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Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Lotman: Towards a theory of communication in the horizon of *the other*

Abstract: Shortly before his death, Yuri Lotman (1922–1993), by now blind, dictated some considerations on the concept of 'alien,' 'stranger' (chuzhdoe): a concept that de facto weaves all of his thirty-year reflections on the relationship between language, meaning, and culture and that, until the end, appears as the mark of a speculative orientation focused on the ethics of otherness. A profound influence on Lotman's thinking in this direction was exercised by two leading figures of the Russian intellectual tradition: the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and the philosopher, critic, and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). It is no wonder the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School dedicated to them volumes IV (1969) and VI (1973), respectively, of the Trudy po znakovym sistemam, the review on sign systems launched in 1964 by the Department of Russian Literature of the University of Tartu. The horizon of otherness, and the consequent emphasis on the relational nature of man, fill in fact as much of Vygotsky's theoretical reflection on the human mind as does Bakhtin's on literary creation (slovesnost'). This article intends to explore the concept of "dialog" as thematized in Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's studies, theoretical roots of the Lotmanian idea of communication as a dialogical semiotic act.

Keywords: Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Lotman, language, communication, dialogicity

1 Introduction

Lotman's attention to the idea of an "*others*' world" (*chuzhoi mir*)[1] as a cultural problem became very intense beginning in the second half of the 1980s, when he framed Vygotsky's studies on the historical-cultural dimension of the mental processes of socialization and Bakhtin's studies on the aesthetic-existential

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1 Cf. Lotman (1992–1993).

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opening of man as a dialogic-communicative subject in an eminently "cultur-ological" vision.

Lotman started to think about the text – until then considered in its purely formal aspect, according to a structuralist vision and methodology – just like a thinking system, or an organism that accumulates memory (diachronic function), informs (synchronic function), models reality (analogical-representative function), produces thought (creative function),[2] and gives shape to a fundamental connectivity, namely, the intertextuality (relational function).

The text started to be seen as a sort of revelatory device-model of culture, considered as a collective intellect [*kollektivnyi intellekt*], a thinking organization in constant (internal and external)[3] communication, inexhaustibly repositioning itself between the *own* world and the *others*' world.

2 Vygotsky and inner speech

Studies on the human mind were a priority for Moscow during the 1920s when, after the Soviet Union came to power, the necessity of shaping a "new man" (*novyi chelovek*) and build a pedagogical-educational system able to train the future socialist generations became one of its main concerns.

Marxist-Leninist neurophysiology and psychology were particularly supported by the government, although then – with the stiffening of Stalinist planning – they were reduced to a techno-empirical apparatus, strongly focused on short-term results. The understanding of the brain mechanisms became, in other words, the gateway to the creation of the man-worker: an efficient and standardized subject, indoctrinated to the "labor method" (*trudovoi metod*).

Vygotsky grew in the cultural environment of the first generation of psychologists (1923–1924), when there still was a relative plurality of heuristic perspectives and a modest circulation of the Western scientific production. These years were in fact characterized by the critiques and argumentations

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2 Already in an essay from the 1960s, *Tezisy k probleme "Iskusstvo v ryadu modeliruyushchikh system"* (2002 [1967]), Lotman pointed out that the artwork looks primarily like a living being since, on one hand, it is always identical to itself while, on the other hand, it indefinitely amplifies the information held in itself, increasing its semantic content over time through the intertextual dynamics, just as a body that maintains its identity while growing.

This vision is also implied in Bakhtin (1986 [1959–1961]: 105) for whom the text is a living body, a sort of "monad that in itself reflects all texts... of a given sphere," giving life to a creative textual dynamics.

3 In accordance with the Vygotskian inner speech and the Bakhtinian dialogue.

about behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and Gestalt psychology. He wrote most of his works between 1924 and 1934 (the year of his death), then was "forgotten" until 1956, when the so-called *post-Stalin thaw* started; in 1956 the collection of writings, *Izbrannye psikhologicheskie issledovaniya*, saw the light with the fundamental work, *Thought and Language* (*Myshlenie i rech'*, dating back to 1934).

