



HAL
open science

From paradigm to environment: The foreign rhythm and punctual catalysis of culture

Pierluigi Basso Fossali

► **To cite this version:**

Pierluigi Basso Fossali. From paradigm to environment: The foreign rhythm and punctual catalysis of culture. *Sign System Studies*, 2016, 44 (3), pp.415 - 431. 10.12697/SSS.2016.44.3.06 . halshs-01438986

HAL Id: halshs-01438986

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01438986>

Submitted on 18 Jan 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

From paradigm to environment: The foreign rhythm and punctual catalysis of culture

Pierluigi Basso Fossali

Université Lyon 2 / ICAR, ENS de Lyon
France
e-mail: pierluigi.basso@univ-lyon2.fr

Abstract. Lotman and Barthes created two different critically oriented semiotic traditions. Both of them went through an evolution in their thought, moving from systematic organization to living transformations in cultural systems. This allowed them to carry out a bilateral critique of codes and identities in favour of either anonymous hybridity (Lotman) or neutrality (Barthes), where heterogeneity becomes a principle of creative “disorder”. Though quite different as regards their theoretical production, both scholars meet in their refusal to turn descriptive practices (*studium*) into a model of any other form of behaviour, considering that the determination of textual or institutional perimetres is not always clear. In short, Barthes and Lotman anticipated current research trends on the semiotics of practices; Barthes because of a sort of self-reflexion on the behaviour of the interpreter in front of an object, and Lotman through his analytic interest in attitudes and ways of living.

Barthes’s view on writing essentially reaches Lotman’s conception of culture as a “collective person”: we are looking for traces of breathing in the life of signs. More precisely, we can assert that, in the view of both scholars, inscribing speech events in history problematizes the dynamic and asynchronous relation between the structural frame of a culture and its textual heritage. The rhythm of fashion is not a side topic in their research, but, rather, it is the clearest exemplification of a dialectic between structural projection from the outside and local introjection of forms, depending on the conditions that make a difference.

Keywords: history of semiotics; Roland Barthes; Louis Hjelmslev; Juri Lotman

1. Confronting Hjelmslev's heritage: Text and history

For Barthes, much like for Lotman¹, the 1960s started with a discrete confrontation with Hjelmslev's semiotics: Barthes (2002b², 2002c³) was faced first of all with the problem of finding minimal units of analysis in fashion and cinema; nonetheless, he refers to Hjelmslev episodically until *Elements of Semiology*, first published in 1965. Barthes's Hjelmslevian period was marked by his adherence to a methodological posture and to working concepts that gave him the ability to explain the organization of language. However, Barthes never really adopted Hjelmslev's epistemology.

After the controversial publishing of *The Fashion System* in 1967, Barthes began to remark that all the research on connotation was simply a way to knock down the "prestige of linguistics, which, until today, has been reducing language to the sentence and its lexical and syntactic components", influencing all classical western thought in its assumption that it can "arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth)" (Barthes 2002a[1970]: 7).

At the beginning of the 1970s, Hjelmslev had already become, in Barthes's opinion, a disciple of the *universal grammar* of the Modistae, for whom the diversity of cultural grammar is sacrificed in favour of recognizing the centrality of relations between signs. The problem is that this entails making a sweeping generalization not on the recognition of an abstract language (*langue*), but on the praxeological paradigm of the 'intersign', meaning that Barthes had already moved past the fascination with *structure* to the more elusive and dynamic one of *structuration* (Barthes 2002f[1970]: 551). The abolition of a denotative "background" as the main factor for signification cannot be substituted by the different stable background of the form of language. Barthes refers to Hjelmslev yet again for the primacy of form while also asserting "the infinite deferral of the signified"⁴ (Barthes 1990: 442). From this point of view, Barthes changed his focus of interest from *codes*, with the idea that they made it possible to penetrate the hidden ideology of language, towards *texts*, where the cultural interplay is still dynamic and lively.

Lotman, on the other hand, referred to Hjelmslev's teachings explicitly in order to problematize the notion of text: in the section on "textual and extratextual structures"

¹ According to Zenkine 2013: 84, Lotman was skeptical of "the proper scientific value" of Barthes's work; while on the other hand, Barthes never mentioned the Russian semiotician. We will try to find a productive intersection between Lotman's thought and Barthes's contributions to Semiotics beyond the lack of reciprocal acknowledgments and private suspicions.

² English translation in Barthes 2013: 37–53.

³ Published in English as Barthes, Roland 1985. The 'traumatic units' of cinema: Research principles. *On Film 14*: 48–53. However, this reference could not be verified at the time of the translation.

⁴ The same idea is expressed in Barthes 2002g: 639; 2002h: 181.

in his *Lectures on Structural Poetics* (1964: 155), the demand for a *textology* posed by Lihachev (Lotman 1964: 55) is immediately met by Hjelmslev's contribution, including his *Prolegomena* (1961), published in Russian in 1960 in the journal *Novoe v Lingvistike*. What stands out for Lotman is Hjelmslev's inclination to assimilate text into the global discursive dimension of speech (*parole*), something which, as shown, has no clear boundaries and is susceptible of being reproduced infinitely. However, the second problem according to Lotman is that infinite and unanalysed syntagmatics should be replaced by a processual reconstruction, considering that *langue* would have to contain all the actual textual realizations in the form of abstract combinations. Beyond falling for some simplifications when it comes to Hjelmslev's thought, Lotman appears quite clear in his critique of a textological perspective that refuses to characterize the status of the *object* of a work of art with its specific foundations and communicative aims.

