

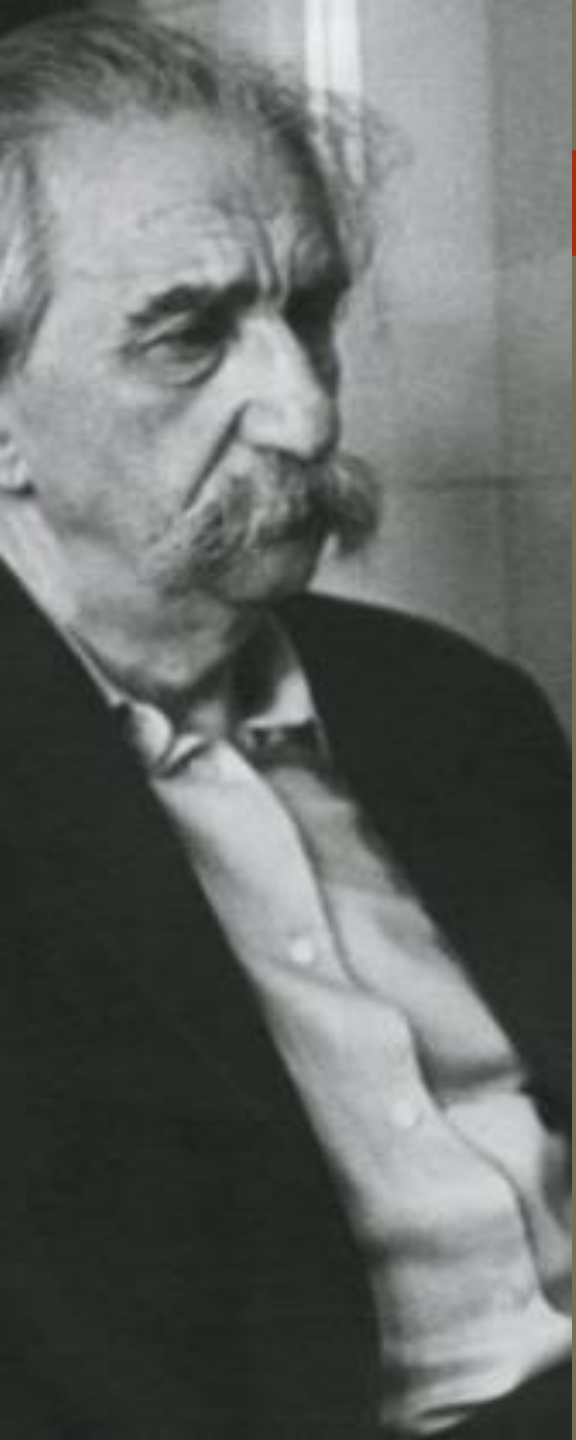


interlude: the semiotics
of culture



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

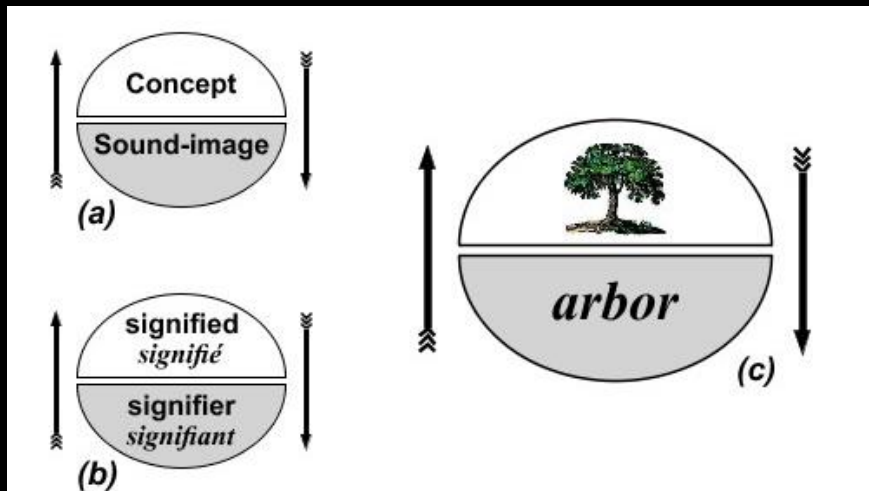
- ▶ When we describe culture ‘from outside’, we do not give primacy to culture as a system. Instead, we put both culture and non-culture as systems with specific features
- ▶ As we have defined both systems in opposition, we describe them as ‘mutually conditioned’ and ‘mutually necessary’
- ▶ Under this 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

