Book Review

In the footsteps of the semiotic school of Moscow-Tartu / Tartu-Moscow: Evaluations and perspectives

Ekaterina Velmezova (ed.), *L'école sémiotique de Moscou-Tartu / Tartu-Moscou: Histoire, épistémologie, actualité* (Revue Slavica Occitania 40). Toulouse: LLA-CRÉATIS, 2015.

Reviewed by **Laura Gherlone**, Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, Buenos Aires, Argentina, E-mail: laura.gherlone@gmail.com

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1 Introduction

The collection of essays proposed by Ekaterina Velmezova for *Slavica Occitania* bears a title that immediately reveals the corpus of the thematized issues: *The Semiotic School of Moscow-Tartu / Tartu-Moscow. History, Epistemology, Topicality*. It is, in fact, an attempt to offer a transversal “balance” of a phenomenon that, according to the historical, geographical-spatial and epistemological angles adopted or experienced by the observer, is referred to as either the Semiotic School of Moscow-Tartu or Tartu-Moscow – a nomenclature that is, in other words, intimately linked to the *position* taken by the initiator-witness, the disciple, the adherent, or simply by the researcher interested in studying the matter of Soviet semiotics.

This alternativity (still today frequently quoted and remembered by its direct participants, such as Tatiana Tsivyan during the Tartu Summer School of Semiotics 2011¹) is here regarded as an opportunity to take stock of the multiplicity of

1 During a summer school dedicated to “Semiotic Modelling” (Palmse 22–26, August 2011), Tatiana Tsivyan gave a *lectio magistralis* entitled “*Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture* as the Foundational Text of the Moscow-Tartu / Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School.” Tsivyan refers to a collection from the 1970s (Eng and Grygar 1973) in which for the first time the famous collective manifesto *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (as Applied to Slavic Texts)* was published. For a further reference see Salupere et al. (2013). On the occasion of the above mentioned summer school, there were two other conferences that contributed to the topic that is being addressed in this paper, namely, “Moscow-Tartu School: A Retrospective View” by Boris Uspensky and “The Influence of the Tartu Summer Schools’ Publications on the Preparation of Robots for Space Flights” by Boris Egorov.

perspectives and reflections on this scientific and human event of the Soviet era because, as Velmezova points out, if much has been written, not all has yet been said about the School.

Beginning with a historical view, which focuses precisely on the matter of its birth (Moscow or Tartu?), leadership and the end of the School, the book offers an overview on the present. The participation of authors from several countries (some of whom are young scholars) accompanies the contributions written by the direct witnesses, Boris Uspensky and Tatiana Nikolaeva (Ms. Nikolaeva passed away in the fall of 2015), and offers an unprecedented reflection that completes, interprets and further explores the previous fundamental publications, which are more linked to the “memory” (namely, the firsthand experiences of the participants), such as the Russian collection *The Moscow-Tartu Semiotic School* (Neklyudov 1998).² The result is surely the actualization of a scientific thought that, although it flourished back in the 1960s after the Khrushchev Thaw (and was an expression of those years), can bear fruit even today.

In fact, the book embraces a multitude of connections and resonances, ranging from the Russian literary tradition and its dialogue with the Slavic studies to the more recent and transdisciplinary outcomes of the Lotmanian semiotic approach, as shown by Winfried Nöth through the actualization of the semiosphere concept in light of the so-called *spatial turn* (p. 185), or Aleksei Semenenko who revisited the link between Soviet semiotics and neurophysiological studies. There is no doubt that in the last decade Lotman has been the subject of vast phenomena of dissemination that has extended his thought from the literary sciences to various disciplines: biosemiotics, political studies, anthropology and postcolonialism, communication and translation studies, aesthetics and philosophical studies on postmodernism, and media ecology.

With this review I would first like to take the opportunity to focus the reader’s attention on some issues that the book edited by Velmezova finally helps to clarify or frame in a fully and polyvocal manner; second, I will explore some aspects that emerge in the text about Yuri Lotman’s character.