The problem lies not in the distinction between a *general analysis* devoted to *langue* and a *particular analysis* focused on *parole*, but rather in the preservation of the history of the text, from its creation to the open series of its attested interpretations. Put more simply, Lotman tries to find a point of convergence between the semiological recognition of an objectifiable, organized structure in the text and the culturalist vision of Boris Tomashevskij, for whom a work of art is considered as a changing, dynamic event (Lotman 1964: 156).

We can start seeing a first point of Lotman's contact with Barthes in the way they both move from structure to structuration. The fact that a text is always an object that enters the communicative process lies at the foundation of his programmatic speech, "The linguistics of discourse", first delivered in 1966 in Kazimierz, where the International Semiotics Association was originally founded. For Barthes, *discourse* is "any finite chain of *parole*, unified in its content, emitted and structured towards secondary communicational aims, culturalized by other factors than those of language"⁵ (Barthes 2002d: 612). Throughout his speech, Barthes emphasizes the concept of *integration* (Barthes 2002d: 614–618): There is a relation between the "integration" of linguistics and *translinguistics*, between the text and the *extratextual*, thus causing the movement away from the sentence and "what lies beyond the phrasal level of textual organization" that was promoted, according to Barthes, by "the Russian formalists, Jakobson, Shcheglov and their Soviet colleagues"⁶ (Barthes 2002d: 615).

For Lotman, the text has a clear "graphic identity", a specific sameness of spelling,⁷ but it can survive its stages of fragmentary manifestations and the contingencies of

⁵ "Toute étendue finie de *parole*, unifiée du point de vue du contenu, émise et structurée à des fins de communication secondaires, culturalisée par des facteurs autres que ceux de la langue"; the original. English translation adapted by the author of this article.

⁶ "Les formalistes russes, Jakobson, Shscheglov et ses collègues soviétiques" in the original.

⁷ To use the words of Nelson Goodman 1968.

cultural transmission, which shows that it cannot be preserved in time without its historical ground or its social status.

These reflections anticipate Nelson Goodman's theory from 1968 and, in a rather technical aspect, point towards the ever elliptical nature of the text. Take, for instance, the use of dots or the omission of numbered verses (*Eugene Onegin*) in Pushkin's case. So, there is another issue to consider, namely *intertextuality*. The reasoning is simple: if the structuralist point of view understands the text as a web of relations, the same perspective must be retained between the text and its cultural surroundings (Lotman 1964).

Hjelmslev's perspective on the text becomes problematized in two different steps: first, the negation of indifference at the level of expression regarding the manifestation of content (the signifier is always an interpretant of the text); second, the non-autonomy of the text, which is not the "highest level" of discursive signification (Lotman 1964: 160) with regards to linguistic and stylistic choices (that is, the "artistic devices").

Following Lotman, the value of the poetic structure of a work, such as rhythmic organization, emerges from the history of a specific national literature. Its translation into another language does not just pose the challenge of respecting its internal textual organization; it is also necessary to refer to its role in its social environment so that a fitting poetic structure can be found in the target language, that is, a structure that performs a similar function to that of the text's native culture, as for instance, in the nostalgic recovery of ancient classicism.

We could quite clearly underline the presence of a *sublogical system*, *norms* and *collective appreciations* in Hjelmslev's thought. However, without lingering on the controversial philological aspects of the reception of the *Prolegomena* by both Lotman and Barthes, we must focus on their common reaction: the need to move from structure towards structuration, the semantic determinations outlined by the boundaries of the text in the historical dynamics of meaning production.

2. Catalysis: From paradigm to environment

2.1. The zero-problem

For Barthes, reading is simply a form of *structuration*:

I'm not the only one to distinguish between structure and structuration. That opposition is inscribed in the historical process of literary semiology. In fact, one must go beyond the statics of the first semiology, which tried precisely to discover structures, structure-products, object-spaces in a text, in order to discover what Julia Kristeva calls a productivity – i.e., a working of the text, a junction, a coupling into the shifting infinity [*l'infini permutatoire*] of language. An exact evaluation of a text's degree of closure should be made. (Barthes 1991: 73)

Barthes's 'intermeaning' [*intersens*] (1991: 74) is not simply an intersemantics between texts, but it also emerges from the paradigmatic spaces of a language. The strong presence of paradigmatic organization in Barthes and in Lotman's *Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977[1970]) shows that it is considered as a potential extension of signification, as if there were some resonance of *what's said* [*dit*] with all the renewable or translatable enunciative voices of *saying* [*dire*], that is, a type of contrastive semantic space regarding the linearity of binding syntactical language combinations.

In the section on "The concept of the text" (Lotman 1977[1970]: 51), Lotman asserts the roles of paradigms: the use of a certain rhythm has a signification that stems from alternative systems present in a specific historical culture, and that evidently assumes a different value where this rhythm is the only admitted solution. Lotman seems particularly inclined towards generalizing the fact that each textual production is but a manifestation of "unfinished constructions" (Lotman 1977[1970]: 51), something that seems to presentify the absence of some paradigms. The absence of an integral manifestation is a "wholly real and measurable quantity" of communication (Lotman 1977[1970]: 51) through the articulation between textuality and the system of reader expectations related at the same time to the linguistic and pragmatic framework.