Vygotsky's theoretical vision, oriented toward the historical-dialectical method, promoted the idea of human behavior and consciousness as phenomena subject to the determination of historical and social conditions of life. Taking a position (Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 49) against the "view of social and biological factors as alien to each other" by virtue of which the second ones are the real causes of intellectual development, he introduced the hypothesis that natural mechanisms of mental processes go through a non-biological transformation: this is the necessary result of the acquisition of human culture throughout all generations thanks to the process of communication among people.

The Byelorussian psychologist focused his studies on the relationship between genetic factors and environmental factors in the process of the development of the human psyche, namely on the relationship between the biological imprint and the socio-cultural influences deposited in man – a theme highlighted strongly by Lotman, who saw culture as a qualitative discontinuity in respect to nature, resulting from the historical-hereditary communication between collective intellect and individual intellect.[4] Language has a particularly important role as a socializing bridge between the *I* of the child and the people around him ("genetic" bearers of the cultural substratum):Vygotsky advanced the idea of an *I* who, through the word (*slovo*), is originally conceived as *for others*, according to a uni-total vision of the relationship *I-others*.

This way of thinking about the language and, more generally, the inter/intrahuman communication belongs to the early twentieth century Russian culture's *Weltanschauung*,[5] inclined to an integral, relational and non-dividing vision of reality, a vision that crosses over the boundaries to unite, in search of what Bakhtin (1990 [1924]: 261) called the "unified human culture": the place of the sociality which always passes through communication. This vision marks a

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4 Culture – Lotman specifies in 1967 in *Some Results and Problems of Application of Exact Methods in the Soviet Literary Criticism* (originally written and published in Italian) – is the complex whole of humanity's experience in terms of information which is not transmitted genetically but by the entire historically formed system of codes.

5 This world view is called "cosmism," namely a philosophical vision contemplating the earth as an integrated space, a relational whole that aspires to "come back" to the original unity with the universe (*cosmos*), where boundaries are a *means* (not an obstacle) according to the process of integration.

breaking point between the Western and Russian cultures. As in fact stressed by A. Mandelker (1994: 385–396), in such a European perspective (Lacan, Freud, Piaget) the language (namely, the place of socialization and recognition of the other) is a source of anxiety, nostalgia, and eternal failure due to an otherness viewed as a *prison*. In the Russian vision (Vygotsky, Voloshinov, Bakhtin) it is instead a familiar, friendly place, because the individual is accounted as social from birth and it is such thanks to the language: I and the others are an *I-others* incarnated immediately in the pre-verbal and pre-intellectual disposition of the child. Vygotsky writes:

> The primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact. The earliest speech of the child is therefore essentially social. At first it is global and multifunctional; later its functions become differentiated. At a certain age the social speech of the child is quite sharply divided into egocentric and communicative speech. (We prefer to use the term *communicative* for the form of speech that Piaget calls *socialized*, as though it had been something else before becoming social. From our point of view, the two forms, communicative and egocentric, are both social, though their functions differ.) Egocentric speech emerges when the child transfers social, collaborative forms of behavior to the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions. (Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 36–37)

So the first (egocentric speech) is what gradually allows the child to become an individual aware of himself through increasing silent reflection; instead the second (communicative speech) is what allows him to relate with others and the surrounding environment.

In a third stage, childhood thought and language evolve towards *inner speech* (*vnutrennyaya rech'*), which is not simply the manifest language minus sound (or vocalization) but the development of the egocentric thought toward its definitive reflective, logical and rational form.[6] Again Vygotsky (2012 [1934]:

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6 Vygotsky specifies:

> behind the symptoms of dissolution [of the vocal aspect of speech] lies a progressive development, the birth of a new speech form. The decreasing vocalization of egocentric speech denotes a developing abstraction from sound, the child's new faculty to "think words" instead of pronouncing them. This is the positive meaning of the sinking coefficient of egocentric speech. The downward curve indicates development toward inner speech. (Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 244)

According to Vygotsky, inner speech makes use of the semantic aspect of language and tends to abbreviate, omit or transform the syntax. The semiotic "nebula" that dominates this form of thinking allows the subject to abstract, reflect, refine his adaptation to the environment, mentally organize speech, and increase the semantic richness of his view of the world.