This review is, finally, a space to pay homage to Vyacheslav Ivanov, one of the founding members of the School, who died on 7 October 2017.

² This collection offers some essays that are already published in the section “The Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School seen through the eyes of its participants” [*Tartusko-moskovskaya semioticheskaya shkola glazami eë uchastnikov*] from the book Yu. M. Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (Koshelev 1994). Most recent publications, which offer an overview of the School and its developments, include those by Kull et al. (2011) and Pilshchikov and Trunin (2016).

2 The when and the where of the School

Here is the first question: Moscow or Tartu? The formation of the group of scholars under the name of Moscow-Tartu or Tartu-Moscow School has its roots in two parallel historical moments. Between 1958 and 1962–1963, Yuri Lotman gave a course of lectures on structural poetics at the Tartu State University, where he elaborated the postulates and methodology of Western structuralism which had been present in the Soviet Union since 1947³ but were strongly opposed by the Communist Party. This series of lectures, as it is well-known, gave rise in 1964 to Lotman's first monograph, *Lectures on Structural Poetics*. In the collection edited by Velmezova, Igor Pilshchikov proposes Lotman's essay, "Structuralism in Literary Studies [Strukturalizm v literaturovedenii]," dated 1967–1968 but which remained unpublished until 2012, in which the author exposes the historical framework within which the studies made at Tartu were originated⁴:

In the West, Structuralism in literary studies has developed mainly in France, where its postulates are shared both by researchers who tend towards Marxism and by those who move away from it. Claude Levi-Strauss's works on the theory of mythology, folklore and culture constitute an indisputable success of general scientific value. In his works, Algirdas Greimas analyzes the problems of the meaning structure of poetic texts and artistic texts [*khu-dozhestvennyi tekst*]. Tzvetan Todorov conducts research on the structure of literary narratives and on the theory of novels; Christian Metz focuses on that of the cinema. (p. 145)

Therefore, if on one hand Lotman was working on structural poetics,⁵ Vyacheslav Ivanov, on the other, in 1956, in collaboration with colleagues of linguistics and mathematics, began a series of interdisciplinary collaborations and academic and institutional actions in order to give a scientific status and legitimacy to

3 In 1947, the linguist and philologist Nikolai Chemodanov published an article on "Structuralism and Soviet Linguistics," giving a detailed account of the structuralist current (Seyffert 1985: 80).

4 The quotation is taken from the second version of the essay, reworked by Lotman following criticisms received from some members of the editorial board of the Concise Literary Encyclopedia [*Kratkaya literaturnaya entsiklopediya*] for which the essay was written. The two versions are included in Pilshchikov's contribution and were published for the first time in the scientific journal *Russkaya Literatura*.

5 The typological-structuralist methodology soon led Lotman to review Russian cultural history through certain categories of textual analysis. This is the case of the typological opposition "honor and glory," on which Serge Zenkine reflects in his essay "Histoire des concepts et structuralisme (au sujet de deux textes de Youri Lotman)." He writes: "The special attention paid to moral categories corresponds in Lotman to a program of semiotic research on private daily behavior (in opposition to collective political action) that he meditated on from the beginning of the 1970s" (p. 269).

structuralism. The ultimate goal was to elaborate, through an *exact, interdisciplinary* and *objective method* – as Lévi-Strauss had already developed during those years in the anthropological field – an all-encompassing science of language: semiotics. It is no coincidence that Ivanov's references to Lévi-Strauss were continuous in his essays on Indo-European mythology written in the 1960s and 1970s together with Vladimir Toporov on the so-called *Teoriya osnovnogo mifa* ('Basic Myth theory').⁶ In addition, since 1961 Roman Jakobson's works in general linguistics had been available in the Soviet Union; after 1955, in fact, he began attending in various conferences held in the East-bloc countries (Seyffert 1985: 146–147), disseminating his theory of distinctive features and his vision of communication sciences as a whole. It goes without saying that the Muscovite linguist emphasized on several occasions the need for a transversal approach to the study of language.