It is exactly because of this that Lotman cited Barthes's work openly: it is necessary to recognize that the unfinished or "incomplete" structure (Lotman 1977[1970]: 51) stems from a more general problem, that is, the "structural role of the *zero-probleme*,⁸ the semantic significance of pause" (Lotman 1977[1970]: 51). In a footnote, there is a reference, though erroneous, to "M. (*sic, pro* Henry) Frei", but next to this, perhaps indirect, reading⁹ – there's no title for Frei's reference, just "*Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, vol. XI, p. 35" – we can find *Writing Degree Zero*, published in 1953, the year of the previous issue. Lotman (1977[1970]: 51) specifically cites the chapter on "writing and silence" from Barthes's book, where the "zero element" (Barthes 1968[1953]: 76) is mentioned for the first time, making his awareness of the semiologist from Cherbourg clear on an occasion that comes up once more in 'Concerning Khlestakov' (Lotman 1985), after Lotman returned to *Mythologies* (Barthes 1972[1957]) to describe different social orientations in the consumption of alcohol.¹⁰ What is not a conscious act is perhaps that a hidden reading of Barthes (Lotman 1977[1970]: 103, note 84) reproduced a mistake: the article published in volume XI of *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* was written by Gödel (see Gödel 1953)!

⁸ In French in the original.

⁹ The correct quotation should be Frei 1950, a seminal article about the "zero element".

¹⁰ It is important to note that in *The Neutral* (Barthes 2005), specifically in the chapter on the 'ideosphere', Barthes explored using neologisms, apparently stopping right before the recognition of the concept of 'semiosphere' by Lotman.

There is not enough space to unpack the thorny issue related to the Saussurean tradition, but it can be summarized by saying that the zero-problem is an *implicit* and *oppositional* sign, paradigmatic and yet empty, neutral, without manifestation.¹¹ In order to bridge this gap – the zero-problem –, we need a *catalysis*, which is not limited to textual borders, but it also takes charge of the paradigmatic structures in consistence with both the zero-signifier and the “extra-systemic elements” (Lotman 1977[1970]: 91). We must remember that in the first page of *Culture and Explosion* we can still find, even after 30 years, the same return to the zero-signifier, the “meaningful zero”, in the expression of an absence (Lotman 2009: 1, fn 1). It is in this book that Lotman gives central attention to catalysts in the logic of explosion. Even for Barthes, the question of the zero signifier persisted in all its actuality up to the reflexions on *The Neutral* from 1977–1978 (Barthes 2005).

2.2. Catalysis and textual incompleteness

Catalysis is a Hjelmslevian notion that reminds us of the need to make elliptic elements explicit through frames of reference or logical and narrative presuppositions (cf. Greimas, Courtés 1982: 26). In any case, we should specify two aspects of this notion. The first one comes from the etymological and disciplinary origin of the concept: ‘*kata*’ means ‘beneath’, while ‘*lysis*’ means ‘dissolution’, ‘loosening’ or ‘unbinding’. We can thus understand the corresponding chemical notion that sees catalysis as the loosening of a process sustained by an activating element that is not necessarily changed by the transformation taking place. We can note here the occurrence of acceleration of a reaction or the reorientation of its dynamics.

In Lotman’s view, the textual phenomenon of *ellipsis*, where the incomplete manifestation of structures casts a light on an extratextual element capable of replacing the missing pieces, is the most important aspect to detect in order to give an account of cultural *dynamics*. It is rather easy to see in Lotman’s perspective a reference to the phenomenon of catalysis, indirectly evoked by the zero-problem and later made explicit in the 1980s. Of note is the fact that, following Lotman, “empty” manifestations are, first of all, a factor in slowing down the reading process, usually sought by artistic strategies. On the other hand, they are also a factor in speeding up reading when the zero-signifier reaches a suitable extrasystemic element (which is the *catalyst*).

Barthes’s recovery of the notion of *catalysis* marks a progressive detachment from Hjelmslev’s heritage, thus implying a reconceptualization of the idea. In his *Elements of Semiology*, catalysis is the realization, after an already manifested element, of a syntactic saturation, and its extension depends on the conceded paradigm (Barthes 1977[1965]:

¹¹ Cf. Gödel 1953.

69–70). Independently, after some pages, we find a synthesis of reflections on the zero signifier, making the same reference to Henri Frei that appears in Lotman's work (Barthes 1977[1965]: 73). It is 1965, and the connection between the zero signifier and catalysis is not completely articulated in Barthes's thought. We will have to wait for the *Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits*¹² to appear in 1966¹³.

While Greimas had a tendency to see catalysis as a strong presupposition in narrative schematisms, Barthes thought of catalysis, on the contrary, as a textual phenomenon entirely realized in-discourse organization. That is, a slowdown in the syntax of cardinal narrative functions,¹⁴ implying "areas of security, rest or luxury" (Barthes 1975: 248). The more idiosyncratic interpretation of Hjelmslev's concept as "syntactic saturation" will continue to be a determining factor: Barthes talks about the absence of an absence, textual lack of economy, the fact that the text reasons in an opposite way to that of the metalinguistic abstraction of theory. That is why he keeps trying to add interstices (Barthes 1975: 268).