241): "egocentric speech is a phenomenon of the transition from interpsychic to intrapsychic functioning, i.e., from the social, collective activity of the child to his more individualized activity – a pattern of development common to all the higher psychological functions. Speech for oneself originates through differentiation from speech for others."

The statement from which Vygotsky started is linked to Piaget's and his studies on childhood thinking,[7] even if the latter ends up being "upside down." In fact – Vygotsky writes (2012 [1934]: 241) – according to the Swiss psychologist and pedagogue, egocentric thought "is a compromise between the primary autism of [the child's] thinking and its gradual socialization"; thus it is the very first verbal manifestation of the child who, after the autistic (or strictly individual),[8] nonverbal phase, uses the language originally "for himself" (in monologue form) and, only after strong social pressures, begins to use it to relate with the others: Piaget calls this result "socialized speech" – a concept that, as we have now seen, was criticized by Vygotsky because it implies that speech is originally non-social.[9]

For Vygotsky, on the contrary, the egocentric language comes *after* the social one and it is what allows the child to become, as Bakhtin would say (1990 [1920–1923]: 5), a "unitary and unique whole," able to stand in front of others with his own self-consciousness.

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7 *Le Langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* (1923) and *Le jugement et le raisonnement chez l'enfant* (1924) were published in Russian in 1932 (*Rekh' i myshlenie rebenka* 1923, *Suzhdenie i rassuzhdenie rebenka* 1924) and introduced by Vygotsky's foreword.

8 Vygotsky quotes Piaget:

> Autistic thought is subconscious, which means that the aims it pursues and the problems it tries to solve are not present in consciousness; it is not adapted to reality, but creates for itself a dream world of imagination; it tends, not to establish truths, but to satisfy desires, and it remains strictly individual and incommunicable as such by means of language. On the contrary, it works chiefly by images, and in order to express itself, has recourse to indirect methods, evoking by means of symbols and myths the feeling by which it is led. (Piaget in Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 17)

9 Piaget's theory, Vygotsky writes, is based on the idea of a breakdown between the biological and social factors:

> Biological factors appear as primeval, original forces composing the psychological substance of the child's mind. Social factors act as an external, "alien" force, which, using coercion, replaces the original biological modes of mental life ... Piaget does not see a child as a part of the social whole. Social factors are shown as an external force that enters the child's mind and dislodges the forms of thinking inherent in the child's intelligence. (Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 46–47)

While in the first perspective intellectual development originates from the individual, in the second one it stems from the social.[10]

In Vygosky's vision, dialogue and individualization are, in short, the cause and effect of communication, which distinguishes the higher mental functions of man. This vision is what allowed Lotman to review the semiotic mechanism of culture, transposing on it the Vygotskian idea that the *integral ego* – or the *esthetically consummated consciousness*[11] in Bakhtin's words – takes form placing itself on the outside and, in the light of the *other people's gazes*, becomes an individual.[12] With the term "I-I communication system," Lotman (1992 [1973]) intends to advance the idea that culture, like man, "works" well when it achieves the *inner language* (or I-I), the acquisition of which is the result of an intrinsically relational and not a self-referential consciousness. Acknowledging the relationship-individualization dynamics, cultural identity learns to stand up not by virtue of an opposition to the space outside of itself[13] but because of a dialoguing action. This achievement is expressed in the inner language, which indeed presupposes an antinomically plural and never self-sufficient

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10 Vygotsky sums up (2012 [1934]: 36): "The development of thought is, to Piaget, a story of the gradual socialization of deeply intimate, personal, autistic mental states. Even social speech is represented as following, not preceding, egocentric speech."

11 In the aesthetic activity (Bakhtin 1990 [1920–1923]: 15), this consciousness is embodied by "The author's position of being situated outside the hero", namely, by an *I* able to be outside the *other*, though maintaining a position of relationship.

