

History as Communication in the Works of Tartu-Moscow School

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Abstract

The aim of this presentation will be to try and find a common ground between the cultural semiotics of the Tartu-Moscow school and the Western semiotic tradition which has greatly been influenced by Charles Peirce. I will concentrate on the works of Yuri Lotman and Boriss Uspensky, and try to bring out both the similarities and differences in their approaches. Lotman finds that human culture can be treated both as the sum of messages circulated by various addressers and as one message transmitted by the collective “I” if the humanity itself; from this point of view, culture can be viewed as a vast example of autocommunication, where information transferred in time from an earlier “I” to a later one leads to a restructuring of the “I” itself. For Uspensky, semiotic approach to history presupposes appealing to the point of view of the participants in the historical process: only those things are meaningful that are meaningful from their point of view. This approach, in turn, presupposes reconstructing the conceptual system that determines both the perception of certain events and the reaction to these events. This applies both to individuals and larger social groups, such as cultures. From the semiotic perspective, then, the historical process can be viewed as a process of communication where new information that is constantly created causes a certain reaction on the side of the receiver (the social group). Historical experience, in turn, influences the future turn of events: based on similar concepts and experiences, the society as a collective personality creates a program for the future and plans its future behavior. Every step in the movement of history changes both the present and the past, and with this also the future turn of events.

The topic of this paper is the relations of history and communication in the works of the Tartu-Moscow school of Semiotics. Due to time and space constraints, I will only concentrate here on the works of Yuri Lotman and Boriss Uspensky and try to bring out both the similarities and differences in their approaches to the semiotics of history. While history, especially the history of culture has been one of the recurring topics in the works of both of these semioticians, the works dedicated specifically to this topic have been relatively few. I am going to start with Uspensky's ideas on historical semiosis and historical communication, then move on to Lotman's concept of autocommunication in history.

Uspensky's and Lotman's semiotic theories of history have previously been discussed by Iliia Kalinin (2003). Kalinin finds that their approaches to the semiotics of history can be seen as two different descriptive strategies. Uspensky concentrates on the grammar of history, which is responsible for cultural identity, and dividing history into separate cultural codes and the description of their separate grammars, while Lotman's main concern is the rhetoric of history, which provides cultural change (Kalinin 2003: 507). According to Kalinin, we are facing a choice here — whether a grammar of history with an extremely reduced theoretical construction, or a rhetoric which «undermines the semiotic model of history as the positivistic scientific project» (Ibid). I would like to argue, however, that the semiotic theories of history we encounter in the works of Uspensky and Lotman are not so much theories of historical description, or theories of semiotics of history as a science of history, but theories of existence in history — or «our historical condition», if we use the words of Paul Ricoeur (in «Memory, History, Forgetting»), of which the historical science is but one facet. In this case, it seems to me, the question of choosing between these two becomes irrelevant; instead, they can be read as two approaches that do not oppose but complement each other. This is the way I will be attempting to read them — as semiotic theories of existence in history.

BORIS USPENSKY: HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE AND HISTORICAL SEMIOSIS

According to Uspensky, semiotic approach to history presupposes appealing to the point of view of the participants in the historical process: only those things are meaningful that are meaningful from their point of view. This approach, in turn, presupposes reconstructing the conceptual system that determines both the perception of certain events and the reaction to these events (Uspensky 2002: 11). This applies both to individuals and larger social groups, such as cultures. From the semiotic perspective, then, the historical process can be viewed as a process of communication where new information that is constantly created causes a certain reaction on the side of the receiver (the social group). From this point of view, the 'objective' meaning of the events is unimportant; what matters is how they are perceived or «read»; the interpretation of the text of events determines the future turn of events, as the «reader» of the text bases his reactions on his interpretation of the events (Ibid. 11-13). The «language» of the group is, on one hand, what unites the group and makes it possible to view it as a single collective personality; on the other hand, it organizes information, as the choice of meaningful facts and the relations between them are based on it: everything that can not be described in this «language» is as if not perceived at all by the receiver (Ibid. 13).

While this model, as Uspensky remarks, allows us to explain the unfolding of history (history as *res gestae*), it is unable to explain the perception of historical past (*historia rerum gestarum*; 2002: 14). A semiotic concept of history that would help explain this must be based on not only on semiotics of language but also on semiotics of the sign (Ibid. 9-10; 15)^[1].

