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Juri Lotman's Typologies of Culture

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Abstract. One central concept in Juri Lotman's semiotics of culture are cultural typologies, the objective of which is to describe the basic types of cultural codes, define the universals of human culture, and to create "a grammar of culture", i. e. a unified system of the general structure of the universal characteristics of the "culture of humankind". Lotman compares culture with a living organism as well as with a work of art, above all emphasizing the dynamicity of culture that is effected by two poles (i. e. consciousnesses) throughout the whole of cultural history: cyclical-continual (mythological) and linear-discrete (historical). The article views Lotman's different conceptions of cultural typologies as a whole, where one and the same binary opposition is described in different ways and with different emphases, conclusively from which two universal types of culture are drawn out.

Keywords: semiotics of culture, metalanguage, typology of culture, modelling, binary opposition.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to map out and systematize the different attempts at the typologization of cultures, which is a recurring topic found in Juri Lotman's texts. Although the essentialness of the problem concerning cultural typology in the semiotics of culture of Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School has been noted

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in several studies, hitherto this question has not been specifically dealt with. The aim of this article is to bridge this gap.

The question concerning the typology of cultures is raised in the Tartu-Moscow School for the first time in 1966, in the "Theses of the Second Summer School of Semiotics", in which Lotman argues that the task of creating a structural typology of culture(s) must be prioritized, and:

> The task of typological description of different models of culture also requires the formulation of the universals of human culture, similar to linguistic universals […] and its ultimate aim would be the creation of a "grammar of culture". (Lotman 1966: 83)

In the following year, a more thorough article on the topic is published – "Problems in the typology of culture". Following the structuralist canon, Lotman argues that a prerequisite for creating a structural-typological history of culture, is the differentiation between the content (*parole*) and the structure (*langue*) of texts. Thus, the task of the typology of culture would be to describe basic types of cultural codes (the total number of which, in Lotman's opinion, is relatively small).

Upon these cultural codes, the "languages" of individual cultures are formed, and the comparison of these "languages" enables the definition of universals of human culture. The typological characteristics of basic cultural codes are formed upon these universals; the end-goal being the possibility of creating a unified system of the universal characteristics of "human culture" (Lotman 1977a [1967]: 214).

1.1. Topology as a descriptive metalanguage of culture

The construction of such a new description, however, presumes a novel metalanguage which is presented in the article "On the metalanguage of a typological description of culture". This metalanguage:

> would not coincide in any part with language of the object (as was the case in all previous typologies of culture) and is the prerequisite for establishing cultural universals (all talk of typological research without it would be meaningless). (Lotman 1975 [1968]: 100)

Lotman mentions spatiality as one universal characteristic of human culture, because each picture of the world inevitably acquires the features of spatiality:

> The very construction of a world order is invariably conceived on the basis of some spatial structure which organizes all its other levels. Thus, a homeomorphic relationship appears between the metalinguistic structures and the structure of the object. (Lotman 1975: 101)

This adequately formal enough component (spatial characteristics) becomes "that level of the content of a universal cultural model which acts as the plane of expression in relation to others" (Lotman 1975: 101) and it follows from this that:

> spatial models, in particular, utilizing the apparatus of topology: of that mathematical discipline which studies those properties of spaces that do not change with homeomorphic changes [...] can be used as a metalanguage when studying cultural typology. (Lotman 1975: 100)

Thereon, Lotman shows how such a system is "extracted". First, he divides the texts of culture into two types:

1. Those characterizing the structure of the world, immobile. They answer the question: "How is it constructed?" A fundamental characteristic will be a type of discreteness of textual space (described in topological notions of continuity, proximity, boundaries, and others). It is important that in spatial categories, with means to orient in space, axiological values that are essential to the cultural text can be expressed. This includes categories of evaluation, and the idea of an axiological hierarchy. In the language of spatial relationships these concepts will be expressed by means of spatial orientation: such concepts as "top – bottom", "right – left", "concentric – eccentric", "inclusive – exclusive" (i. e. "including me – excluding me") shape the evaluation.