This aspiration to holism, which is a prerogative of the paradigm of complexity of the twentieth century, as Velmezoza emphasizes, was already present in the linguistic current promoted by Marrism: a scientific current that fell in disgrace in 1950 after Stalin's denunciation⁷ and considered *bessmyslennyi* ('senseless') by the Muscovite linguists in many of its postulates but that, however, supported the idea of a *global* approach to the study of human phenomena as seen by ethnologists, culturologists, specialists in mythology, or literary critics, as Boris A. Uspensky (1994 [1981]: 267) points out in his 1981 essay "On the Subject of the Genesis of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School."⁸ Velmezoza writes in this regard:

⁶ In 1970, they wrote *Le mythe indo-européen du dieu de l'orage poursuivant le serpent: Reconstruction du schéma*, a tribute essay to Lévi-Strauss (Ivanov and Toporov 1970). For further exploration see Grishakova and Salupere (2015).

⁷ Through the essay *Marksizm i voprosy yazykoznaniya* ("Marxism and Problems of Linguistics") published by *Pravda* on June 20, July 4, and August 2 of 1950, Stalin intervened in the linguistic controversy between the Marrists and the historical comparativists, demolishing the first in three points, as Eddo Rigotti underlines (1972: 658): (1) the criticism of the Marr's vision of language as a superstructure, (2) the criticism of the classist interpretation according to the theory of stadialism and (3) the proposal of the new Stalinist concept of language (cf. also Seyffert 1985: 20–21).

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the figure of Uspensky, see Roger Comtet's contribution. In support of the idea of interpreting the School as an expression of the holistic orientation of Russian and Soviet science, Comtet (pp. 62–63) reports Trubetzkoy's words from the essay *La Phonologie Actuelle* (1933): "The time we are living in is characterized by the tendency of all scientific disciplines to replace atomism with structuralism and individualism with universalism (in the philosophical sense of these terms, of course). This tendency is observed in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics, and so on. The current phonology is not an isolated case."

In Russian philological science of the twentieth century, such an interpretation goes back, among others, to the holistic theories of the representatives of the Marrist current, some of whom had tried to gather in their theories the instances of a very large number of disciplines (including linguistics, literary analysis, geography and biology, ethno-linguistics and archeology, etc.). In 1950, these theories were severely criticized by Stalin, which resulted in the end of the official domination of Marrism in Soviet linguistics. Nevertheless, Marrism does not seem to have completely disappeared, especially in regard to its holistic component. (p. 21)

We can find a further exploration of this reflection in the invaluable interview of Ivanov by Velmezova and Kull (2011: 291) in August 2010, where it emphasized that the interdisciplinary approach of the Muscovite scholar (and, in general, of the researchers of that generation) was rooted in the “aspirations of many Soviet intellectuals in the 1920s–1930s (such as Olga Freidenberg, Lev Berg, Nikolai Marr, Pavel Florensky, Yakov Golosovker and many others), which were to create an ‘integral,’ a ‘holistic’ science that would have united separate fields of learning.” Also, Tatiana Kuzovkina (p. 158) sees, above all in Lotman’s reflections, the emergence of an organic, culturological vision of reality (especially in its artistic expressions), that is rooted in the past: “The scholars’ works of the Institute for the Comparative History of the Literatures and Languages of the West and East, directed by the academician Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr, and more particularly Olga Mikhailovna Freidenberg’s works, are considered precursors of the culturological research of the School of Tartu-Moscow.”⁹

Returning to the foundation of the School, we can affirm a certain chronological and “projective” precedence (of vision and institutional strategy) of the Muscovite branch with respect to the birth of Soviet semiotics, namely, of the *Moscow-Tartu School*. It was always Ivanov, together with Toporov, who inaugurated the Section of Structural Typology of Slavic Language within the Academy of Sciences – a conceptual but also organizational promotion – in 1960 and promoted the Symposium on the Structural Study of Sign Systems in December 1962: an institutional window after which the term “semiotics” suffered from censorship (or the “crushing” as it is defined by Nikolaeva [p. 35]) by the official cultural-ideological authority. It was again Ivanov (1978 [1962]) who wrote the anonymous foreword to the conference proceedings of the Symposium of 1962 (*Tesizy* [‘Thesis’]), namely, who proclaimed the vision in black and white, the manifesto of the new scientific stream.¹⁰

⁹ Kuzovkina refers to the ILlaZV [Nauchno-issledovatel'skogo Instituta sravnitel'noi istorii literatury i yazykov Zapada i Vostoka].