Historical consciousness in the sense of perception of the historical past presupposes *semiosis*. For Uspensky, semiosis stands for a very specific process — the process of semiotization, the transformation of *non-signs* into a *signs* (Ibid. 10). He draws an analogy between history and dream: the same way as something that takes place right before you wake up — say, the banging of a door — can give a new turn, new meaning to the dream you were having, a historical event can change the way the «text» of history is «read».

The terms Uspensky has used here to speak of semiosis are somewhat misleading. The concept of semiosis as semiotization is far too narrow, excluding from the sphere of semiosis practically the whole sphere of signs. Semiosis does not stop once something has become a sign. Indeed, below we will see that Uspensky himself sees historical semiosis in much broader terms than this. So it seems that we can simply drop the definition of semiosis as the transformation of non-signs into signs and go with the broader notion of «action of signs» without «breaking» Uspensky's theory.

Historical semiosis, according to Uspensky, has two necessary conditions:

- 1) Introduction of the factor of time – Organized the events into a temporal sequence (without this, we would only have mythological time).
- 2) Introduction of the factor of causality – establishing causal relations between the events (if this condition is unfulfilled, we are left with pure chronology).

These conditions are what determine the historical value (*valeur*) of the observed phenomena (Uspensky 2002: 15): certain events are recognized as having historical value if and only if they meet the above conditions.

How does historical semiosis work? Historical experience is not something absolutely or objectively given. Events are perceived as far as they are related in the consciousness to a final result. If an event is given the status of a historical fact, that is, if it perceived as historically significant, this leads to perceiving prior events as related to each other. Past events are identified and interpreted from the point of view of the present — as far as a memory of them exists in the collective consciousness. At the same time, the past is organized as a text, read from the point of view of the present (Uspensky 2002: 18-19). Historical experience thus consists not of real meanings that have accumulated over time, but of causal relations that are viewed in a synchronic perspective (that is, one relevant for the present moment) (Ibid. 19)^[2].

Historical experience, in turn, influences the future turn of events: based on similar concepts and experiences, the society as a collective personality creates a program for the future

[1] It can also be argued that in the case of the first, we are dealing with semiotics as a method, in the case of the second – semiotics as a point of view.

[2] This is also, as Uspensky notes, why we cannot learn from history: «historical experience is nothing absolute and objectively given, it changes over time and is essentially derived from our present.» (Ibid. 19)

and plans its future behavior. Every step in the movement of history changes both the present and the past, and with this also the future turn of events.

Uspensky distinguishes between *historical* and *cosmological* perception of time. Cosmological concept of time presupposes that all events are related to an original state, which never fully disappears. Events taking place in this state act as a text that is constantly repeated in all later events (Uspensky 2002: 27). The historical concept organizes past events into a causal sequence. All events are seen to result from other, earlier events (Ibid. 26-27). These two different concepts also lead to two different perspectives on the future. From the cosmological point of view, present events are meaningful insofar as they are related to some past event; they are seen as *consequences* of an original state. If present events are related to future events at all, then not by causal relations, but relations of some other kind — most likely symbolic (Ibid. 28).

YURI LOTMAN: THE ROLE OF RANDOM FACTORS IN HISTORY

From Yuri Lotman's point of view, historical communication can be described as cultural auto-communication — the culture's communication with itself. In the case of autocommunication, or 'I-I' communication, information is transferred in time, from an earlier state of the system to a later one (Lotman 2001: 21). The bearer of the information remains the same, but the message is reformulated and acquires new meanings during the communication process, giving it the features of a *new* message; this leads to the qualitative transformation of the information, which in turn leads to a restructuring of the actual 'I' itself (Ibid. 22).

Lotman, like Uspensky, stresses the role of the «reader» in cultural evolution. As an example, the process of literary evolution can be described as the constant transformation of the extra-systemic into intra-systemic (or the peripheral into central, or the irrelevant into relevant). The reader or receiver is the one who «reads» a text in a way that subjects it to a new code, making the random relevant and vice-versa. This, however, does not explain how new forms are born in the process (Lotman 2002: 128). This is where random factors come into play. It is those random factors that give birth to new texts, new information. According to Lotman, random or irrelevant elements also act as a reserve for future reorganizations, making it possible to correlate the text to a future context (2002: 130). But the appearance of a «random» text can also completely change the whole semiotic situation.

