication of *Culture and Explosion* in 2009 and of *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* in 2014, and with the republication of some sections from *Universe of the Mind* in semiotics anthologies, there are some signs that this is beginning to change.

*Universe of the Mind* presents a theory of cultural dynamics that results from interactions between non-homologous, that is, mutually untranslatable languages within a contentious field of discourses aspiring to move from the periphery to the center. Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, the semiotic environment in which communication occurs and from which it derives its codes, holds great interdisciplinary appeal. It tends to supersede the binary categories left over from structuralism (and sometimes retained in deconstruction) and to provide an underlying foundation for the local investigations undertaken by cultural studies. It emphasizes shifting boundaries and hierarchies, permutations between the center and the periphery, mediations and translations, isomorphic relations between events on the micro and macro levels, and unity through diversity. In that sense, the concept of the semiosphere is close to what Galin Tihanov has called "marginocentricity," defined as a regime in

which "centre and periphery become fluid, mobile, and provisional, prone to swapping their places and exchanging cultural valences."[22] The organicist metaphor of the semiosphere serves not to essentialize discourse, but to restore to it a sense of unceasing life, of the continuous metabolic exchanges discourses undergo when they are thrown into the world.[23] In that sense, Lotman's semiosphere stands in sharp contrast with the notions of world literature developed by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, for whom it is invariably at the center of culture that innovation happens, while the peripheries are confined to assimilating the forms imported from it.[24]

One of the attractive and unique dimensions of Lotman's theory is that it offers a way to conceptualize change and innovation, both on the individual and historical scales, but without lapsing into antiquated humanist or Romantic assumptions. *Culture and Explosion* explores two different types of change: continuous evolution and abrupt, unpredictable transformation (that is, "explosion") that turns a culture, especially a binary one, upside down. The existence of explosive changes throws an element of creativity and chance into history, thus calling into question meta-narratives that presume to encapsulate history's unfolding. Lotman thought that he was witnessing such a period of transformative change in the early 1990s, just as he was working on this book. Indeed, he ended this study on a plea to avoid "the historical catastrophe" that would result from missing the opportunity to abandon Russia's binaries and to join the more supple ternary system he ascribed to European culture. From the current perspective of rabid polarization between Russia and the notional "West," fostered by demagogues on both sides, Lotman's poignant hope highlights the extent to which he saw himself as a scion of European culture, not unlike the Russian noble elite he described in some of his later works.

For a reader accustomed, say, to French cultural theory, the works of Lotman will bring some surprise. While the likes of Barthes and Foucault were engaged in a sustained critique of prevailing ideologies, which they exposed in seemingly ordinary cultural formations and social processes, for example, in mass culture (Barthes) and clinical practice (Foucault), Lotman endeavored first and foremost to recover and protect the rich layeredness of high culture. There is a larger context to this, and to understand what is at stake we can draw on the productive opposition Caryl Emerson has proposed between the "hermeneutics of suspicion," a term coined by Paul Ricoeur, and the "hermeneutics of recovery of meaning," which Emerson identifies as a premise shared by Russian thinkers as diverse as Lotman, Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky, and Lydia Ginzburg.[25] Whereas French theory took its impetus from the effort to unmask

the false consciousness at work in cultural production ("suspecting" the ways it conceals the iniquities of the underlying system of economic production and of prevailing power relations), Emerson contends that what unifies these scholars is the belief that the word can change the world, and hence that culture is invested with a forward-looking responsibility to model desirable and morally sustainable behavior. For Lotman, this implicitly entailed foregrounding the world-making powers of prominent luminaries from the past, such as Karamzin, Pushkin, and the Decembrists (or their wives). Accordingly, Lotman's most innovative "move" in his treatment of literature consisted in analysing the ways in which it disseminates codes of behavior, as well as models of feelings, which can easily cross cultural and national boundaries and thus demonstrate their porousness (for an example, see his piece "A Woman's World" in this volume). In so doing, Lotman laid one of the foundations for the emotional turn in Russian history and culture.[26] His faith in the creative, that is, constructivist powers of high culture arose in the highly ideologized atmosphere of Soviet cultural politics, which tightly controlled innovative cultural production and, in particular, restricted how aristocratic culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be received and understood. It thus acquired a tacit oppositional valence, which, however, could never become explicit or militant. While Lotman maintained an outward front of political aloofness, his concept of the semiosphere rests on a semiotic understanding of power: the discourses that vie for a position at the center shape our consciousness and constitute our reality. They exert, rather than transmit, power.[27]

