On The Concept of Mythopoetic Thinking in the Semiotics of Tartu-Moscow School

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Abstract

The notion of myth has remarkable place in the analysis of culture of TM School. The present paper discusses mythopoetic modelling from the perspective of the cognitive, social and historical aspects, regarding culture and consciousness as isomorphic, both functioning as at least bilingual mechanism. The theorists of TM School have elaborated a semiotic theory of myth which is opposed to linear-logical thinking and historical modelling of the world, outlining typological and evolutionary aspects of this concept. According to the works of TM School, mythopoetic thinking refers to a specific type of memory, language and worldview. Typologically it represents the paradigmatic type of culture and consciousness as opposed to syntagmatic type. The concept is close to R. Jakobson's theoretical approaches. We can also draw parallels between this binary distinction and Roland Barthes` concepts of ideological and mythological sign production. These two different structures coexist in actual communication, enabling us to talk about different dominants that constitute differences in culture or mind. While different types of communication coexist typologically, from the evolutionary perspective they do not. Characterizing mythopoetic thinking both socio- and ontogenetically, the approach of TM School stresses on the diachronical shift of cultures and individuals from one type to another. For example, J.Lotman and B. Uspenski refer to child consciousness as typically mythological, which is gradually replaced (or complemented) by linear-logical type of thinking. V. Toporov describes the end of cosmological and beginning of historical-linear consciousness in the similar way. To our mind the concept of mythopoetical thinking appears to be an appropriate tool for a typology of cultures as well as for studying culture and child development. Theoretical model of the presented paper describes diachronical and synchronical differences of culture and thinking, giving regards to the theory of evolution as well as to the R.Barthes` concept of myth.

The notion of myth has a remarkable place in the analysis of culture of Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics. One may say that in the seventies the concept of myth was one of the central subjects of interest for Tartu-Moscow semiotics. Scientists as V.N. Toporov, A.M. Pjatigorski, B.A. Uspenski, E.M. Meletinski and Y.M. Lotman have approached the subject as a theoretical model as well as studying concrete mythologems and myths. They have elaborated a semiotic theory of myth which is opposed to linear-logical thinking and historical modelling of the world, outlining typological and evolutionary aspects of this concept.

The present paper discusses mythopoetic modelling from the perspective of cognitive, social and historical aspects, regarding culture and consciousness as isomorphic, both functioning as at least bilingual mechanism. At first we give a short overview of the concept of myth and mythological thinking according to various works of these authors. As the concept of myth has been elaborated mainly by binary opposition to historical consciousness and linear-logical thinking, these authors define myth constantly via the opposite pole, i.e. in contrast to what it is not. Next we describe the diachronical shift from mythological to historical consciousness. Finally, after outlining some shortcomings and problematic aspects of the theory, we try to suggest some possible further applications of Tartu-Moscow School's approach to myth. We sketch some parallels with Roland Barthes´ theoretical approach on myth and ideology as well as draw some similarities with the concept of metaphor versus metonymy by Roman Jakobson.

1. COGNITIVE ASPECTS

According to the works of Tartu-Moscow School, mythopoetic thinking refers to a specific type of memory, language and worldview. Historical and mythopoetic consciousness are compared by binary oppositions such as left/right hemisphere, linear-temporal versus iconic-spatial perception; metonymy versus metaphor; adult versus child or primitive and so on.

These oppositions can be seen in the table below:

Historical thinking	Mythological thinking
Linear-temporal	Iconic-spatial
Left hemisphere	Right hemisphere
Logical-empirical	Mythopoetic
Discrete	Nondiscrete, continual
Written culture, writing	Oral culture, speech
Prose	Poetry
Word, time, line	Picture, space, circle
Orientation towards the Past	Orientation towards the Future
Metonymy	Metaphor
Event, individual	Ritual, society
Adult, modern society	Child, traditional society

Cyclical-continual (right hemisphere) and linear-discrete (left hemisphere) types of texts[1] have been influencing each other throughout the cultural history. The reciprocal influence of these two should be considered as a specific trait of human consciousness. These two different structures coexist in actual communication, enabling us to talk about different dominants that constitute differences in culture or mind. These two modes of thinking do not succeed one another, but coexist, functioning as different dominants in certain periods. Still, it is useful to make a distinction between cultures which are oriented towards mythological thinking (e.g. medieval) and those towards non-mythological (e.g. Renaissance).