¹⁰ Peter Grzybek (1998a: 424) defines the Thesis as “a blueprint for Soviet semiotics in the decades to come.”

3 The question of the School's representativeness and leadership

In this framework, the cleverness and willpower of Lotman emerges. After having learned of the *Thesis* of the Symposium and of the criticism that the newly created semiotic science was suffering, he proposed Tartu (Estonia) as a more “protected” place for the development of ideas *in nuce* both in the *Thesis* as well as in his *Lectures on Structural Poetics*. Between 1963 and 1964, the idea of a symposium came to life, which subsequently was called summer school:¹¹ 10 days of common life in the Estonian village of Kääriku – strictly by invitation – to discuss issues related to “semiotic systems.”¹² In parallel, the idea of a new editorial project was also inaugurated: *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (‘Works on Sign Systems’), “the first semiotic journal in the world, the former herald of Tartu-Moscow structuralism, and the periodical of the new Tartu semiotics in the twenty-first century” (Pilshchikov 2014 [2012]).

As Lotman (1997: 648) suggested to Ivanov in a letter dated 3 May 1964, the journal had to present his monograph, *Lectures on Structural Poetics*¹³ in the first issue, and the proceedings of the summer symposium (19–29 August 1964) in the second. Furthermore, Lotman commented: “The composition of the editorial board of the *Works* is this: you [Ivanov], Boris Fedorovich Egorov (Leningrad), I [Lotman], Dr. Räätsen (Tartu, a linguist), Valt (Tartu, a philosopher, a brilliant person), and Kull (Tartu, a mathematician).”

As Jens Herlth underlined (p. 296) in his contribution, “‘Tartu,’ or rather ‘Kääriku,’ the sports center of the University, the place where the famous summer schools organized by Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman and his colleagues were held, became the ideal *topos* of this academic utopia”: namely, a space “which speaks of the possibility of a ‘pure’ science that is immune to the interference of the Soviet authorities” (p. 295).

¹¹ See Salupere’s article (2012) on the history of the Tartu Summer Schools. See also Andrei Faoustov’s contribution “Mythe, nom et systèmes modélisants secondaires.”

¹² Recalling Lotman’s letter to Ivanov of 31 January 1964, Salupere (2012: 303–304) underlines that the first name given to the summer meeting was “Summer School of Semiotics (Extra-linguistic Sign Systems)” but then, due to the exacerbation of the authority, it was re-baptized “Summer School on Secondary Modelling Systems.”

¹³ According to Lotman’s plans, the monograph had to be published before the Summer School. In the spring of 1964, the work was already completed and revised but the printing time was slower than expected and Lotman could only show the proofs to his colleagues at the August meeting (Egorov 1999: 126).

Here looms the second question: Did the School have a leading figure? Through the epistolary correspondence between Lotman and his Moscow colleagues, we can infer how clear his ideas were and how strongly motivated he was to promote and safeguard (if not drive) this group of scholars and the scientific expression that they were elaborating together. Not surprisingly, given the weight and incisiveness of his leadership and of the Estonian ferment on the constitution of the School, several scholars highlight the indispensable, *charismatic* personality of Lotman, whose organizational, relational and intellectual activity permitted *de facto* the existence of this “bridge” between Tartu and the capital of the Soviet Union. As Uspensky (1994 [1981]: 272) recalls in “On the Subject of the Genesis of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School,” Jakobson had described Lotman as a “remarkable, incomparable organizer,” a man with an iron hand – from his point of view, he prefers to talk about the great “personality” of Lotman. As observed by Grzybek (1998b: 376), the summer meetings especially “shaped the intellectual profile of the Moscow-Tartu School. In fact, the school as a whole owed its existence mainly to Lotman’s organizational activity in the early 1960s”¹⁴ – even if, as Velmezova points out echoing words of Tatiana Tsivyan (one of the first participants in the School), in terms of actual time the real days of the summer meetings amounted to less than a month of face-to-face communications.¹⁵