2. Those characterizing the place, disposition and activity of man in the surrounding world. This sub-group of texts is dynamic and narrative, describable in terms of a "topological tree", i. e. with trajectories, with means of shifting points, and – in particular – with a theory of graphs, which can become an apparatus for describing the plot (Lotman 1975: 102).

Lotman defines the model of culture as those descriptions of cultural texts that are founded on spatial modelling. Thus, we can view the actually existing texts as realizations of these models.

The basic characteristics of such models are: (1) types of fragmentation of universal space; (2) the dimension of the universal space; (3) orientation. The basic concept of the metalanguage describing culture's spatiality is "boundary", which is also one of the most common characteristics of cultural models, dividing the cultural space into two – inner and outer – spaces (Lotman 1975: 104).

One essential feature of any kind of cultural type are its relations to the problem of sign-ness, and therefore the language of spatial relations must also be able to model the different structures of sign systems. In this case, binary relations are established between the points of the inner and outer space, as well as between the spaces themselves. Thus:

> the relations of binary correlates between points of internal and external and these areas as a whole may be determined. The nature of these relationships, what acts as content, what as expression, how the very concept 'to have meaning' is interpreted, all of these depend on the nature of the cultural model. (Lotman 1975: 115)

In this long and thorough article – in one form or another – we already find the problematics present in all later articles discussing the typology of culture. On the other hand, in later texts we do not find references to topology as a descriptive metalanguage of culture, and also the spatial models of culture are left to the background. The definition of the model of culture changes, whereas understanding culture as a communicative system rises to the foreground.

1.2. Type, model, and code of culture. Culture as text and as function

Alongside the type of culture and the model of culture appears also the notion of the cultural code. The model is an example, a type of functioning, whereas the type of culture is the realisation of culture in different historical stages. The cultural code characterizes the corresponding type of culture, and on these basic codes (of which there should be only a few) the "languages" of individual cultures are formed.

It is clear that one and the same text (of culture) can be described in its actual functioning simultaneously in several categories of the model of culture. This is exactly what Lotman does in the article discussed here, as well as in later treatments: he offers us different models of culture which are universal and able to describe the most different of cultural texts (types of culture).

In the same year, 1968, the article co-written with Alexander Piatigorsky "Text and function" is published, which is also one of the more essential articles in *Articles on the Typology of Culture* that was published two years later. Here, in addition to what is for culture the fundamental concept of text, the equally fundamental concept of function ("pure construct and here one in the sense of which a given text may be interpreted, or in relation to which some features of a text can be examined as features of the function" (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978 [1968]: 233)) is added; whereas the system of textual meanings defines the social functions of texts in the given culture.

Culture can thus be described on three different levels:
1) sub-textual (linguistic) messages;
2) culture as a system of texts;
3) culture as a set of functions serving texts.

On the grounds of such an approach, it is possible to postulate the existence of two types of cultures:

> one will tend towards a specialization of its texts so that to each cultural function there corresponds an adequate type of text; the other type of culture will tend to obliterate the boundaries between texts

> in order that identical texts should serve the whole set of cultural functions. In the first type the text is more important, and in the second, the function. (Lotman, Piatigorsky 1978: 243)

In the same article, cultures that are constructed either paradigmatically (text is more important) or syntagmatically (functionality prevails) are also mentioned, which is a central topic in Lotman's article "Numerical semantics and cultural types" that appeared in the same year and in the same collection.

Treating culture as text, Lotman distinguishes two types of internal organization:

1. Paradigmatic, in which the whole worldview is represented as an "extratemporal paradigm in which the elements are situated on various levels and represent different variants of a single invariant meaning" (Lotman 1977b: 227). Therefore, it is natural to semantically relate a concept with a corresponding element of another level with the help of a number. It is the paradigmatic culture that enables the transformation of a number from an element of culture to a universal symbol of culture.
2. Syntagmatic, in which the worldview represents "a sequence in which the various elements are situated on one level and a single temporal plane and receive meaning in reciprocal relation to each other" (ibid.).

The paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures of the cultural text are opposed to each other as closed and non-closed (open) respectively. In the paradigmatic type, the symbolic meaning of numbers is essential, whereas the syntagmatic type stresses their succession. Respectively, the meaning of the model of the world is above all either spatial or temporal.

2. Articles on the typology of culture

In 1970, the first part of the collection *Articles on the Typology of Culture* is published, including those that were already published ("Text and function", "Numerical semantics and cultural types") as well as new articles.

The principle standpoints are defined in the introduction of the article "Culture and language":

> culture should primarily be understood as a semiotic mechanism, it is a sign system that is organized in a certain manner (i. e. a language). Such an approach makes it possible to apply to the analysis of culture those categories that have already proven themselves useful in general semiotics (code and message, text and structure, *langue* and *parole*, paradigmatic and syntagmatic description, etc.). (Lotman 2004a: 396)

The given semiotic mechanism is applied to the world, to the surrounding reality, and tries to "culturize" it, to transform it into a text. This is possible in two ways:

1. The world is seen / viewed as a text that represents itself as a meaningful message. Man strives to decipher this text, to translate it to a comprehensible language.
2. The world is not a text, it has no meaning. Here, it is the task of human to structurize the world by way of culturization (a Kantian approach to the relation of thought and reality), to change non-text into a text (Lotman 2004a: 398–399).

In the next article ("The problem of sign and sign system, and the typology of Russian culture in the 11.–19. centuries"), to the opposition text / non-text, another one – word / non-word – is added, which produces the only fourfold division of cultural codes in the long line of binary divisions (actually the basic opposition here is also binary: semantic and syntactic). The introduction of this typology is also the most "semiotic":

> As we know, building any kind of social model presupposes dividing the reality surrounding people into the world of facts and the world of signs, which is followed by the definition of their interconnections (semiotic, evaluative, existential, etc.). To become a carrier of meaning (a sign), a phenomenon must necessarily be part of a system. For this, it must enter into a relation with a non-sign or another sign. The first relation – replacing – creates semiotic meaning, the second – combination – syntactic. (Lotman 2004b: 401)

If we take such an existential-evaluative classification as the basis of the system of culture, we obtain four cultural codes:

1. **Semantic** (symbolic) cultural code. Non-text, the word is essential ("In the beginning there was the word"). Movement towards the truth is not movement from one sign to another, but deepening into the sign. The temporal dimension is not important here. Lotman uses the early Middle Ages as an example.
2. **Syntactic** cultural code. Text (musical-architectural). The concept of progress is prevalent, the opposition of old and new is important. Epoch of Peter the Great with its reforms, the Baroque.
3. **Asemantic and asyntactic**. The cultural code denies signs. Non-text, non-word. The opposition of natural and unnatural. The world of things is real whereas the world of signs, of social relations, is borne by deceitful civilization. The Enlightenment, especially the rousseauesque worldview are brought as examples.
4. **Semantic-syntactic** cultural code. Text (verbal). The beginning of the 19th century.

Naturally, this is a simplification. In the course of the historical evolution of culture, complex interlacings of these basic types are formed. On the other hand, Lotman claims that:

> the logic of internal development in one or another cultural cycle is built upon dominant structures as a certain exhaustion of the general possibilities of semiosis, as a progressive enrichment of the communication system. (Lotman 2004b: 402)

According to Lotman, the dominating principles in the development of Russian culture from Kievan Rus' to the mid-19th century are constructed according to the regular changing of these four cultural codes. Although Lotman draws examples from Russian history, it is clear that he takes these cultural codes as being universal.

In the article "The problem of "acquiring culture" as a typological characteristic", again two types of culture are introduced, which in Lotman's opinion can be seen as stages that constantly change over the course of evolution:

1) "Culture of texts", in which right is that, which exists. Such a culture consists of the sum of precedents, uses, and texts. Custom is at the forefront.
2) "Culture of grammars" – exists only that, which is right. Metatexts – collection of norms and rules. Law. (Lotman 2004c: 417–418)

The collection ends with "Some conclusions", which discusses the essence of culture. Parallel with the frequently presented argument that culture is "the most perfect of mechanisms created by mankind for the transformation of entropy into information", Lotman compares culture both with a live organism as well as with the work of art, emphasizing the dynamism of culture. It is exactly these ideas that henceforth become decisive, culminating in his two last books, *Culture and Explosion* and *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*.

3. Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky on the Typology of Culture

From the standpoint of the given topic, Lotman has two important articles co-authored with Boris Uspensky. In 1971, "On the semiotic mechanism of culture" is published, where especially the concept of culture along with different cultural models are discussed in depth. Culture's self-evaluation – what cultures themselves deem true – is mentioned as an essential feature in the typological characterization of culture. Those cultures whose self-image is characterized by a normalized collection of texts, by the right text, are oriented to expression, and various behavioural rituals become crucial to them. A one-to-one correspondence between the expression (plane) and content (plane) is recognized, as well as their principle indivisibility (as was characteristic for the Middle Ages), or the effect of expression to content. Correct naming is of importance. Others in turn model themselves as a system of rules, which defines the creation of texts. Hence, in the first case rules are defined as the sum of precedents, and in the second case the precedent exists

only in the case it is described by the corresponding rule (Lotman, Uspensky 1978 [1971]: 217–218).

Discussing the opposition text–rules, according to the authors it is important to keep in mind that in certain cases one and the same elements of culture can appear in both functions. For example, taboos can be seen as elements of a text (signs) reflecting the moral experience of the collective and, on the other hand, as a collection of magical rules dictating certain behaviour.

These thoughts are further developed in their article "Myth – name – culture" (1973), where the difference between cultures oriented towards mythological thinking (proper names) and non-mythological thinking is presented (Lotman, Uspensky 1977 [1973]: 233). When we place this division to the framework of typologies provided by Lotman throughout the years, then simplistically it may be said that "the world is a horse" describes a culture of texts, whereas "the world is matter" describes a culture of grammars, since the first tends towards the level of object-language, and the second towards the level of metalanguage.

4. The Concept of Culture and Typologies of Culture

The concept "culture" is central to the Tartu-Moscow School. For example, the *Conceptual dictionary of the Tartu–Moscow semiotic School* provides us with five different definitions. It is interesting to follow how the understanding of cultural typology changes correspondingly with the definition of the concept of "culture".

When the problem of the typological study of culture is raised in the 1960's, Lotman defines culture as "the totality of non-hereditary information acquired, preserved, and transmitted by the various groups of human society" (Lotman 1977a [1967]: 213), with emphasis on the description of the structure of a culture's "language" which is possible because culture is viewed as a sign system organized in a special manner. On the other hand, already in the introduction of *Articles on the Typology of Culture*, the necessity to view culture as a semiotic mechanism is emphasized. Therefore,

it is logical that henceforth in the typological study of culture, the model of communication is taken as a starting point, as in the article "Two models of communication" (1973).

By defining two basic communicative models: I–S/he (message is important) and I–I (code is important), Lotman argues that real cultures are constructed according to a pendulum-like oscillation between these two systems. Cultures that are oriented towards the message, towards acquiring information from the outside, are more dynamic (and have a tendency to infinitely grow the amount of texts). The downside of such a culture is the sharp division of society into senders (authorities) and receivers (socially passive consumers of information). Whereas cultures oriented to autocommunication are able to develop greater intellectual activity, but often turn out to be less dynamic, than would be necessary for the evolution of society (Lotman, 1992 [1973]: 88–89).

A special position is occupied by "The Phenomenon of Culture" (1978) that does not specifically discuss typologies of culture, but where Lotman – defining the coexistence of verbal-discrete and iconical languages as the most universal features of the structural dualism of human culture – comes to the conclusion that:

> at all levels of cognition[1], from the two hemispheres of the human brain to culture at every structural level, we can observe bipolarity as the minimal structure of semiotic organization. (Lotman 2019a: 36)

Lotman connects this bipolarity to the left- and right-hemispheric principles of individual human thought, and it seems to me that this distinction is the basis for the binary divisions of his typologies of culture, which allows us to examine them as a unified whole.