Whereas Barthes was primarily interested in ideology, Lotman undertook the study of culture as a meaning-producing mechanism. There exists some superficial terminological overlap between Barthes and Lotman, which scholars have recently begun to explore, notably the notion of a "secondary modeling system," the ideological, artistic, or religious constructs that build on natural language as the primary system.[28] An important difference between the two semioticians lies in the fact that in his treatment of ideology, Barthes tended to assume a fairly homogenous and hierarchical discursive landscape, while Lotman foregrounded the interactions and exchanges between at least two heterogenous and intersecting systems. As Daniele Monticelli has usefully highlighted, when Barthes refers to culture, he means tradition and ideological conformity, while for Lotman culture is a dynamic landscape pervaded with languages that compete for ascendancy and whose seething activity is the very mechanism that enables the creation of (new) meaning.[29] The geological metaphors Lotman deploys to describe the semiosphere—a seething sun,

layering in strata, cataclysmic events, the interaction between the mineral and the organic—describe a high-octane energetic framework that stands in sharp contrast with the stagnant political culture of the Brezhnev era during which he developed his theories. While Barthes was somewhat quicker than Lotman to "explode" the bounded and stable systems he described in his structuralist phase—for example, by introducing the difference between the self-contained "work" and the unpredictably limitless "text" in his famous article "From Work to Text" in 1971[30]—even in his earlier structuralist period, Lotman's understanding of the artistic text was always that of a dynamic system of inter-related binary oppositions, whose complex multi-layeredness enabled a degree of openness and variability that was subject to actualization by the readers in accordance with their own frames of reference.[31]

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The present collection of texts by Lotman aims to achieve several things. Firstly, it provides handy access to a broad range of his scholarly contributions, grouped under the two headings of Semiotics and Cultural History, thus presenting a self-standing overview of his works. In selecting texts for translation, emphasis was placed on his later, post-structuralist period, which is more attuned to contemporary concerns, although some earlier texts were also included, both to provide a fuller view of his intellectual development and because they have been influential. Secondly, it offers first or new translations of his works in a contemporary idiom that sought to remain faithful to the inflections of his syntactic cadences and to his metaphors, while conveying his thoughts through an approachable, non-scientist lexicon. We took the opportunity to bring heretofore untranslated works into the English-speaking world, but we also included well-known seminal pieces in a new translation, as consistency of terminology and style across various texts is key to enabling an adequate understanding of Lotman's scholarly legacy. This collection thus represents a stand-alone primer of his works. We should say that our decision to retranslate some pieces should not be read as a rebuke to our predecessors. We had initially considered including some existing translations into the volume, but the steep copyrights demanded by publishers quickly ruled this out, while consistency in the translation emerged as an important objective. Thirdly, the collection is aimed at an English-speaking audience of undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of disciplines, rather than at the narrow world of professional Russianists, so, to the extent possible, we chose texts that are accessible and do not require

an extensive background in semiotics or in Russian literary history. Finally, this collection intends partly to bring Lotman into the orbit of contemporary concerns and debates such as gender, memory, performance, world literature, and urban studies. While Lotman approaches these themes from a standpoint and in a language that at first glance may feel alien and dated, we believe that his works still shed a distinctive light and thus continue to contribute to a pluralistic, multidisciplinary debate around these themes.