While different types of communication coexist typologically, from the evolutionary perspective they do not. Characterizing mythopoetic thinking both socio- and ontogenetically, the approach of Tartu-Moscow School stresses the diachronical shift of cultures and individuals from one type to another. For example, Lotman and Uspenski refer to child consciousness as completely mythological, which is gradually replaced (or complemented) by linear-logical type of thinking.

Vladimir Toporov (Toporov 1995) has pointed out the main characteristics of historical versus cosmological modelling in history, while studying some early historic texts. He points out the main differences as the following table shows:

Cosmological modelling	Historical modelling
Cyclical time	Linear time
Space – nomination, significance	Space - physical, homogeneous
Orientation towards the future and stability	Orientation towards the past and change,
Heterogeneity of space and time	irreversibility,
The ultimate meaning is on the act of creation, the centre of the world and the beginning of time	orientation on goals
	Res gestae
Sacrality manifests itself in everything significant, nothing else can exist in the framework of this model	Sacrality manifests itself in progressive time,
	evolution,
The principle of isomorphism in time cycles	progressing or regressing stages
	Isomorphism on space levels

Thus, the basic difference between cyclical time versus linear time lies in the progressive succession of time in case of historical worldview, while cosmological understanding of the world regards time as a continuous succession of isomorphic temporal cycles (seasons, birth-death-rebirth etc). We could say that sacrality manifests itself in progressive time for

[1] According to Tartu-Moscow School the concept «text» refers to any kind of cultural message.

historical consciousness, i.e. in evolution, progressing or regressing stages. Respectively, we could see some parallels between different religious and ideological systems' concept of time, e.g. Golden Age – regress - the Last Judgement; Paradise – regress - Hell/Paradise; Heroic time - the present - Übermensch; primitive society - progress - Communism. Space, on the other hand, is perceived as isomorphic in historical worldview.

Mythological worldview excludes anything accidental; whereas the historical, on the contrary, gives significance to profane and accidental instances. The occurrence of historical-linear type of thinking brought about the appearance of a new type of texts e.g. checklists, chronicles and genealogies. The element of chaos and accidental, while appearing in the descriptions, needs justification inside the system.

Another example of the mythological versus linear thinking comes from Uspenski and Lotman. Here the former functions as a metatext and the latter as a metalanguage in relation to the texts of culture. On the basis of dominants in the texts we can separate two types of texts:

1) discrete type of text – is deciphered by codes which use the mechanism of similarity/ dissimilarity;

2) nondiscrete, continual type of text – is deciphered by the mechanism of isomorphism and homeomorphism.

In the article «Myth-Name-Culture» by Lotman and Uspenski there is a distinction between child and adult consciousness, while the former is claimed to be a typical example of mythological consciousness.

«The world is a matter»	«The world is a horse»
Metalanguage	Metatext
Multilinguistical	Monological
Translation	Identification
Objects with characteristic traits, similar to each other	Singular objects without specific traits
Traits charcterise the whole	The part is identical to the whole
Sign is analogous to a pronoun	Sign is analoguous to proper name
Metalinguistic models	Myth is personal
The hierarchy of metalanguage	Mythogenic models
Distribution to differential traits	Hierarchies of objects and worlds
	Distribution into isomorphous constituents

Proceeding from this assumption, they propose that mythological layer is rooted in consciousness, making it to function heterogeneously. But Lotman and Uspenski stress that

the «pure», absolutely consistent model of mythological thinking can be documented neither in sociogenesis nor in ontogenesis, because:

    - both have very complex and heterogeneous structure;

    - consistently mythological stage belongs to a very early phase of development which cannot be observed directly. We could only reconstruct it. (Lotman & Uspenski 1999)

Nevertheless, Lotman and Uspenski still assume that mythological consciousness can become a direct object of observation if we investigate the consciousness of a small child.