In 1981, Lotman's article "Literature and mythology", co-authored with Zara Mints, is published. Central to this article is the opposition "mythology–literature" which, according to the authors, is one of the more essential structuring oppositions for

[1] In Russian original: "at all levels of thinking mechanism".

culture, since it reflects the ideal model of human culture, which can be viewed as a two-channeled mechanism for the preservation and exchange of information; in this mechanism, one channel transmits discrete messages, and the other, non-discrete messages. Literary texts are discrete and they are decipherable on the basis of a code founded upon the mechanism of similarity / difference. Non-discrete texts (mythology) in their turn are deciphered on the basis of iso- and homeomorphism. In both cases, being discrete or non-discrete fulfils only the role of a structural base (Lotman, Mints 1981: 37).

Also here, non-discrete (continual) thinking is related with the right, and lexical-discrete thinking with the left hemisphere of the brain, which grounds the argument that cyclical-continual (mythological) and linear-discrete (historical) consciousness have reciprocally effected one another throughout the whole of cultural history, which is the peculiarity of human thinking as such. But this process itself moves and is specific to each historical period. So it can be said that in pre-literate times, the mythological consciousness was prevalent, but which in the period of literary cultures was almost totally expelled by the swift rise of lexical-discrete thinking (Lotman, Mints 1981: 42).

In his final article discussing typology of culture ("Some thoughts on typology of culture", 1987), Lotman distinguishes between literate cultures, and non-literate cultures, which relates to the notion of two different mechanisms of collective memory (collective memory, for Lotman, equals culture, cf. Lotman, Uspensky (1978 [1971]):

> The forms of memory depend on what is considered necessary to be remembered, whereas the latter – what is to be remembered – depends on the structure and design of civilization. (Lotman 1987: 4)

In comparison with "Literature and mythology", the characteristics of non-literate (oral) cultures overlap with what was said about mythology, whereas literate (written) cultures overlap with what was said about literature. The existence of writing is associated

with the necessity to remember extraordinary events, and in such a culture the amount of texts grows exponentially. However, the aim of non-literate culture:

> is not the growth of the amount of texts, but the repeated re-representation of texts that were given for once and for all. Literacy is not necessary here. Its role is fulfilled by mnemonic symbols. (Lotman 1987: 6)

It may be stated that here Lotman arrives back to where he started, to the opposition of text / grammar (rules).

5. Final Remarks on Culture – The Dynamic Turn from Object to Subject

In his final articles, Lotman is not so much interested in the typology of culture anymore, but foremost in the dynamics of culture; he is not so much interested in culture as an object, but more so of culture as a subject. Notions describing this dynamic such as explosion, bifurcation, continuous and discrete, predictability and unpredictability, rise to the fore. These are topics that again and again rise to the surface in his final articles and in two of his last books, *Culture and Explosion* and *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*.

He discusses the cyclical and directed form of dynamics in the article "On the Dynamics of Culture" (1992). In the first case we are dealing with "the dynamism of regular repetitions", which, in comparison with the directed form, is understood as static. In turn, the directed form of dynamics divides into "slow dynamism, which occurs according to consolidated laws and, as result, is characterized by a high degree of predictability, and catastrophic dynamic, characterized by a sharply lowered level of predictability" (Lotman 2019b: 97). The real historical process, the development of culture is described as "rhythmic shift from dynamic (catastrophic) to normative stages of developmet" (ibid.).

Again, binarism, that is essential to human culture, is at the forefront, and related to its "deepest essence: the contradictory combination of linear directionality and cyclical repetition" (Lotman 2019b: 111). Therefore, both cyclical and dynamic processes are equally real and "different types of description simply illuminate different types of reality" (ibid.).

Written around the same time as *Culture and Explosion* but only recently appearing in print for the first time, the book *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (in the original – *mechanisms*) emphasizes that "The relationship of word and deed is one of the most important indices in the typology of culture" (Lotman 2013: 151). This divide is implicitly present also in the categories described here.