In relation to future, random events act as the starting point of a chain of events; in relation to the past, it is retrospectively interpreted as providential or inevitable (2002: 133). «The choice which was open to chance *before* seems predetermined *afterwards*. A retrospective view intensifies determinancy and for the future course of history that choice will seem like the first link in a new law of history.» (2001: 233)

The transformation of a «random» event into a «predetermined» one can be interpreted as its transformation into a text. The transformation of an event into a text involves first subjecting it to a previously given structural organization. This organization, which only belongs to the expression level, inevitably becomes transferred to the level of content as well (Lotman 2001: 221-222). The «reader» of the event is the one who transforms it into a text, «translating» it

into his own «language», inevitably also giving it a new content. A historian (or anyone turning their gaze towards history, for that matter), then, has no direct access to the «event itself»:

The historian is condemned to deal with *texts*. The text stands between the event 'as it happened' and the historian [...] A text is always created by someone and for some purpose and events are presented in the text in an encoded form. The historian then has to act as decoder, and the fact is not a point of departure but the end-result of many labours. The historian creates facts by extracting non-textual reality from the text, and an event from a story about it (Lotman 2001: 217-218).

The creator of the text records the events that, from his point of view, seem significant and leaves out what he sees as insignificant. «From the point of view of the addresser, a fact is always the result of selecting out of the mass of surrounding events an event which *according to his or her ideas is significant.*» (Lotman 2001: 219) A fact selected by the addresser is always unambiguous for him, whereas for the addressee (including the historian), it has to be interpreted. The interpreter of the text must reconstruct the code(s) of its creator and correlate them to the codes of the researcher. A decoding of a text «is always a reconstruction [...] the researcher proceeds from the fact that the document is written in another language whose grammars has to be learnt.» (Ibid., 218)

CONCLUSIONS

Let us try and recap what we have just discussed. Although Lotman and Uspensky start from different positions, as we saw above, they reach quite similar results (relatively independently of each other, judging by their correspondence on this subject): they both model the way how, in historical communication, the information coming from the past influences the future and vice versa.

Lotman finds that human culture can be treated both as the sum of messages circulated by various addressers and as one message transmitted by the collective «I» if the humanity itself; from this point of view, culture can be viewed as a vast example of autocommunication, where information transferred in time from an earlier «I» to a later one leads to a restructuring of the «I» itself.

According to Uspensky, from the historical point of view, present events are evaluated from the point of view of the future as it is seen at the given moment: the events of the present are seen as causally related to probable future events, as *causes*, and are thus evaluated by their possible results (Ibid. 27). Future, however, «is not given to us and all in all, we cannot know the consequences of some events or others — we can only make guesses about those consequences. Our reactions, then, are determined by not objective but subjective factors...by our concepts of causal relations.» (Ibid. 27-28)

According to Lotman, the present includes all possible future paths of development. Their selection is not determined by laws of causality — in the moment of explosion, all such laws are switched off. The choice of future is influenced by random factors and realized as an accident.

While Lotman sees history as a process of autocommunication between the past and present of the culture, Uspensky, as we saw above, introduces a third factor into this process — namely, the future. From the semiotic perspective, then, the historical process can be viewed as a process of communication where new information that is constantly created causes a certain reaction on the side of the receiver (the social group). Historical experience, in turn, influences the future turn of events: based on similar concepts and experiences, the society as a collective personality creates a program for the future and plans its future behavior. Every step in the movement of history changes both the present and the past, and with this also the future turn of events. However, whereas in Uspensky's theory, what is changed is the «reality» as it is perceived by the subject of communication, whereas for Lotman, what is changed is the structure of the communicative 'I', the subject of communication.

While I would not place Lotman or Uspensky over the other, since their ideas should be seen as complementing, not contradicting each other, I still think that from a general semiotic point of view, Uspensky's theory of history as communication is, perhaps more valuable than Lotman's concept of random factors as the source of new information. Lotman's theory is more text-centered and oriented towards written texts, while Uspensky attempts to move away from the linguistic roots semiotics and model historical experience as a more general communicative phenomenon, which goes beyond the world of human language and for which human language is just one sign system it uses for communication.

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