Language and Historic Plots. Lotman’s Critical Vision of Historic Text Constructions in the Russian Culture
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At the end of his life, Lotman proposed to converge the cultural studies on the *semiotics of history*, as a science for an analysis of the *Weltanschauung* of the human unity [*chelovecheskaja edinitsa*] produced by a culture who has to make choices for the future, namely to open new paths. Through this perspective, he intends to deconstruct a such idea of historic track that influenced deeply the course of events in Russian world: idea which transformed the *human unity* “in an all-embracing totality” (Lotman 1991, p. 170).

This paper intends to retrace Lotman’s vision of history and his critical thought about logic-argumentative strategies that underlie the historic text constructions. Particular attention will be given to the rhetoric-textual “contaminations” between the Russian idea of “history” and the European Hegelianism, cause of the imitation of the French Revolution in Russian – event that had repercussions up to the post-soviet world.

1. **Lotman’s legacy. Focus on the Euro-Russian historical relationships**

Yuri M. Lotman was born in St. Petersburg in 1922 and died in Tartu, Estonia in 1993. The course of his life, in a similar manner to the arc of his intellectual evolution, moved from the center of the Soviet Empire to its periphery. Because of the Soviet purges during the early 1950’s, his Jewish origins forced him to take refuge in Estonia and to restart his academic career at the University of Tartu. There Lotman was able to turn what seemed to be a “mutilation” into a fruitful and liberating atmosphere of collegial intellectual exchange. In 1964 the so-called Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School was created. It was thought as a sort of “noosphere”, based on an interdisciplinary dialogue and an adhesion to a precise ethical idea of scientific research – transparency, collegiality and enhancement of the individual. From Tartu, Lotman carried out an intellectual policy of quiet but stern criticism of the Soviet regime. Employing a scientific language in which metaphorical sense is veiled, he was able to erode the techno-practical epistemology of the Sovietism and to affirm the centrality of peripheral processes in the transformation of culture: Tartu vs. Moscow, the margin vs. the center, the unspoken thought vs. the dominant one. It isn’t an accident that his motto was the Gospel phrase: the stone that was rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone (Lotman 1980, p. 13).
The Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School developed in the crossroads of particular historical conditions – initially the Soviet regime, afterwards Perestroika, and in particular social conditions – the contradictions between the national identities and the soviet meta-identity), the School developed its theoretical reflections not coincidentally around the culture, namely the ways through which every community transforms the reality in a meaning space where historical-mnemonic, geographical, ideological identity is self-generated. Lotman, in particular, focused his whole theory on the dialectic between the “own” and the “other” (svoe and čužoe), the “self” and the “outside-of-self” – that is to say what is different, alien, marginal, peripheral, and on the various discursive strategies able to build and transmit the difference: a culture, to be such, namely one in which it is possible to utter I am, “creates, with all its efforts, an outsider bearer of another consciousness, which encodes the world in a different way [...]. This image created in the entrails of the culture, in contrast with its dominant codes, is its externalization toward the outside and a projection of itself on the cultural worlds that lie around it” (Lotman 1985, pp. 124-125). And it is a projection that is often loaded with negative and antagonist attributes, such as the barbarian, the uncivilized, the profane, etc.

Toward the end of his life, Lotman wrote a series of articles to stand with his contemporaries in the difficult process of transition from Sovietism to an undefined “post” system: these articles were oriented toward his Estonian countrymen, namely for those who were enthusiastic about the Soviet collapse but who would soon have to confront the traumatic process of dealing with a cultural reconstruction involving issues of nationhood, political and economic transformations, ethnic identity).

Obviously they were only perspectives rather than precise assessments of this “post” because he was only a witness to the transformations of the Russian Perestroika period (1985-1991), the Czech Velvet Revolution (1989), the independence movements of the Baltic States and the Slavic Republics (1991).

Lotman lived through the disintegration of the Soviet empire and its early transitional phase from “the Culture to the cultures”: a phase that, as much socio-political and socio-economic literature emphasized, could be defined as euphoric. But he did not directly experience the cultural shock that followed with its loss of self-orientation, its confusion in face of an unknown autonomy and, above all, the confusion in face of the older states’ autonomy with their clearly defined European identities. We should therefore welcome Lotman’s thought as the vision of one who, through a deep knowledge of the Russian world, of its history and its distinctive cultural features, tried to imagine the path of a familiar but very unpredictable spirit.