12 This process is well-described by Bakhtin:

As soon as a human being begins to experience himself from within, he at once meets with acts of recognition and love that come to him from outside – from his mother, from others who are close to him. The child receives all initial determinations of himself and of his body from his mother's lips and from the lips of those who are close to him. It is from their lips, in the emotional-volitional tones of their love, that the child hears and begins to acknowledge his own *proper name* and the names of all the features pertaining to his body and to his inner states and experiences. The words of a loving human being are the first and the most authoritative words about him; they are the words that for the first time determine his personality *from outside*, the words that *come to meet* his indistinct inner sensation of himself, giving it a form and a name in which, for the first time, he finds himself and becomes aware of himself as a *something*. Words of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct, satisfy, and connect it with the outside world – as with a response that is interested in me and in my needs. And as a result, they give plastic form, as it were, to his boundless "darkly stirring chaos" of needs and dissatisfactions, wherein the future dyad of the child's personality and the outside world confronting it is still submerged and dissolved. (Bakhtin 1990 [1920–1923]: 49–50)

13 Space that results in the creation of the "non-culture" (disorder, chaos, incivility, etc.) or "non-cultural subject" (the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the outcast, the devil, the Cossack, etc.).

consciousness, the result of the forming activity that comes from the outside. The inner unity so acquired allows the culture to organize a highly effective self-communication that, in the same way as Vygotsky's inner speech, is aimed at the qualitative transformation of the information (1992 [1973]: 77)[14] and at the *unlimited* enrichment of semantics: that is de facto the real life of culture.[15]

3 Bakhtin and dialogism

Even Bakhtin, with his consideration of the relationship among culture, texts, and signification, was bound to attract Lotman's attention. The latter rediscovered him in 1963, the year in which the work *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*[16] was republished after 34 years of silence; this was followed in 1965 by *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaya kul'tura Srednevekov'ya i Renessansa*,[17] in 1975 by *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*[18] (where we find the fundamental essay dated 1937–1938 *Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romane*[19]), and in 1979 by *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*,[20] containing two writings of great suggestion on the Lotmanian thought: *Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deyatel'nosti*,[21] dating back to the Vitebsk period 1920–1924, and *Problema rechevykh zhanrov*[22] (1952–1953).

Between 1977 and 1979 Lotman probably read *Le marxisme et la philosophie du langage* in French, revived in Russian only in 1993.[23]

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14 Cf. also *Autocommunication: "I" and "Other" as addresses* (Lotman 1990: 22).

15 In autocommunication addresser ("I") and addressee ("other") end up by coinciding. Autocommunication so requires a transformation of information, without which otherwise it becomes a monologic speech; it therefore takes the form of an inner speech, a *logos*, which self-enriches inexhaustibly. It is no wonder that Lotman uses the metaphor of Heraclitus's logos that grows on itself to synthesize the dynamics of cultural life.

16 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Work*. Work expanded in 1963 and retitled *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* [*Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*].

17 *The Art of Francois Rabelais and the Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.*

18 *Problems of Literature and Aesthetics.*

19 *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.*

20 *Aesthetics of Verbal Creative Work.*

21 *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* (the title was awarded by the publisher of the first Russian edition, S. G. Bocharov, the one originally assigned by Bakhtin having been lost).

22 *The Problem of Speech Genres.*

23 This is apparent from the fact that Lotman speaks of this work (without references) in the essay *The text in the Text* (*Tekst v tekste* 1981), some twelve years before the Russian edition.

A first version was published in 1929 (probably) with Voloshinov's authorship (*Marksizm i filosofiya yazyka*).

Here, I will neither deal with the thorny issue concerning the authorship of Bakhtin's thought, divided between V. N. Voloshinov and P. N. Medvedev nor the deep analysis of his intellectual legacy. Rather I will try to outline the conceptual universe that attracted and influenced Lotman so deeply, pushing him toward the concept of the *other* as a plenitude of meaning: a concept that Lotman thematizes from the culturological point of view.

A first aspect of this universe was highlighted by M. Holquist, according to whom the Bakhtinian conception of literature as a (organic and non-structural) system proves to be such only if it is considered as an activity that continues endlessly, not as a discontinuous series of passive and isolated texts, but as a living tissue of inextricably imbricated utterances that sink their roots into in the most remote past and maintain steady ties with the most faraway future. Strongly fascinated by the concept of *biosphere*, conceived thanks to the Russian-Ukrainian bio-geochemical Vladimir I. Vernadsky, Bakhtin saw literature as a spatio-temporal organism (or chronotopic *logosphere*), within which a continuous exchange of speech acts (or live concrete utterances) occurs (Bakhtin 1986 [1952–1953]: 87); these are in a permanent condition of contact with the logosphere's boundaries (*granitsy*), which are devices of communication and, at the same time, of individualization.