Barthes (1975: 249) writes: "[C]atalysis constantly reactivates the semantic tension of discourse, forever saying: there has been, there is going to be, meaning. The enduring function of catalysis is, then, in the final analysis, a phatic function". But obviously, "the catalytic potential of narrative finds a corollary in its elliptical potential" (Barthes 1975: 268). It is true, though, that Barthes begins to put the 'full', or even the 'too full' (oversaturation) in place of the empty signifier. Here we can understand his interest in Sade, for whom the sentence "is also a body to be catalyzed by filling all its principal sites (subject-verb-complement) with expansions, incidental clauses, subordinates, determinators" (Barthes 1989: 129).

Why is Barthes so exasperatedly obsessed with a catalysis that has already been realized on the textual surface? The answer is clearly presented in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*: although we may try to saturate all possible interstices, the results will be catastrophic, because by doing so we only reveal other blank spaces.

Regarding manifested catalyses as if trying to saturate the communicative issues, Barthes's conclusion turns completely against the sentence: "nothing (structurally) permits terminating a sentence," he states (Barthes 1989: 129). Every narration of

¹² Published in English as *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Barthes 1975).

¹³ However, a few pages after "The linguistics of discourse", Barthes's contribution to *Sign, Language, Culture*, we find Anna Wierzbicka's speech, stating that "[t]he postulate of our marking out all the heterogeneous elements of the given text before starting the semantic (or grammatical) analysis is a matter of fact kindred to the postulate of catalysis (completing empirical text). Empirical texts are full of abbreviation of elliptical phrases [...] Now, the situation is similar with respect to heterogeneous 'insertions'" (Wierzbicka 1970[1965]: 627).

¹⁴ "Catalyses are no more than consecutive units, while cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential" (Barthes 1975: 248).

accomplished catalysis reveals blank spaces, zero signifiers that move at the level of textual manifestation. Explicit catalyses are but a paradoxical attempt to hide the voids that affect the interplay of language, even when trying to saturate all combinatorial potentialities. In that way, the manifested catalyses are a supplement that simply displaces the final confrontation of the text with its own need for external elements. The irruption of an external element in a text using delay as a technique, the proliferation of non-cardinal elements, can only cause an implosion of its alleged enclosing.

The conclusion we reach here lies in that it is not necessary to wait for an elliptical text to attest the emergence of catalysis. Where it already seems to stand fulfilled, all we can find is the fragile pleasure of an asymptomatic saturation that surveys its own cracks and voids, and that observes the incoming interruption of strangeness, of a heterogenous composition. Every text is thus more or less covered in unfinished and resistant catalyses that show how the separation of the textual tissue releases meaningful effects beyond strictly immanent constraints.

2.3. The open game and the orientation towards variability

The theoretical consequences of this point of view are very important. The reconstruction of meaning through the semiotic modelling of a *langue* turned *parole* following a process of successive determinations, from the same semantic and syntactic base, can never reach the living signification of a historical text. From utterance to enunciation, there is a lack of explanation, and abduction can only move forward through the interpolation of mediations other than those directly introjected by the text (cf. Parret 1986: 152). We can only attribute a fundamental critical role to the interpreter. If a cultural object always shows the fact that it adapts – either in solidarity or by contrast – to the social scene of public implementation, the interpreter must look for unfinished catalyses, potential sutures in the empty spaces. These are not internal presuppositions regarding the same structural organization but rather missing elements that evoke other structures and cultural spaces.

Lotman was deeply convinced in the hybridity of semiotic principles and the impossibility of saturating the relation between the diminishing of constraints of the systems and the historical and cultural character of the text. Considering the generative process of signification, Lotman could have substituted a series of transitions and movements between one empty space and the next. This does not imply a loss of identification and of possible descriptions of discursive phenomena, but it does immediately show the tensions between the plurality of internal organizations (phonology, grammar, semantics) and external elements such as metre, which can suborganize either phonemes, grammemes or semantemes (Lotman, M. 1974). In any case, there are free, irreflexive relations that turn into catalysts of an unexpected

meaning: “The possibility of choice at different levels, the intersection of different types of organization, and the free ‘play’ among them – these are some of the minimum number of essential cultural mechanisms” (Lotman 1984: 175).

According to Lotman, each culture is a “complex and contradictory compound”¹⁵ (Lotman 1971: 170), and the problem faced by theory when saturating the relation between generative modelling and textual phenomena can be decisively demonstrated by the fact that the self-description of a culture can never avoid going through different levels of deconstruction of the produced textuality (given the excess of grammaticalization), different levels of idealization (with a rather dramatic hiatus between *utopia* and *reality*), and different degrees of deliberate fiction [the self-referential proliferation of laws overcomes the rationalization of practices (Lotman 1971: 170)].

If a culture escapes its complete self-description, it must also note its own impossibility of encrypting and directing the fluctuation of systems in time: phonetic change and fashion are one example (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 225). Fashion is a system directed “towards change” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 225), in a way that all locally asserted normativity is already predisposed to leaving its place to other formal propositions (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 225). The explanatory gap here is programmatic, showing that cultural dynamism is an intersection of categories where there’s a “slack”, a hiatus permitting a play, a space of transition that cannot create saturation, where we can see the “the *shifting* infinity of language”, according to the idiolectal expression coined by Barthes (1991: 73) that has already been quoted in Section 2.1 above.