Lotman's gendered language triggered a lively exchange of views between us about the proper way to translate it. While Lotman clearly thought, with some justification, that his piece "A Woman's World," included in his *Conversations on Russian Culture*, was ground-breaking by the standards of Soviet historiography, given the latter's disregard for the life of the nobility and for the life of women in particular, it is also true that in it he deployed a language that is markedly gendered. References to *zhenshchina*, that is, "woman" in the singular, as a generic term applicable to all women, sound dangerously essentializing. Yet, the piece itself makes a constructivist argument, aimed at showing that women of the time were forged in their character and identities by the literature they read and thus changed profoundly over the period in question. Historians will be quick to point out that a substantial corpus of Lotman's evidence relies on literature itself, thus becoming circular, though in fairness he also draws on memoirs and biographies. The main interest of this essay lies precisely in the way it models the relationship between literature and the political and social behavior of its readers, along with their mental and emotional worlds. But Lotman also anchors his analysis of the identities and behavioral patterns of (noble) women in a more essentializing premise that men are more subject to social pressure than women, as the latter are more able to extricate themselves from social conventions due to their intimate ties with ahistorical dimensions of life, such as nature, processes of becoming, and emotions, an idea he draws from Leo Tolstoy and that looms large in Russian culture. This notion also explains, in his view, why women are quicker to respond to cultural solicitations than men and therefore can serve as a bellwether of intellectual and cultural change for the historian. In the final paragraphs of his article, Lotman raises what he sees as a distinctive mental perspective into some sort of anthropological and semiotic constant that supersedes actual gender differences: "women's culture is not merely the culture of women. It is a particular view of culture, an indispensable element of its multi-voicedness," pointing out that Pushkin identified himself with this perspective. Hence, this view of culture is no longer gendered, narrowly speaking, but a voice within the normal heteroglossia of culture to

which men contribute as well. Indeed, in reading his glowing description of the fearless moral probity of the Decembrists' wives, it becomes clear that Lotman identified himself with this stance. Yet despite this fairly sophisticated recasting of gendered parameters, he nonetheless remains wedded to binary oppositions, even when these oppositions allow interesting, counter-intuitive permutations within them.[32] Ultimately the binary of man versus woman underpins his entire argument, in tribute to his times. His article is as much an analysis of the literary construction of female identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a document about the gendered views of a sophisticated intellectual of the last Soviet period, and we ask readers to approach it in that spirit.

In discussing Lotman's views on gender, one should bear in mind the astonishingly dismissive analysis of Anna Labzina that Lotman gave in his essay "Two Women" [Dve zhenshchiny], which is also included in his *Conversations on Russian Culture*. As Gary Marker has astutely pointed out, here Lotman falls into the trap of taking entirely at face value the notion that Enlightenment necessarily implies moral probity.[33] In reading Labzina's memoirs, he dismisses as pure fantasy her account of her first husband Alexander Karamyshev, which depicts him as a depraved, womanizing, child-molesting, card-playing drunkard. Unable to reconcile this narrative with his high-minded vision of a Europeanized scientist, Lotman dismisses her tale of woes as the fabrication of a woman wholly given to a literary masterplot of martyrdom and thus unable to recognize her husband's attempts to educate her in the ways of the Enlightenment for what they were. Whereas Marker carefully teases out—on the basis of her memoirs, diary, and external evidence—the traces of Labzina's own resourceful agency and coping strategies, Lotman confines her to the role of a hallucinating girl incapable of receiving the gift of knowledge (even though she was in her fifties when she wrote her memoirs). While the gendered optics of Lotman's misreading are truly alarming, this passage can also alert us to the pitfalls of assuming that people thought exclusively through literary paradigms.

All things considered, how then should one translate *zhenshchina*? Given that in Russian this generic use of the singular sounds entirely neutral, should one gloss over its essentializing implications by adopting the current English-language norm of using the plural instead? Or, on the contrary, should one draw specific attention to the way Lotman's language embeds gendered assumptions, for example by using the archaizing "woman" without article, making him even more essentializing than he was (or at least sounded in Russian), at the risk of putting off the English-speaking readers we address with this translation? Or would the compromise position "a woman" both convey