Vernadsky had worked for a long time on these dual functions of boundaries during his studies on the mechanisms of chemical and molecular interpenetration among the various spheres of the planet – a fundamental issue for understanding the migration of atoms taking place at the levels of the cosmic environment, the biosphere and the earth's (living and inert) components. In his scientific vision the boundary has many meanings, which we can essentially attribute to the following duality: boundary as a line of demarcation that marks the unity and autonomy of each domain (of nature, of knowledge, etc.) and boundary as a filter through which the communication and exchange between different domains can happen.

It was just the recognition of this dual and complementary function of the boundary that allowed him to *cross over* and relate to the several natural phenomena of the biosphere, discovering their intimate connection.

The scientific but more broadly philosophical-speculative importance of this "porous" vision of reality was such that, significantly, even before Lotman, two thinkers of huge caliber were inspired by it: we are talking about Pavel A. Florensky (1882–1937) and, as we have seen, Bakhtin. The first – a philosopher, mathematician, and Orthodox theologian, twenty years younger than Vernadsky, was a direct interlocutor of the Russian-Ukrainian scientist, to whom he proposed the concept of *pneumatosphere* (the space-time of spirit), in response to that of the *noosphere* (the space-time of intellect, which, over

time, penetrates, assimilates, and "cephalizes"[24] the universe of nature, namely, the biosphere).

The second was as careful a receiver of much of Vernadsky's thought, manifested in the Bakhtinian concept of logosphere, as of Florensky's thought, from whom he accepted the exhortation to think about the boundary in terms of an ethics of otherness.

Vernadsky's boundary, framed by the different perspectives of Florensky and Bakhtin, is so linked to the problems of 1) the proximity between the I and the other, and 2) the constitution of the subjectivity in the presence of the *other-than-self*. The boundary is the place of self-recognition through the *being-for-the-other* (boundary as a porous membrane) and, at the same time, of self-construction through the *being-opposite-to-the-other* (boundary as a line of demarcation and individualization). In case its "porosity" is saturated, the boundary may however become the "lair" for self-sufficiency[25] of a polarized I-thou. In the first case the distance between the I and the other is the space of the intersubjectivity and the antinomical integrality; in the second case it is the hiatus of a subjectivity self-built by antithesis, who dialectically affirms himself.

In Bakhtin (1990 [1924]: 309), this dynamics of recognition or instead of antagonistic projection happens specifically in the logosphere, the space-time of the "flesh and [of] the spirit of the word," where every utterance comes to life from the *hic et nunc* – namely the historical-cultural context in which it is inserted: a context dense of past and future – and makes the universe of discourse (*rech'*) that it conveys real. In the aforementioned essay *Problema rechevykh zhanrov*, Bakhtin emphasizes (1986 [1952–1953]: 71–72), "The utterance is not a conventional unit, but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects, which ends by relinquishing the floor to the other." This

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24 The terms "chefalize" and "chefalization" come from the Greek kephalē (κεφαλή, 'head').
25 Bakhtin writes:

> Lived life tends to recoil and hide deep inside itself, tends to withdraw into its own inner infinitude, *is afraid of boundaries*, strives to dissolve them, for it has not faith in the essentialness and kindness of the power that gives form from outside; any viewpoint from outside is refused. And, in the process, the *culture of boundaries* (the necessary condition for a confident and deep style) becomes impossible, of course; boundaries are just what life has nothing to do with; all creative energies withdraw from the boundaries, living them to the mercy of fate.
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> Aesthetic culture is a culture of boundaries and hence presupposes that life is enveloped by a warm atmosphere of deepest trust. A confident and founded act of constituting and shaping the *boundaries* of man and his world (outer as well as *inner* boundaries) presupposes the existence of a firm and secure position outside of himself." (Bakhtin 1990 [1920–1923]: 203–204)

change of speaking subjects, he continues (1986 [1952–1953]: 72), "creates clear-cut boundaries of the utterance." It follows that authentic communication, whether internal or externalized, is always a real-life dialogue (1986 [1952–1953]: 75), which implies the personal and active presence of the intersubjectivity and an actively responsive understanding (1986 [1952–1953]: 69) of the other: "The first and foremost criterion for the finalization of the utterance is the possibility of responding to it or, more precisely and broadly, of assuming a responsive attitude toward it" (1986 [1952–1953]: 72).