2.4. From paradigm to the environment: Necessary strangeness

“Pure change”, as a renewing factor, is a witness to the fact that languages cannot saturate the living space of a culture. We can thus recognize the existence of an environment that goes beyond all the spaces of implementation of cultural objects. Naturally, in Lotman’s perspective, this environment is mainly composed of the heterogeneity of the cultural systems necessarily faced by each point of view, from their own specific position. The impenetrability of other systems shows a necessary interpretative catalysis that can only produce information and innovative values. The heterogeneity and alternation of systems are the basis for both the creation of empty spaces and the appearance of “snowball” effects, exemplifying untranslatable values that will be translated despite everything, paradoxically favouring an “accelerating change in the working mechanisms of information” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 228).

¹⁵ “[С]ложный и противоречивый комплекс” in the original.

Catalysis becomes thus a factor for metaobservation: a sign of missing signs, a sign of an exponential implicitation, where the deep questions of life can activate the “movement towards the infinite”, emerging from the study of artistic space in Gogol’s work.

By the end of *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* Lotman describes knowledge as if it were subjugated under the empire of a hopeless goal: “to catch up to the object that is itself” (Lotman 2013: 222) in order to finalize an intrinsic aspiration to self-description. On the other hand, culture is loaded with asynchronisms, shifted processes, slowdowns and moments of quick acceleration caused by the reception of an external element that fills a vacant interstice in the host culture.

Plurilinguistic dialogue is at the basis of the dynamism of social systems and the importing/translating of explosive effects, the fallout of which appears in both future and memory (Lotman 2013: 75). For Lotman, translation is the ultimate catalyzing element that shows the impact of the extra-semiotic space on the cultural object (Lotman 2005: 210). Paradoxically, we can only find an acceleration in the process of change in the periphery of a culture, where self-descriptions are infrequent (Lotman 2005: 214). Semiotic formations are more fragmentary in the periphery, and foreign fragments work as “catalyzers”, says Lotman explicitly. For Lotman, the main question thus becomes: “Why and under what conditions does a foreign text become necessary in certain cultural situations?” (Lotman 1992: 112).¹⁶ These conditions are not to be framed as a search for greater stability. On the contrary, they come as the expansion of internal indetermination (Lotman 1992: 119).

Lotman writes:

A text enters a system with a high degree of internal indeterminacy, that is, a text that, exactly because it is a text rather than merely a bare ‘meaning’ (in Zholkovsky-Scheglov’s sense), is itself internally indeterminate – representing not a materialization of a certain language but a polyglottic formation that can be given a number of different interpretations from the position of different languages –, is internally conflicted, and is capable of exposing completely new meanings in a new context. (Lotman 1992: 119)¹⁷

¹⁶ “почему и в каких условиях в определенных культурных ситуациях чужой текст делается необходимым” (Lotman 1992: 112) in the Russian original.

¹⁷ In the original: “[...] в систему с большой внутренней неопределенностью вносится извне текст, который именно потому, что он текст, а не некоторый голый «смысл» (в значении Жолковского-Щеглова), сам обладает внутренней неопределенностью, представляя собой не овеществленную реализацию некоторого языка, а полиглотическое образование, поддающееся ряду интерпретаций с позиции различных языков, внутренне конфликтное и способное в новом контексте раскрываться совершенно новыми смыслами.” (Lotman 1992: 119)

Catalysis is then a “window in the semiotic layer” that allows us to “play” “with the space external to it, first drawing it into itself, then throwing into it those elements of its own which have already been used and which have lost their semiotic activity” (Lotman 2009: 24).

2.5. Questions of rhythm: fashion and play

Fashion and play seem to present themselves as the exemplary domains of the dynamism of culture, where the static and synchronic stage is nothing but a fiction that assists in the self-description of a system. In this respect, fashion “introduces a dynamic principle to those spheres of life which appear to be non-dynamic” (Lotman 2009: 79). The capricious and unmotivated character of fashion “makes it a certain metronome of cultural development” (Lotman 2009: 79) that shapes “the transformation of the insignificant into the significant” (Lotman 2009: 80).

Catalysis can be taken as punctual (explosive), but it is also concealed in the iterative (rhythmic) configurations, causing thus a repetition of markedly differentiated agogic movements because of the asymmetric accelerations and decelerations of these transformations. “Semiological space is filled with the freely moving fragments of a variety of structures” (Lotman 2009: 114) that move, collide and vigorously restore themselves (Lotman 2009: 114). However, fashion does not just deal with internal fragments through a sort of continuous bricolage, it also comes forward as a “form of intrusion” in an exterior language which, following its own rhythm, “inserts itself in the dynamics of the main culture” (Lotman 2009: 114).

In the idea that fashion “is intended to act as a metronome and catalyst of cultural development” (Lotman 2009: 134), Lotman’s voice seems to be superimposed over that of Barthes’s. The pure fascination exercised by an exterior space translates into the welcoming of its prosody, its phenomena of variation and the opportunities for change given to the guest language.