Describing child consciousness as a typical mythological consciousness, they outline:

• the tendency to treat all worlds as proper names;

• equating knowledge with naming;

• specific perception of time and space (Lotman and Uspenski 1999: 196-197).

As well as in sociogenesis, this type of thinking in ontogenesis is gradually replaced (or rather complemented) by the linear-logical type of thinking. This happens mainly by achieving literacy, which basically means starting to use the so-called scientific concepts in thinking. Lev Vygotsky, Russian psychologist, whose ideas were of significance for Lotman and Uspenski, has given a detailed description of the gradual process of employing scientific concepts in his «Thought and Language» (1934). According to Vygotsky, words tend to function initially as proper names in child language (a word and its denotate are inseparable), then evolving gradually to thinking in complexes (a transitory and syncretic form of pre-concepts) and finally in scientific concepts (Vygotsky 1973).

This very early stage of «pure» mythological thinking is described as working in the principle of homonymy. Although using the metaphoric phrase like «The world is a horse», the utterer «truely believes» in it and doesn´t make any difference between source and target domains of the metaphor.

In sociogenesis, mythological consciouness dominated roughly in pre-literate period, but it was almost completely replaced by the rapid development of discrete verbal-logical thinking in written culture. This process is also observable in child development Although comparing child consciousness and «primitive» consciousness has been a commonplace assumption throughout the history, the ideas of Tartu-Moscow School can shed some new light to this understanding. Moreover, it could be successfully employed for investigating cognitive development, as it offers an alternative view of child development for contemporary psychology's still powerful Piagetian paradigm, which regards thinking in scientific concepts as the only adequate way of thinking.

2. MODEL OF CULTURE

One of the main components in modelling the world is a boundary between «us» and «them», the distinction of the world to «Cosmos» and «Chaos». Both mythological and linear-historical type of culture use universal binary distinction between cosmos and chaos. But in these two different models of culture we see two different types of «other». According to Tartu-Moscow

school, «each type of culture has its corresponding type of "chaos", which is by no means primary, uniform and always equal to itself, but which represents just as active a creation by man as does the sphere of cultural organization. Each historically given type of culture has its own type of non-culture, peculiar to it alone». (Ivanov et alia «Theses on the semiotic study of cultures» (1973) 1998:34)

Correspondingly, we can separate two typologically different types of culture-models — ideological antithetic model and mythological model of conditional similarity (Lepik 2008; Lotman 1999, Uspenski 1994) Antithetic culture models are expansive, their borders are heavily marked and absolute, emphasis relies on the historic/linear time (events) and on the center and borders of physical space. The other is an enemy and a threat, and physical borders need to be guarded and expanded. The physical space with its objects is actively involved in the ideological communication of culture and the space is a clear metaphor of historic succession of power. The soviet and other totalitarian regimes have antithetic models.

Cosmological model concentrates on space and conjunction, naming and translating the several layers of its own. Mythological space isn't connected with linear time-line. According to its intentional character of keeping and renewing the stability of cosmos, the world and environment, the cosmological model is spatial, but topology is connected to the relevance of spatial values, as to their sacred-profane axis, which actualizes from time-to-time the certain code. The cosmological model has one «other» or more of them, but it doesn´t focus on the other, but rather on translations; actually this «other» can be a part of the system of totality when manifested in certain periods in renewal of the world. Mythological texts, because of their topological and spatial laws, emphasize the structural laws of homeomorphism: equivalences are drawn between the dispositions. This results in an elementary semiotic situation, namely every message has to be interpreted, or translated, as it is transformed into the signs of another level. Since the microcosm is identified with the macrocosm, every narrative is perceived as something intimately relevant to each member of the audience (works of Tartu-Moscow school on mythological modellling: Uspenski 1994, Meletinsky 2000, Toporov 1995, Ivanov 1999, Lotman 1990, 2001).