Enunciation is always an individual-contextual feature that is realized through the assumption of language (and its speech genres) and the "*assimilation* – more or less creative – of others' words (and not of the words of language)" (1986 [1952–1953]: 89). The *individuality*, in other words, creates the speech boundaries and the very possibility of dialogue as plural conscience. In case it yields to the temptation of becoming an absolute and self-isolated subjectivity in an utterly private space, it becomes a *solitary consciousness* which willingly uses the dialectic in order to survive: dialectic,that is "the abstract product of dialogue." (Bakhtin 1984 [1961–1962]: 293). Bakhtin notes:

> I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*). Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the *threshold*. And everything internal gravitates not toward itself but is turned to the outside and dialogized, every internal experience ends up on the boundary, encounters another, and in this tension-filled encounter lies its entire essence. This is the highest degree of sociality (not external, not material, but internal)... The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion*. To be means *to communicate*. Absolute death (nonbeing) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered (Ippolit). To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*. (Bakhtin 1984 [1961–1962]: 287)

This dialogic game or dialogism (*dialogizm*) is precisely what allowed Lotman to go progressively beyond the formal and (then) structural approach to the study of culture and propose a more organic vision of the same, namely the so-called *semiosphere* – a concept that he indeed gathered from Vernadsky. Recalling Bakhtin's image (1986 [1952–1953]: 93), according to whom "The speaker is not the biblical Adam, dealing only with virgin and still unnamed objects, giving them names for the first time," in the 1980s Lotman proposed to see human communication as a complex phenomenon, inextricably linked to the space of

meaning in which man has been immersed since the first moments of life. This space makes him *assimilate* the names of objects even before having understood and pronounced them; it's a space that grows in space-time thanks to the texts, semiotic "lumps," charged with past and future elements.

The semiosphere becomes synonymous with culture: the living tissue of texts, threads of a teeming network of connections that open up to an infinite depth insofar as they meet *the others* (the other people's visions, the other people's interpretations, the other people's encodings of the world).

4 Lotman and the otherness

The reflection on strangeness (*chuzhest'*) became very urgent in Lotmanian work when he started to think about culture (now *semiosphere*) in terms of boundaries, harking back to the model of the homeostatic organism. Adopting the biological similarity of the cell membrane (which transforms external chemical substances into assimilable biochemical structures), Lotman (2005 [1994]: 210) defines the boundary as "a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces.." This dialogism allows it to absorb and "culturalize" – namely, to make expressible and therefore knowable, phenomena that would otherwise be alien to its language and its image of the world (*kartina mira*).

The function of the cell layer, however, is not only to filter, transform, and absorb externalities, but also to protect the cell itself from the environment, limiting the penetration of extraneous agents. Analogically, by this function, culture affirms, so to speak, its subjectivity, its "I am." In other words, at the same time in which it self-defines, with the generation of a semiotic space starting from a precise vision of the extra-semiotic space, culture also gives life to a boundary, through which it becomes a subject (or, in Vygotsky and Bakhtin's terms, becomes an individuality).

Lotman plastically envisions culture as a living organism whose edges (or its periphery) are "riddled" with the so-called *bilingual translatable "filters"* (Lotman 2005 [1994]: 208); these allow its demarcation from the outside (the

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26 Lotman writes (2005 [1994]: 212) "Insofar as the border is a necessary part of the semiosphere, the semiosphere also requires a 'chaotic' external sphere and constructs this itself in cases where this does not exist. Culture not only creates its internal organization, but also its own type of external disorganization."

extra-semiotic space) and the filtering of this into the semiotic space, according to a precise translation that reflects the culturalized vision of the world.