It is particularly necessary to take the role of catalysis seriously, for *explosion* operates on a specific juncture of a certain creation, text or discursive development. Catalysis is thus a false synonym that asserts itself where a substitutive paradigmatic form cannot be guaranteed by the native culture any further (cf. Lotman 2009: 136). Right in the centre of a basis of general structures, we can substitute a commencement of nomadic forms with the aim of assumption and assimilation, following a local and dynamic *structuration*. For Lotman, “art is not ‘a game without rules’, but a game whose rules must be established in the process of play” (Lotman 1977: 292). That is why Lotman never proposed nor accepted a generative structural model (Lotman 1977: 292–293).

In his thesis on art as a secondary modelling system, Lotman shows that play is at the foundation of the self-centredness of art and its autonomous justification, considering

its fictional character and emancipation from the real: play “develops an emotional structure necessary for practical activity” (Lotman 2011: 253), a transversal structure of mediation that simultaneously implies introjection and suspension, convention and experimentation. Play “models randomness, incomplete determination” (Lotman 2011: 256) and is introduced as an active background related to the mainstay of signifying system.

The passage on translating the untranslatable, doubtlessly crucial for Lotman’s concept of explosion, has a correspondence in the “imitation of the inimitable” that characterizes Barthes’s view on fashion (Barthes 2002e: 887). Yet, ‘play’, that is, the ability to move past radical difference, is accepting a rhythmical proposition whose foreign form is only a valuable catalyzer for acceleration in a specific domain of the host culture. Fashion is thus a factor contributing to the asymmetrization and asynchronization of social dynamics. Rhythmic structures have no issue with regards to their justification or validation: their capricious diffusion takes advantage of the impertinence of rationalization.

The intrusion of exterior details is favoured by the presence of an interstice, a *zero signifier* in the host culture. This zero signifier becomes thus more visible (“naked”) than the host culture is static, deprived of a proper rhythm. However, the massive presence of ellipses may paralyze or dissuade it. Rhythmic intrusion is catalytic in that it conceals an unexpected “filling up” on the plane of content. In other words, it appears to us that our common reflexion on the relation between Barthes and Lotman has moved past rhetorical artifice or erudite historical reconstruction by showing real and productive intersections to the point where we can find a viable basis for a formalization of the concept of *catalysis* through a synthesis of their contributions.

2.6. Ellipsis and oversaturation

It would be interesting to preserve the notion of catalysis because it shows that assuming a foreign form reveals a missing link in the self-description of the host culture, which implies that the host culture encounters the foreign, the ‘Other’, as an implicit part of itself.

Historically speaking, Barthes notes that the democratization of the *forms of life*, with different styles available to everyone, forces us to take distinctive *details* seriously (Barthes 2013[2005]: 61). Such a detail can look like *nothing*, some sort of *je ne sais quoi*. The intrusion of this distinction reveals thus an implicit blank space that may be filled with an undetermined detail. Both the chemical process that activates change in semiotic productions and, specifically, the formula that institutes *oneself as another* (Ricoeur) are ready to start acting.

We need to remember that, for Barthes, the most interesting aspects here lie, on the one hand, in the oversaturation of catalysis directly realized in discourse to the fault (baroque proliferations), and on the other hand, in the ellipsis: “a misunderstood figure, disturbs because it represents the dreadful freedom of language, which is somehow *without necessary proportion*” (Barthes 1994: 80). The ellipsis is but the missing catalysis in the dimension of the utterance, but its most remarkable aspect is that this silent lack can be associated with a paradigmatic absence: the ellipsis becomes thus a symptom of a flaw in the linguistic system, revealing its vulnerable neutrality with the advent of a foreign element. The ellipsis turns thus into a cultural concern when there are no connoted substitutions, just emptiness; when the utterer’s initiative becomes neutralized. Is there any chance for a “paradigmatic turning point” in the opening of a system? Can explosion be a punctual catalysis filling the void in the fabric of text?

Conclusions: The life of cultural systems

We can finally draw some conclusions by asking ourselves how Lotman and Barthes combined a *critical vocation* to semiotic analysis with a focus on cultural indetermination of the culture and the impersonal nature of its transformation. The dandy is the ultimate hero aiming to work autonomously on distinctive details, for “fashion has exterminated all *considered* singularity in clothing” (Barthes 2013[1962]: 63). Fashion has inoculated “all of contemporary clothing [...] with a bit of dandyism” (Barthes 2013[1962]: 63).

Deep down, Barthes and Lotman worked on a model of cultural transmission, unbound to the unilateral power of codes or to an epidemiological model. They each painted, with their own theoretical horizon, the *life of cultural systems*, a life inflected by undetermined factors, the interplay of forms that also guarantee a continuous dynamism of social semantics. The life of systems moves along the protagonists of history by demythifying their acts, preventing us from seeing them as heroes anymore. The choice of a destiny, as well as self-observation of behaviour, are at both the individual and collective levels, an imperfective tension, where *studium* (voluntary concentration) must be articulated with the *punctum* of an unexpected formal explosion. In other words, theory itself must dispose of its “heroic” aspirations: the need to face a heterogeneity that prevents the formation of a unifying description was perhaps the reason, for both Barthes and Lotman, for the progressive relinquishment of formalization as well as schematization.