What Lotman proposed as his theoretical task and bequeathed as his legacy was to develop a historical reconstruction of the cultural links between Europe and Russia. Without a precise discernment of those links it is not possible to properly understand the genesis of Sovietism and to advance a path of post-ideological rehabilitation and identification. Of these links, he privileged one – the analogy, more rhetorical than real, between the French Revolution and the October Revolution: analogy that had been adopted during the first two decades of the 20th century by the members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and used in order to legitimize the class conflict.

Lotman observes in his 1989 essay On the Perspective of the French Revolution that especially during the autumn and the winter 1917 the insurgents sang the praises of sans-culotte’s clothing: “Sans-culotte in rags – Invader in uniform!” went the song that symbolized opposition to the apparatus of old uniforms and parades serving the sovereignty of the tsar (Lotman 2002a, p. 372, footnote 1). And, as the Jacobins in their sans-culottes, the Russian revolutionaries formulated utopian and dramatic, radical action plans. Lotman writes (ivž, p. 374):

In times of desperation, revolution suggests visibly impracticable slogans and these inspire the masses, replacing the program of the real politicians. [...] Jacobins were ousted when the impracticability of their program became evident. Lenin gave proof of his cleverness when, at the end of the civil war, stated [through the NEP] the impracticability of the maximalist slogans, coming from Svetlov’s ballad, on the world revolution, which had inspired not only the party but also the farmer.

The analogy between the two revolutions, penetrating in a cultural background structurally different from the European western one, had an unexpected blasting effect and took root with extreme radicalism in Russian political and social fabric.
We have to consider this unpredictability as an effect of the textual manipulation which was implied in the “work” of party self-persuasion. In this sense, according to Lotman this phenomenon has to be analyzed adopting a logic-argumentation approach to the texts, able to highlight the plot (syuzhet, сюжет) – or the narrative structure that underlies the report of historical events (Lotman 1991, pp. 166-167): “every text, first of all, is an utterance in a natural language and is thus inevitably organized according to the laws of the syntactic structures of that specific language”, so that

(...) grammatical structure predetermines the distribution of roles in the content of a proposition, i.e. language subordinates reality to its organization. (...) the very necessity of grammatically organizing a text has an influence on what this text is capable of saying. But the laws of text construction on the level above the phrase, i.e. the laws of rhetoric, are more important. As soon as we transcend the limits of the phrase into the broader elements of the text, the correct construction of this text implies a sense of topic. The topic has its own logical laws. In order to tell about some event, it has to be organized according to the laws of this logic, i.e. the episodes have to be arranged in a definite plot sequence, the plot has to be brought into an extra-textual reality, and simultaneous events, which may not be connected, must be re-organized into a consistent and connected chain. Thus, the necessity of the historian to rely on texts and of the texts to retell the events according to the laws of linguistic and logical, rhetorical and narrative constructions results in the extra-textual reality falling into the researcher’s hands in an obviously distorted shape.

This strategy of plot-construction characterized the difficult history of Russian culture, above all during the Times of Troubles, which deeply influenced the course of later events – making “desirable” the process of Europeanization.


The deep cultural link between Europe and the Tsarist Russian empire coincides with the advent of modernity. In Russia, modernity arrived along the lines of the European one, a model of which was imposed by Peter the Great in his attempt to eradicate the ancient folk tradition and its religious orthodoxy. The Petrine reforms, inspired mainly by the need to adapt to the technical and military challenges of the more advanced European countries, marked the conclusion of the first Russian historical phase that had lasted until the Time of Troubles and the election of Mikhail Romanov, and launched the “second Russia,” a state which was already substantially formed through its prior orientation and imitation of the West, in a cycle that lasted until October 1917. As pointed out by Vittorio Strada (1991, 2005), the Russian culture is in this way modern in a twofold sense - both in terms of modernization’s chronology and of the acts and process of the forced modernization imposed by Peter the Great on its origin.

In 1703 the Russian capital was torn from “sacred” Moscow, symbol of the common people (narod, народ) and of their Byzantine inheritance (Moscow the Third Rome) and was entrusted to St. Petersburg, a town that came from nothing and was situated, not coincidentally, on the borders of the Empire as a “window on Europe”. In 1725, the Russian Academy of Sciences was founded, based primarily on Gottfried W. von Leibniz’s design and composed mostly of exponents of modern, secular, Western ideals and called upon to contribute to the birth of a new era. The official language of the noble class and intelligentsia became French (with the consequent import of the philosophical-literary production revolving around the Encyclopédie) a language that gradually inseminated the principles of the Enlightenment into the Russian cultural fabric and later those of utopian socialism. At the same time, with the imposition of this heteronomous and xenophilic identity, a deep and radical split arose between the state hierarchy and the Russian people. The latter, remaining loyal to their national tradi-
tions and so to the myth of the tsar, started to consider the new personification of the modern autocracy as a sort of Antichrist.