In Lotman, the concept of boundary is identified mainly with the cultural periphery, that space where the accelerated and original semiotic processes develop but also where it is easier to find *the other*, namely the part of the semiosphere farthest from the cultural grammars and therefore more alien. The linguistic filters thus acquire an eminently ethical feature since just the translation is what gives shape to the image of *the other*, which may be an idea of a *foreign* world or culture, or an *alien* subject.[26]

Culture, defining its internal organization, also specularly defines its external organization and does it, as a rule, by attributing the qualities related to non-culture (disorder, chaos, barbarism, ignorance) to the "outside of itself." Lotman dealt with this issue several times, especially in the 1971 essay, *O semioticheskom mekhanizme kul'tury* (written with his colleague and friend Boris A. Uspensky).[27] In the years when he wrote the essays on the organicist matrix he examined this topic in depth and paid attention to a specific cultural figure of the non-culture, that is the *boundary man* or *marginal man*. They are all those people, always present in human history, who have been placed between the semiosphere and the extra-semiotic space, the nameable and the unnameable, and who, "by virtue of a particular talent (magicians) or type of employment (blacksmith, miller, executioner), belong to two worlds, operate as a kind of interpreter, settling in the territorial periphery, on the boundary of cultural and mythological space" (Lotman 2005 [1994]: 211) and the world of the semiotic indefiniteness.

In the two essays *Pushkin i "Povest' o kapitane Kopeikine"* (1995 [1979]) and *"Izgoi" i "izgoinichestvo" kak sotsial'no-psikhologicheskaya pozitsiya v russkoi kul'ture preimushchestvenno dopetrovskogo perioda ("Svoe" i "chuzhoe" v istorii russkoi kul'tury)* (1982), Lotman interprets the semiotic-textual mechanism of *the other* from a historical-anthropological perspective. The Russian word *izgoi* [outcast] expresses the figure that conveys to perfection the process of building of the *alien*, since it is exactly the antithesis of the *own*, culturalized, and nominable space. *Izgoi*, Lotman and Uspensky write (2002 [1982]: 222), was a term that

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26 Lotman writes (2005 [1994]: 212) "Insofar as the border is a necessary part of the semiosphere, the semiosphere also requires a 'chaotic' external sphere and constructs this itself in cases where this does not exist. Culture not only creates its internal organization, but also its own type of external disorganization."

27 He identified two typologies of culture, depending on their relationship with the sign and the segnicity: "culture directed towards expression" *versus* "culture directed towards content." Each of these has a different relationship with the "external" space, codified by Lotman as two typologies of non-culture.

referred to a specific socio-juridical concept of early medieval Russia. It denoted a position of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the social structure: the outcast was the executioner, the outlaw, the Cossack, the dead and buried soul (*otpetyi*), belonging to a *foreign*, alien world.

Another interesting figure that Lotman suggests again regarding the *non-existent subjects* is the "forgotten artist." The fact that some periods of the history of literature present titles such as "An Unknown Poet of the Twelfth Century" and "Further Remarks about a Forgotten Writer of the Enlightenment Period" (Lotman 1990: 129) suggests a very important truth: culture not only tends to expel those people who, by virtue of particular attributes, seem to be shadows of society, but it is also inclined to "forget" those subjects who are outside its ("correct") canons of behavior and style.

Let us now try to understand when the boundary may become a place of cultural construction of intersubjectivity. A key requirement for the life of the semiosphere is the safekeeping of the differences within identity. To explain the value of this principle and its repercussions on the level of ethics, Lotman uses a concept taken from the world of natural science: the enantiomorphism of the hands.[28]

The hands in fact, one in front of the other, seem to be equivalent and "reciprocating" but, once superposed, they lose their mirror symmetry and appear unequal, different. The same applies to communication: communication is not possible, and thus growth in knowledge (i.e., the exchange of information), out of a dialogic relationship where the subjects of communication have something in common[29] (like the hands, one in front of the other) and simultaneously are irreducible to one another (like the superposed hand). This combination of "structural diversity and structural similarity" is what permits reciprocal understanding and the "mutual translatability" (Lotman 2005 [1994]: 220). Dialogue, Lotman even says, precedes language and generates it, as also Bakhtin affirms: "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it." (1981 [1934–1935]: 279). The figure of Robinson Crusoe living in isolation is a utopia and a contradiction of reality, which is fundamentally relational. The enantiomorphic relationship, therefore, condenses the concept

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28 The topic of enantiomorphism will be then recalled in a number of the *Trudy* devoted to semiotics of mirror (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, XXII, Tartu, 1988).