The cross-reading of Barthes and Lotman shows that they did not try to find a descriptive aptitude hidden in practices and produced texts. On the contrary, the *forms of life* and discourses they studied were assumed as an eccentric posture

that the semiotician's view should learn to assume. Cultural life is simply a series of anamorphoses that dream of imposing themselves as a "main perspective". The ethical role of theory is the critique of such an ambition, not its realization. That is why Barthes increasingly accepts its implication in the object towards a sort of experiential semiology. That is why Lotman's essays give word, with care and critical finesse, to the literary scholars, the artists, and even to the wisdom of popular thought.

Deep down, a discourse on culture, a cultural self-description such as the semiotic metadiscourse cannot avoid reproducing an autocatalysis in itself. As Lotman (1990: 3) says at the beginning of *Universe of the Mind*:

The idea that 'thinking' semiotic structures need an initial impulse from another thinking structure and that text-generating mechanisms need a text from outside to set them going reminds us on the one hand of so called autocatalytic reactions, that is those reactions where, in order to obtain the final product (or to hasten a chemical process), the final result has to be already present in some quantity at the beginning of the reaction. And, on the other hand, this question finds a parallel in the as yet unsolved problem of the 'beginning' of culture and the 'beginning' of life.

Beyond the ambition of taking charge of the origin of culture and languages, we can make the most of catalysis as a semiotic detector of the dynamization of systems, which can combine an ecological vision of culture with an indexing or archeological perspective on the analysis of discourse. At heart, we do not want to defend the idea that Lotman and Barthes shared the same concept of *catalysis*, despite their many shared points. What we proposed is a form of recursive application of the catalytic principle through two different, yet complementary conceptualizations of this process to the point of envisioning a better syncretic theorization of the infinitely productive process of culture. The convergence between Barthes and Lotman is thus perfectly explosive.¹⁸

References

- Barthes, Roland 1968 [1953]. *Writing Degree Zero*. (Lavers, Annette; Smith, Colin, trans.) New York: Hill and Wang.
- 1972[1957]. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang.
 - 1975[1966]. *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*. *New Literary History* 6(2): 237–272.
 - 1977[1965]. *Elements of Semiology*. (Lavers, Annette; Smith, Colin, trans.) New York: Hill and Wang.

¹⁸ The article has been translated from French by Claudio Julio Rodríguez Higuera.

- 1989[1971]. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. (Miller, Richard, trans.) Berkeley: University of California Press.
 - 1990. *From Work to Text. Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 441–446.
 - 1991 *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*. (Coverdale, Linda, trans.) New York: Hill and Wang.
 - 1994[1975]. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. (Howard, Richard, trans.) Berkeley: University of California Press.
 - 2002a[1970]. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang.
 - 2002b[1960]. Le bleu est à la mode cette année. *Œuvres complètes. Vol. I*: Paris: Seuil, 1025–1038.
 - 2002c[1960]. Les unités “traumatiques” au cinéma (en collaboration avec G. Cohen Séat). *Œuvres complètes. Vol. I*. Paris: Seuil, 1047–1056.
 - 2002d[1966]. La linguistique du discours. *Œuvres complètes. Vol. III*. Paris: Seuil, 611–616.
 - 2002e[1966]. La mode et les sciences humaines. *Œuvres complètes. Vol. II*. Paris: Seuil, 887–892.
 - 2002f[1970]. L’ancienne rhétorique. Aide-mémoire. *Œuvres complètes. Vol. III*. Paris: Seuil, 527–601.
 - 2002g[1970]. Critique et autocritique (entretien avec André Bourin). *Œuvres complètes. Vol. III*. Paris: Seuil, 635–648.
 - 2002h[1972]. Sémiologie et médecine. *Œuvres complètes. Vol. IV*. Paris: Seuil, 174–183.
 - 2005. *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977–1978)*. (Krauss, Rosalind; Hollier, Dennis, trans.) New York: Columbia University Press.
 - 2013[2005]. *The Language of Fashion*. (Stafford, Andy, trans.) London: Bloomsbury.
- Frei, Henri 1950. Zéro, vide et intermittent. *STUF – Language Typology and Universals* 4: 161–191.
- Gödel, Robert 1953. La question des signes zéro. *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 11: 31–41.
- Goodman, Nelson 1968. *Languages of Art*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Greimas, Algirdas J.; Courtés, Joseph 1982[1979]. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hjelmslev, Louis 1961[1943]. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Lotman, Juri 1964. Leksii po struktural’noy poetike. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam [Sign Systems Studies]* 1. [Лекции по структуральной поэтике. *Труды по знаковым системам* 1.]
- 1971. Problema «obucheniya kul’ture» kak ee tipologicheskaya harakteristika. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam [Sign Systems Studies]* 5: 167–176. [Проблема «обучения культуре» как ее типологическая характеристика. *Труды по знаковым системам* 5: 167–176.]
 - 1977[1970]. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. (Lenhoff, Gail; Vroon, Ronald, trans.) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
 - 1984. The stage and painting as code mechanisms for cultural behavior in the early nineteenth century. *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 165–176.
 - 1985. Concerning Khlestakov. *Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 150–187.
 - 1990. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- 1992. K postroyeniyu teorii vzaimodejstviya kul'tur (semioticheskij aspekt). *Izbrannyye stat'i Tom 1*. Tallinn: Aleksandra, 110–120. [К построению теории взаимодействия культур (семиотический аспект). *Избранные статьи. Том 1*. Таллинн: Александра, 110–120.]
 - 2005[1985]. On the semiosphere. (Clark, Wilma, trans.) *Sign Systems Studies* 33(1): 205–229.
 - 2009[1993]. *Culture and Explosion*. (Clark, Wilma, trans.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
 - 2011[1967]. The place of art among other modelling systems. *Sign Systems Studies* 39(2/4): 249–270.
 - 2013[1994]. *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*. (Baer, Brian, trans.) Tallinn: Tallinn University Press.
- Lotman, Juri; Uspensky, Boris 1978. On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture. *New Literary History* 9: 211–232.
- Lotman, Mihhail 1974. O vzaimodejstvii estestvennogo yazyka i metriki v mehanizme stiha. *Materialy vsesoyuznogo simpoziuma po vtorichnym modeliruyushchim sistemam* 1(5). Tartu: Tartu University Press, 182–186. [О взаимодействии естественного языка и метрики в механизме стиха. *Материалы всесоюзного симпозиума по вторичным моделирующим системам* 1(5). Тарту: ТГУ, 182–186]
- Parret, Herman 1986. *Les passions*. Liège: Mardaga.
- Wierzbicka, Anna 1970[1965]. *Descriptions or quotations: Sign, Language, Culture*. The Hague: Mouton, 627–644.
- Zenkin, Serge 2013. La sémiotique de l'image visuel: Roland Barthes et Iouri Lotman. *Glissements, décentrement, déplacement: Pour un dialogue sémiotique franco-russe*. Saint-Denis: Bibliothèque de l'Université Paris 8, 84–91.