It is in this book where the emphasizing of the role of art in culture comes to its logical end (we could call the theses in "The place of art among other modelling systems" (2011 [1967]) as a starting point, where the concept(s) of "art" nor "work of art" are defined, but instead the relations between the artistic, scientific, and play-type model are discussed). Here this definition is given (as): "The artistic work is a thinking structure, a generator of new information. Art is one of the hemispheres of the collective brain of humankind" (Lotman 2013: 220). As the other hemisphere of the collective brain, which alongside art is the foundation for the working of culture as well as the basis for cultural universals, he defines in the article "About the Nature of Art":

> Science and art are as if the two eyes of human culture. It is exactly their difference (and equality) that give content to our knowledge. [...] Art is a form of thinking, without which human consciousness simply does not exist, exactly like there cannot be consciousness in only one hemisphere. (Lotman 1994 [1990]: 432)

6. Conclusion

The table below attempts to combine Lotman's treatments of the typology of culture into a certain whole. The left and right columns of the main distinction basically describe the same binary opposi-

tion in different ways and with different emphases. Curiously, the first and last entry ("On the metalanguage of a typological description of culture" and *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*) stand out the most from the rest, yet bear the greatest similarity to each other. It is possible that this is just my personal impression and, of course, this review is neither exhaustive of the whole problematics, nor does it aspire to be the final truth, allowing each reader space for personal reflection. Yet it might still serve as a preliminary introduction into a subject of such importance in Lotman's semiotics of culture.

The parameters of Juri Lotman's typologies of culture

Basis of distinction	**Main distinction**		**Source**
Cultural texts describe Main properties of textual space Topological terms	Structure of the world Static Discreteness Orientation, boundary	Position, status, actions of man Dynamic Narrativity "Tree" (also graphs)	On the meta-language of a typological description of culture (1968)
Culture as Organisation Tendency	System of texts Paradigmatic Semiotization	Set of functions Syntagmatic Desemiotization	Text and function (1968, with Piatigorsky)
Organisation of cultural text Meaning	Paradigmatic Closed Spatial	Syntagmatic Not closed Temporal	Numerical semantics and cultural types (1968)
The world as Means of cultura-lization	Text Deciphering	Non-text Structuring	Culture and language (1970)
Cultural code	Semantic	Syntactic	The problem of sign and… (1970)
Culture of	Texts	Grammars	The problem of "acquiring... (1970)

Basis of distinction	**Main distinction**		**Source**
Culture as Cultural orientation	Set of orthodox texts Mythological (naming)	System of rules Non-mythological	The semiotic mechanism of culture (1971) Myth – name – culture (1973)
Type of communication Informational capacity	I-HE (emphasis on message) Constant	I-ME (emphasis on code) Increasing	Two models of communication... (1973)
Modelling languages Priority of	Continual-homeomorphic Text	Linear-discrete Sign	Phenomenon of culture (1978)
Types of consciousness Text types	Cyclic-continual Right hemisphere Non-discrete	Verbal-logical Left hemisphere Discrete	Literature and mythology (1981)
Saturation of cultural memory Development	Mainly from texts created by itself Restrained	Periodically from texts created in another tradition Accelerating	Memory in the light of culturology (1985)
Culture	No written language, oral Closed Primarily textual Eschatology	Written Open Primarily functional Historical experience	Some thoughts on typology of culture (1987)
Cultural processes	Cyclic Repeating Continuous	Linear Unique Explosive	The unpredictable workings of culture (1992)

Directions for future research would be the locating of Lotman's typologies into a wider context – on the one hand, in comparison with previous, "classical" typological treatments of culture (most well-known are those of Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee),

and on the other hand, with the rapidly developed studies in the paradigm of organizational culture in the 20th century, wherein sociological inquiries, theory and statistical techniques of factor analyses (Cattell, 1949; Sawyer, 1967; Hofstede, 1980); smallest space analyses (Schwartz, 1990; Rokeach, 1973); and standard analytic issues (Inkeles and Levinson, 1969) are used in typologizing cultures.

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