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Cosmological model, on the other hand, concentrates on space and conjunction, naming and translating the several layers of its own. As to function of the model — stress was heavily on its mnemonic character — on memory of the landscape. Mythological space is not connected with linear time-line. According to Lotman, «The boundary is ambivalent and one of its sides is always turned outwards. Since the boundary is a necessary part of the semiosphere and there can be no «us» if there is no «them», culture creates not only its own type of internal organization but also its own type of external «disorganization» (Lotman 2001:141-142). Semiotic space, which does not exist, is as of the same importance that does exist — «the world-picture created in this way will be perceived by its contemporaries as reality. Indeed, it will be their

reality to the extent that they have accepted the laws of that semiotics. But the relationship
of this metalevel of semiosphere with the real picture of its semiotic `map` on the one hand,
and with the everyday reality of life on the other, will be complex. Tensions between center
and periphery, whole layers of cultural phenomena, which from the point of view of the given
metalanguage are marginal, will have no relation to the idealized portrait of that culture. They
will be declared to be non-existent (Lotman 2001:129).

Analogous principles as two different types of sign-production in culture are also emplo-
yed by other authors, e.g. Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes (Barthes 1970). We can draw
parallels between this binary distinction and Roland Barthes` concepts of ideological/ dis-
crete-logical and mythological sign production. As to the sign production in those two types
of models, there are some similarities with the models of Barthes on mythological versus
ideological sign relations. According to Barthes, in ideological sign relations, the choice of
context is already pre-established. Only a certain discourse is seen as true, others are inevita-
bly false. Mythological sign production on the other hand, where the shift takes place on the
plane of the signifier, enables choice in the discourses, and also choice in context. The result
is a difference of discourses.

This concept is close to R. Jakobson's theoretical approaches in the analysis of language.
Jakobson, describing metaphor, claims that it is based on similarity on positional (syntactic)
and semantic levels, whereas metonymy is based on contiguity on semantic level and similarity
on positional (syntactic) level (Jakobson 1956).

Barthes´ proposed that the same distinction is applicable to the cultures in general as well.
Jakobsons´ ideas of paradigmatic versus syntagmatic type of sign production appeal to cultures
as well. The authors of Tartu-Moscow School speak also about paradigmatic versus syntagmatic
types of culture (for example in Ivanov 1998). The former is a paradigm without time where
all the variables of life can be translated (or reduced) into one invariant, basically mythological
worldview. In syntagmatic type of culture the succession of events and their position towards
each other is significant, we can talk about historical worldview in this case.

3. IN CONCLUSION

There remains the question if there could be something called as pure mythological thinking.
Lotman and Uspenski also claim that mythological consciousness cannot be translated into
different level of description, thus it can be understood only from inside (Lotman and Uspenski
1999). Trying to solve this contradiction, they propose that the very heterogeneity of our thin-
king enables us to lean on our inner experience in this case. As they suggest, understanding
mythology means to bring our primeval experience back to memory. For us it seems to be more
likely the matter of absence of the abstract level as the only true discourse than the matter of
absence of abstract dimension in thinking at all.

To our mind the concept of mythopoetical thinking appears to be an appropriate tool
for a typology of cultures as well as for studying culture and child development. Lotman
and Uspenski emphasize the importance of nondiscrete or continual type of consciousness.
Historically, the understanding of isomorphism was formed exactly due to this type of conscio-

usness, creating presumptions for the emergence of scientific disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy.

Also, drawing parallels between mythological and child consciousness could offer an alternative approach to the dominating educational paradigms which are mainly focused on the development of children's scientific and logical skills. Some educationalists also stress the importance of this pre-scientific type of thinking, claiming that by investigating children's mind processes, we could possibly find out some intellectual functions in which children are typically above adults, e.g. the formation of new metaphors, the fruitful employment of fantasy and creativity in general (see e.g. Egan 1997).

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