От парадигмы к окружающей среде: иностранный ритм и пунктуальный катализ культуры

Юрий Лотман и Ролан Барт создали две различные критически ориентированные семиотические традиции. Они оба пережили эволюцию идей, двигаясь от систематической организованности к живым преобразованиям в системе культуры. Это позволило им с двух сторон критиковать коды и идентичности, отдавая предпочтение либо анонимной гибридности (Лотман), либо нейтралитету (Барт), где гетерогенность становится принципом творческого «беспорядка». Хотя их теоретические достижения в достаточной мере отличаются, оба ученых отказываются от превращения описательных практик (*studium*) в модель любой другой формы поведения, учитывая, что текстуальные и институциональные границы не всегда четко определены. Таким образом, Барт и Лотман предвосхитили современные тенденции исследования семиотических практик: Барт – по причине особого рода саморефлексии поведения интерпретатора, Лотман – из-за аналитического интереса к жизнотворчеству.

Бартовское понимание «письма» переключается с концепцией Лотмана о культуре как «коллективном интеллекте»: мы ищем следы оживления знаков. Можно утверждать, что с точки зрения обоих ученых вписывание речевых событий в историю проблематизирует динамическое и асинхронное соотношение между структурной рамкой культуры и текстовым наследием. Тема ритма моды не находится в стороне от их исследований, скорее, это самая четкая иллюстрация диалектики отношений между внешней структурной проекцией и локальной интроекцией форм, в зависимости от определяющих условий.

Paradigmast keskkonnani: võõrrütm ja kultuuri punktuaalne katalüüs

Lotman ja Barthes löid kaks erinevat kriitilise suunitlusega semiootilist traditsiooni. Mõlemad tegid läbi ideede evolutsiooni, liikudes süstemaatiliselt organiseerituselt kultuurisüsteemides toimuvate elavate muutuste poole. See võimaldas neil viljelda koodide ja identiteetide kahepoolset kriitikat, eelistades kas anonüümset hübriidsust (Lotman) või neutraalsust (Barthes), millesse kätketud heterogeensusest saab loomingulise “korratuse” printsiip. Kuigi nende teoreetilised saavutused on üsna erinevad, on mõlemale õpetlasele ühine nende keeldumine kirjeldavate praktikate (‘studium’) muutmise üskõik millise teise käitumisliigi mudeliks, arvestades, et tekstuaalsed ja institutsionaalsed ääred ei ole alati selgelt määratletud. Lühidalt, Barthes ja Lotman ennetasid nüüdisaegseid suundumusi praktikate semiootika uurimises: Barthes objektiga vastamisi seisva tõlgendaja käitumist puudutava teatud eneserefleksiooni tõttu ning Lotman oma eluhoiakud ja -laade puudutava analüütilise huvi kaudu.

Barthes’ arusaam kirjutamisest jõuab sisuliselt Lotmani kultuuri kui “kollektiivse isiku” kontseptsioonini: me otsime jälgi märkidele elu sisse puhumisest. Täpsemalt, võib väita, et mõlema teadlase puhul problematiseerib kõnesündmuste ajalukku sisse kirjutamine kultuuri struktuurse raami ja tekstilise pärandi vahelist dünaamilist ja asünkroonset suhet. Moe rütm ei ole nende uurimustes kõrvalteema, vaid pigem kõige selgem näide dialektikast väljastpoolt lähtuva struktuurse projektsiooni ning vormide lokaalse introjektsiooni vahel sõltuvalt määravatest tingimustest.