Another fundamental factor that shaped the appearance of the group and made it known outside the borders of the Soviet Union was the *Works on Sign Systems*, published in Tartu, which, as Grzybek writes (1998a: 424), “with twenty-five issues (1964–1992) contributed to the establishment of the Moscow-Tartu School’s international reputation, and many articles from it have been translated into many languages.” In addition, the journal was also the expression of Lotman’s pedagogical will to form a School (a school of thought, life and alternative scientific culture) or, as Peeter Torop (1995: 233) defines it, an “academy of dialogue.”

In this perspective, we could speak of the *Tartu-Moscow school* – if by *school* we mean a unitary reality that transcends the individual participants, but in which each participant contributes in a very personal way to it – that is based on the model of Socratic maieutics, where the ethical act and the educational act are one whole and where the leader is someone who knows how listen more than answer, and welcome more than to supervise. In 1988, during a series of educational

¹⁴ On the atmosphere of the summer schools and on the “inspiring presence” of Lotman, see again Salupere (2012).

¹⁵ In fact, if we add the total days of the four summer schools and, possibly, the All-Union Symposium on the Semiotics of the Humanities, we have 39 days: 10 days for the 1st Summer School (19–29 August 1964); 10 days for the 2nd Summer School (16–26 August 1966); 8 days for the 3rd Summer School (10–18 May 1968); 7 days for the 4th Summer School (17–24 August 1970); 4 days for the winter All-Union Symposium (8–12 February).

television lectures entitled *Relations Between People and the Development of Cultures* Lotman commented:

Nowadays a [new] human culture is being created, and we need to look for original forms of communication between people. We will call upon the forgotten antiquity, drawing inspiration from Plato's academy, the Peripatetic school, the philosophers, who held their students' hands and, while walking through the gardens, taught them. We will rediscover the culture of the conversation, the dialogical form of the pursuit of truth: in order words, the Socratic dialogue [Σωκρατικός λόγος]. (Lotman 2005 [1988]: 442)

This can happen precisely through cooperative truth-seeking, the integral union of life and thought and the pedagogical-formative vocation of practicing science. In this perspective, Lotman undoubtedly tried to be the *leader* of this school (or of this cenacle), where the *conditio sine qua non* was the adherence to behaviors inspired by moral purity and free and civic spirit (p. 298) in view of a revitalization of the Russian intelligentsia in Soviet time: "Because someone who respects himself is a free man. Being free, he wants freedom for other people" (Lotman 2005 [1986]: 413).

4 School or informal group?

We come to another point, that is, the question of whether the Moscow-Tartu "ensemble" really was a school. As it emerges in the collection of Velmezova, there is a certain reticence to consider it as such. Roman Mnich – in his contribution on the encyclopedic scientist Dmytro Chyzhevsky as a "fairly attentive reader of Lotman's literary studies" (p. 293) – underlines that the only common denominator between every participant in the summer schools of semiotics was the notion of text (p. 279): a notion that actually covered several meanings, epistemological approaches and fields of research. Uspensky writes in this regard:

The representatives of the Moscow-Tartu School never declared that they were part of a united current, brought together by a scientific platform or joint research program. In addition, they constantly sought to expand their fields of interest, find new issues, develop original research methods. This current began, so to speak, spontaneously, more thanks to the regular meetings of the participants in the School than to the special efforts of each individual. Due to a series of circumstances, such meetings ended in the late eighties and early nineties; therefore, the "union" of the representatives of the School ceased. Since then it has been difficult to speak of the Moscow-Tartu School as a real current of research. Today, after so many years, the participants of these meetings can look back (in a "defamiliarized" way [*ostranemo*], in the words of Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky and some other representatives of Russian formalism)¹⁶, and determine, *post factum*, which were the fundamental principles of this current. (p. 30)

¹⁶ Uspensky uses the term *ostranënno* in order to express the distant, aloof, estranged manner of perceiving the past.