As many historians have pointed out, between the 18th and the 20th century the Russian national self-consciousness divided into three different forms: the official’s, the people’s and the intellectual’s, the latter of which was in turn crossed by an internal split between pro-Western and Slavophile currents. For the purposes of this essay, a key issue here stands out. Within this opposition is fostered, in a contradictory way, the cultural trend that will have a prime role in the germination of the October Revolution, namely Hegelianism.

This was the first form of philosophy in the history of Russian philosophical thought and developed in 1830-40 following the Decembrist uprising. When at that time European culture was seeing a division of the Hegelian school into Right and Left, the Russian intelligentsia began to discover this form of thought totally alien to its tradition, “being so before”, as the philosopher Leonida Gancikoff described, “the already fully complete systems of the German philosophy” (Gancikoff 1932, p. 166) by which it was dazzled, “both by the systematic completeness and by the constructive dialectic strength of the thought” (ibidem).

Idealism, in particular, seemed to respond effectively to Russian intellectuals’ dream (both Westernizers and Slavophiles) to create a rational system of thought where the ideal could enter in the life and the life could rise to the level of an ideal, in order to counteract the empiricist and anti-spiritualistic aftermaths of the previous period. This need to mend the splits caused by the Enlightenment’s rationalism encouraged the Russian culture to develop its thought based on Idea, a concept capable of legitimating a new way of seeing the world - unitary, ideal-utopian, impregnated with an “other” reality not immediately understandable, in other words a world rich in the ultimate meaning of things.

Respecting the extraordinary richness of the German Idealism, after its initial orientation to its most Romantic form (Fichte and Schelling), the intelligentsia held in high regard Hegel’s absolutist orientation. Through this, the pro-Western current prevailed, forcing the Russian culture, which had always been more inclined to the mystical wisdom dimension of knowledge (one promoted by the Slavophile current) once again toward a form of thought alien to its roots, namely a systematic and dialectical one.

The post-Decembrist liberal generation, in the words of Roger Bartlett (2005), influenced by the German Romantic Idealist philosophy, in fashion in that moment, began to interpret the present of the

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1 The Antichrist was already present in the figure of the fake Western Christian (Catholic and Protestant), but, in this case, the enemy otherness lives no longer outside its own borders but inside the culture.

2 All scholars are in concordance in asserting that it took centuries of “prehistory”, prolonged until the 18th century, until philosophy arose in Russian as “autonomous discipline”, with its own subject and problems and with its own specific language. This long prehistory, defined as a “secular silence” by one of the greatest scholars of Greek Patristics, G. Florovskij, is mainly attributed to the fact that Russia, under the influence of the cultural Byzantine heritage, was converted to Christianity but not to Hellenism. The “pagan” philosophical legacy of ancient Greek, one which Byzantine culture never forgot, even in its period of decline, did not significantly affect the thinking of the Russian people for whom the Greek-Byzantine legacy was only an instrument of faith, and not a force of creative energy (Tagliagambe 2006, pp. 19-20).

3 An orientation which also coincides with the spread of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thought in the Russian Empire.

4 Due to the peculiar feature of the Russian culture, the Idealistic philosophical tendency took root radically in its intellectual ground, going on to penetrate in the deepest fibers of daily life. At the same time, however, it took a totally opposite path to that of Western philosophy, going from Idealism to Realism, a particularly Russian form of “integral knowledge”. Idealism, in other words, was initially supported by both the pro-Western current and the Slavophile one. But while “the Slavophiles, oriented towards religious and historical ideals of the old Russia, based their philosophy of history and religion on Schelling’s theoretical principles of the last phase […] the Westernizers, oriented to the values of European civilization, saw in Hegel a system through which their ideology could be consolidated. It so happened that, at the end of the 19th century with the evident failure of the Hegelian system to justify and especially to transform reality, the Slavophile current proved to be more able to express the Russian soul and made this going back “to the traditional positions of Realism [mainly oriented towards Platonism] and [trying] to develop an ontological system and in order to create a real philosophy of life” (Gancikoff 1932, pp. 167-168).
country in the light of its past in order to understand a potential and desirable future, thus introducing an unprecedented vision of the movement of time.