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



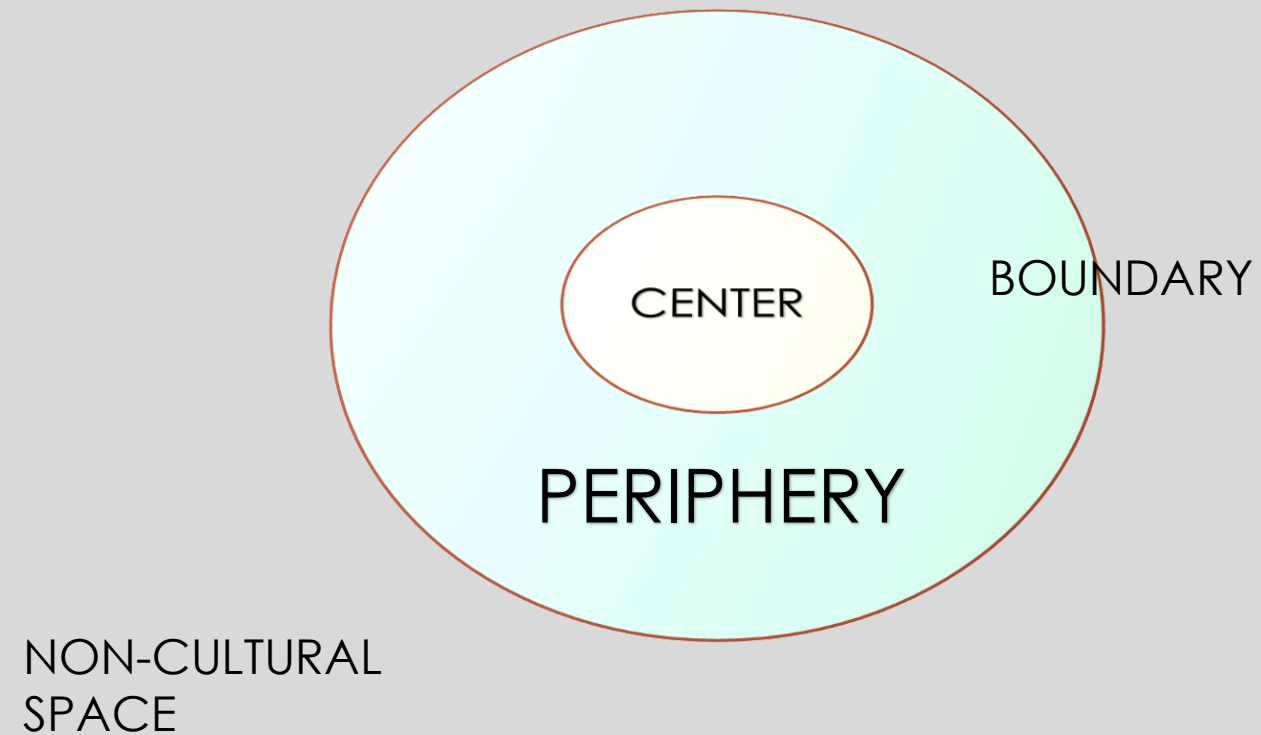
THE ORGANIZATION OF CULTURAL SPACE

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.