  Lotman's position is a direct continuation of Vernadsky's, who is in turn a successor of Louis Pasteur, the discoverer of the enantiomorphic principle, and Pierre and Marie Curie. The Russian-Ukrainian geologist had in fact worked at the Institute Pasteur in the early 1920s in Paris: these scientists' molecular researches lead to the affirmation of the value of asymmetry for the origin of life.

29 This "something in common" is the sharing of basic sign systems into the semiosphere.

of "*correlative difference* that distinguishes both identity – rendering dialogue useless – and non-correlative difference, rendering it impossible. If dialogic communication is the basis of meaning generation, then enantiomorphism divides the unity, and the rapprochement of the difference forms the basis of the structural correlation of individual parts in the construction of meaning generation... enantiomorphism represents the primary 'mechanism' of dialogue" (Lotman 2005 [1994]: 220–221).

In *Universe of the Mind* (1990), a work then proposed in Russian with the title *Vnutri myslyashchikh mirov* (1996), Lotman, like Bakhtin, uses the simile of the mother-child relationship to explain how the concept of enantiomorphism is intimately linked to that of dialogue. He writes:

> We have already mentioned that the elementary act of thinking is translation. Now we can go further and say that the elementary mechanism of translating is dialogue. Dialogue presupposes asymmetry... However, if dialogue without semiotic difference is pointless, when the difference is absolute and mutually exclusive dialogue becomes impossible... The relationship of mother and child is in this respect ideal experimental material: the participants in this dialogue have *just* ceased to be one being but have *not yet* quite wholly separated. In the purest sense this relationship shows that the need for dialogue, the *dialogic situation*, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis. (Lotman 1990: 143–144)

Dialogue for Lotman coincides with the semiosphere, namely the dialogic substrate of meaning that gives a shape and precedes us in any act of communication.[30] What he proposes is to see the boundaries that arise in various micro and macro-cultural situations as places where the asymmetry can become dialogic exchanges and build bridges towards the other-than-self, in search of a common identity[31] (which is the awareness of being part of the common human family).

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30 Again Lotman:

> In this way, we might say, that dialogue precedes language and gives birth to it. And this also lies at the heart of the notion of semiosphere: the ensemble of semiotic formations precedes (not heuristically but functionally) the singular isolated language and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter. Without the semiosphere, language not only does not function, it does not exist. (Lotman 2005 [1994]: 218–219)

31 We continue to discover deep influences of the Bakhtinian universe on Lotman's speculative horizon: literature, as *The Author and the Hero* reminds us, proves to be a real *aesthetics of verbal creative work* when it is able to bring into existence the deeply dialogic relationship between the author and the hero, where the latter – in order not to become a prognosis and psychological projection of the author, needs to be *unveiled* (from the Greek word *alétheia*, ἀλήθεια).

Biological factors appear as primeval, original forces composing the psychological substance of the child's mind. Social factors act as an external, "alien" force, which, using coercion, replaces the original biological modes of mental life... Piaget does not see a child as a part of the social whole. Social factors are shown as an external force that enters the child's mind and dislodges the forms of thinking inherent in the child's intelligence. (Vygotsky 2012 [1934]: 46–47)

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In order to see the true and integral countenance of someone close to us, someone we apparently know very well – think how many masking layers must first be removed from his face, layers that were sedimented upon his face by our own fortuitous reactions and attitudes and by fortuitous life situations. The artist's struggle to achieve a determinate stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself. (Bakhtin 1990 [1920–1923]: 6)

Art has therefore an eminently ethical value because it educates people to be responsible for their own as well as other people's boundaries; but – Bakhtin warns (1990 [1919]: 1–3), it has to be an experience that unites aesthetics and life into the unity of every individual person.

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