Nikolaeva comments in an even sharper way:

In my opinion, there has never been any School of Tartu-Moscow, nor of Moscow-Tartu. After the “crushing” of semiotics provoked by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, namely, after the 1962 Symposium, Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman invited the Muscovite scholars to Kääriku to participate in a joint symposium (if you want, you can call it “school”) . . . Imagine the situation where five or six Muscovite researchers take part in a big conference in Penza, then you will not talk about a “Moscow-Penza School”! Here it was the same. (p. 35)

However, it cannot be denied that many of the publications of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (as Applied to Slavic Texts)*, had a scientific vocation in common.

Using the plural form “we” in the essay *University, Science, Culture*, Lotman himself points out (2016 [1982]: 685) that this *nauchnoe napravlenie* (‘scientific orientation’), namely, the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, was established with a shared intention of bringing mathematics and the humanities together in an interdisciplinary way – an objective that was present both in Tartu’s studies and those of Moscow and Petrograd/Leningrad.¹⁷ If Uspensky speaks of the absence of a programmatic and jointly scientific platform, Lotman instead captures this research area through the eyes of a collective subject: the Tartu’s “we.” In fact, still in the aforementioned essay, he makes it clear that this “we” must be perceived as a *school*. This was the result of a special juncture, namely, the historical background that distinguished the Estonian cultural reality, consisting in the high spirit of scientific tolerance and openness to cultural developments with a pan-European dimension – a background, Lotman highlights, from which a genuine academy was established with a specified, shared research program that then turned out to be too simplistic in the face of the complexity of its subject of study: culture.

This perspective is also confirmed by those who worked closely with Lotman. In “The Tartu School as a School,” Peeter Torop places the emphasis above all on the pedagogical vocation of the Tartu branch, which is less present, or present in a different form, in the muscovite branch. It is a vocation that, together with the yearning to create a community of life and thought (like Plato’s academy),¹⁸ is the reason why Lotman felt deeply that he wanted to be part of a unique atmosphere and historical experience. In his writing “The home in Bulgakov’s ‘The Master and

¹⁷ See Jan Levtschenko and Serguei Tchougounnikov’s contribution. The authors retrace the relations between the Russian formalism of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language and the structuralist current in the Soviet Union.

¹⁸ To speak of the Tartu school as an academy, Torop underlines (1995: 233), means to speak of “its spatial and psychological remoteness from officiality and formality, communication in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and even domesticity, and the recognition only of a professional or moral superiority.”

Margarita’,” Lotman (1990: 190) inevitably calls to mind the Master when, at the end of his extraordinary journey, he “is rewarded with a world of *tender domesticity*, of *life steeped in culture* which is the fruit of the labours of past generations; he is rewarded by an *atmosphere of love*, a world without cruelty.” Natalia Avtonomova¹⁹ writes in this regard:

Lotman himself had warned against any meaningless settling of accounts about who or what would be preserved in history, insisting wisely on the *unity* of the School and on his own *unity with* the School. According to him, it did not make any sense to analyze who did more than whom afterwards. Instead, emphasis should be placed on “the potential created by the joint efforts.” That potential, Lotman said shortly before his death, *had not been exhausted yet*. He himself, in this community of friends and colleagues, never wondered, or distinguished who had found out what. He never divided the intellectual property. This is why . . . many important theses developed by Lotman (especially those written during his last years of life) are presented in his publications in terms of the School’s thesis. Lotman almost never used the words “I” or “me.” At that time, they were not allowed in the scientific language, but there was another reason for this omission. The Lotmanian “we” not only fulfilled the requirements of Soviet political correctness or otherwise, but it represented a special relationship towards the others, where everyone is considered both as “disciple and master” of all others. (p. 326, emphasis mine)