By adopting Hegelian historicism, which contained the idea that history possesses its own inner necessity and a precise internal logic (“the course of the world”) the Russian culture was seen as a collective self-consciousness on the way toward an “end” (the realization of Reason or of an immanent infinity), in which historical events were nothing more than a stage of the becoming of the absolute. But declaring as its summit the realization of the State (the supreme affirmation of Reason), history, thus understood, did nothing but support autocratic Russia, which required anything but conservative thought. This is where the Russian Hegelian intellectuals, in order to respond to the urgency of the social question, dramatically reversed their position and ended up re-interpreting Hegel in revolutionary terms. The transition from the Hegelian Right to the Left was not only the germination of the future Bolshevik revolution but also created the ground for an “explosive” (взрыв, взрыv) confrontation: The Occidentalist intelligentsia ended up by merging French utopian socialism, which had influenced Russian society fifty years previously, with the nationalist and populist branch of the Slavophile tendency, which supported an idea of history as palingenesis. As a result, over time, Russia witnessed the emergence and spread of a conception of historical, social and cultural development, which was seen as a becoming without mediation, carried out by a ceaseless conflict, in an extremist, radical and bloody version, inspired by the imitation of the French revolutionary model, of which Hegel himself was deeply fascinated. To this, it must be added the effect of a specificity of the Russian mentality, which was alien to the distinction of the theory from the practice, namely a theory upon which a practice can be based. In this way, the radicalism of thinking becomes renewing action, one that is even more radical in times of crisis.

3. Binarism and Ternarity: Explosion and Mediation in Historical Development

According to Lotman, the finalistic-revolutionary vision profoundly influenced the historical path of the “third Russia” (1917-1991), leaving deep marks in the process of post-Soviet reconstruction. It isn’t an accident that he dedicates almost all of his final intellectual speculation to this issue. Together with his colleague, Boris A. Uspensky, he retraces the history of Russia from the Middle Ages to the Perestroika era, stressing that the main cause of the explosive and revolutionary trend of the Russian world consists in what he calls “binarism”, a concept that, as we will see, wedded itself in the modern epoch to the Russian pro-Western Hegelian current imposed an eschatological course on the entire culture. In Lotman’s 1993 Unpredictable Mechanisms of Culture, written for his Estonian countrymen as an educational text and in its scholarly version, Culture and Explosion (1992), Lotman tries to deconstruct the ideological bonds that submit to an idea of history as teleological trajectory: idea hinged on the assumption that, Lotman writes (Lotman 1994, p. 81),

the “actual” course of events chooses from an extensive set of possibilities only one line of development, discarding events that did not occur are as if they could not have occurred. In this view,
the future is transformed into a single predictable chain. All fatalistic conceptions of the future (one might point first to the varieties of Hegelianism) construct the future on the basis of reflection produced from the study of the past. Actually, the space between the present and the future is, in principle, not symmetrical with the space “present–past.” There is not just one path from the present to the future but a multitude of equally possible paths.

Influenced by the change in the concept of “time” within the hard sciences (Einstein-Minkowski-Prigogine\(^{10}\)), Lotman stresses that historiography must include the unpredictability of paths that history can potentially take\(^{11}\) and must not leave out this “multitude of equally possible paths” (ibidem). It isn’t just a theoretical position but also an ethical one (Lotman 2009, p. 14):

by removing the moment of unpredictability from the historical process, we make it totally redundant. From the position of a bearer of Reason who holds to the process of the internal point of view (such as may be God, Hegel or any other philosopher, who has mastered the “singular scientific method”, this movement is deprived of informativity.

The informativity is the newness that is brought about by the history, and thinking about it as a sort of inevitable predestination means that every event must, in some way, be interpreted as “expected” and coherent\(^{12}\). That, according to Lotman, is what occurred in the Soviet Union, where history, peoples and their cultures were forced to be part of an anthropological-politically progressive project perhaps destined from the start.

The connection between the historical eschatologism and its real actualization (1905-1924)\(^{13}\) is the meeting between the myth of the French Revolution and what Lotman calls “binarism”.

A particular aspect of the cultural self-definition – the I am earlier mentioned, is the manner through which every culture is aware of moving along the time and, simultaneously, keeps a memory of the

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\(^{10}\) I have already noted that Lotman devotes himself to the reflections on history in of all his final speculations from 1986 to 1993. In 1986 Lotman was introduced to the theory of non-equilibrium thermodynamics, originated by the Russian chemist-physicist Ilya Prigogine, one of the major theorists of the epistemology of complexity (fundamental also in the social sciences). This scientific paradigm, as many of us now know, gives to unpredictability a leading role in the processes of living development, disowning a certain determinism that is sometime postulated (on the philosophical level) from the laws of nature. Deeply attracted by this paradigm, and using the analogical method of analysis, Lotman transferred by his analogical methods the concept of unpredictability to his study on culture and, in particular, on history, proposing a new interpretation of the dynamics in the development of the Russian culture.