Certainly, the weight of Lotman as a founder was very great in the self-perception of the School. In Torop’s interview “On the Destiny of the ‘Tartu School’” (2005 [1992]) given by Lotman the year before his death, the crisis of a whole generation raised in the shadow of the masters and the concern for the potential loss of its charismatic leader is evident. As we have seen, in fact, Uspensky (p. 30) stresses, “Due to a series of circumstances, such meetings ended in the late eighties and early nineties; therefore, the “union” of the representatives of the School ceased. Since then it has been difficult to speak of the Moscow-Tartu School as a real current of research.” The late eighties and early nineties coincide, among other things, with Lotman’s illness, followed by his death in 1993. However, we have also seen, agreeing with him, that the School’s creative potentiality had not been exhausted yet.

Summing up, it could be said that, especially in the eyes of the Muscovite participant, the “union” of Moscow-Tartu was more an instance of researchers, professors and students who met periodically though relatively few kept in touch or wrote joint works, so, basically, they were not united by the “structurality” or formality to be able to call it a school. It could ultimately speak of the Moscow Semiotic Circle [*krug*], as defined by Nikolaeva (1997) in the anthology dedicated to the participants of the Moscow branch.

¹⁹ See also Avtonomova (2009).

In the essay “On the Subject of the Genesis of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School,” Uspensky stresses that *from the outside* people saw in this academic “union” a unity that the members themselves did not necessarily presume to have. This group was self-perceived rather as a research area whose common purpose was the transformative action of science within the Soviet culture. Uspensky, again, emphasizes that it was not a union of people, but rather the union of two cultural traditions, or two different orientations of thought. Moreover, according to many, the same denominator under which the name of the school went, namely, the adjective “semiotic” – in principle, its distinctive feature – did not really correspond to the field of the school’s research, whose interest in semiotics was minimal. Again Uspensky comments:

However paradoxical it may seem, the semiotic school of Moscow-Tartu was interested in semiotics (as an independent scientific discipline) only to a lesser extent. For the representatives of this school, semiotics was a *key* that determined their approach to the most heterogeneous phenomena of human culture that made important analogies between them visible rather than focusing on a particular branch of knowledge with its set of axioms and methodology. (p. 30)

It was a real field of antinomic forces, a “school of paradoxes,” as Velmezova states. Besides, Lotman never tired of repeating that the plurality of perspectives, continuous evolution²⁰ and the antinomies with which reality is imbued are the real sources of life for culture. Opposite and co-existing truths save the world from the single thought and from irrevocable correctness. During the interview between Lotman and Kalevi Kull, the former stated:

It happened to a Greek philosopher who was not from Athens. He arrived in Athens and there at the market a vendor told him: “You are a foreigner.” Of course, he was Greek, but not from Athens. He said: “How do you know?” “Because your Greek is *too correct*,” he replied. You see, so *too correct* is a clue that reveals the alien, while what is ours [*svoi*] is reserved for permissible deviances [*nepravil’nosti*], admissible variants, uniqueness, and so – you know – this freedom of the system, its irregularity [*nepravil’nost’*], ensures its survival, its possibility for evolution [*evolyutsionnost’*] and, in general, all these things make it live. You see, life is incorrect by nature, but it is incorrect because it is profoundly correct. If it were only incorrect, it would be death. (p. 176)

20 See Semenenko’s contribution (p. 117) in which he underlines how Lotman, after having explored the neurologic metaphors for the comprehension of the cultural dynamics, evolved toward the semiosphere, thus abandoning his interest in the “anatomic” analogy: “Lotman’s semiotics tells us that, in order to understand our way of thinking, it is not necessary to deeply explore the interior of the brain or to attempt to find answers in its microstructure. On the contrary, according to Lotmanian semiotics, we must look outwards, at the semiotic space that surrounds us and represents our conscious experience.”

So, all things considered, the Semiotic School of Moscow-Tartu / Tartu-Moscow was the expression of this profound wealth of experiences, views, and truths and of the exuberance of a polyphonic scientific thought – a thought capable of building *a world without cruelty*.

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