\(^{11}\) According to Lotman, a good historiographical case is that of the Annales School. Adopting an anti-positivistic vision, the exponents of the longue durée (J. Le Goff, J. Deleuzeau, L. Febvre, M. Bloch, F. Braudel et.al.) favored a static approach to the study of history, seen as a sort of imperceptible geological movement, carried out by masses and by slow and anonymous historical-collective processes. In this way, the School deconstructed the great narrations, ousting the idea of exceptional personalities of memorable biographies, stating l’histoire des hommes, non de l’Homme (Lotman 1990, p. 224). Although Lotman prefers another approach, the one linked to unpredictability and creativity suggested to him by Prigogine, he doesn’t fail to emphasize the indispensability of this reflection on the strength - slow but inexorable, almost deterministic, of the masses’ unconsciousness.

\(^{12}\) In Culture and Explosion, Lotman evoking Pasternak’s line, which attributing to Hegel Schlegel’s expression, wrote: “Once upon a time, unintentionally / And, probably, hazarding a guess, / Hegel called the historian a prophet, / Predicting in reverse.” Lotman continues: “The ingenious statement, which drew Pasternak’s attention, actually very deeply reflects the fundamental concepts of Hegelian philosophy and Hegel’s attitude towards history. The retrospective view allows the historian to examine the past from two points of view: being located in the future in relation to the event described, he sees before himself a whole chain of completed actions; transporting himself mentally into the past and looking from the past into the future, he already knows the results of the process” (Lotman 2009, p. 126).

\(^{13}\) We can consider the period of realization of the new earth and the new sky as the years from 1905 to 1924, a period that began with “Bloody Sunday,” continuing on to the October Revolution and the Russian civil war and ending with Lenin’s death.
past, realizing various collective practices and creating multiple narrations about its historical subjectivity. In the pre-soviet Russia, Lotman underlines, the most evident manifestation of this subjectivity that “feels” to proceed in the course of time can be observed through its historiographical description: a continuum of sudden interruptions and explosions.

This dynamic requires the precise name of “binarism” – a particular cultural predisposition of the Russian mentality to interpret reality through an opposite-hyperbolic logic, as exemplified by Gogol’s and Dostoevsky’s work. The destiny of man winds around the absolute Good and the absolute Evil, around the supreme virtue and the unlimited abjection, around the holy and the profane. The binarism grounds its root in an ideological bad interpretation of the Orthodox doctrine, founded on a dualistic vision of the world, which was thought of as a place divided between Heaven and the Hell and therefore, by semantic inference, between what is new and pure and what is old and corrupt. In fact, as Lotman observes, Purgatory (or the place of mediation) does not exist.

The idealistic reality that follows this dualistic vision means that history is interpreted as a continuous palingenesis, where what is old and corrupt must be completely replaced with the new, authentic and unblemished. Such a vision is essentially based on the utopian thinking and the maximalism that follows. There are no middle ways between the ideal and the concrete and the only manner to achieve the former is to reset the latter, legitimizing this action by “a poetic subscription to the immediate construction of a new earth and a new sky” (Lotman 2009, p. 166), with all its radicalism. Lotman writes (ibidem):

The characteristic trait of explosive moments in binary systems is that they are perceived as unique and without equal in the entire history of humanity. They declare not the abolition of a specific layer of historical development but the very existence of history. In its ideal expression – this is the apocalyptic “time that will be no more” [Apocalypse X, 6], whereas in its actual realization – in the words of Saltykov as he completed his History of One City: “The flow of history has been interrupted”.

The utopia of the historical apocalypse becomes even more radical by the diffusion of Hegelianism in the Russian philosophical thought, which is integral by its nature. In it, the idea of historical interruption is reinforced, thereby serving not only to re-establish the purity of the ideal but also to pursue the higher unity of the historical destiny that must not contain any contradictions. Because, in this way, the synthesis has already absorbed and passed the moment of antithesis. Here we can also understand the reason why the cultural minorities are subsumed into the figure of an outcast. One is the identity, just as one and only is the historical destiny that develops it (the identity). Everything else is contradiction, and irreconcilable differences. It so happens, as Lotman writes, that

all historical descriptions of catastrophically explosive moments, wars or revolutions, are constructed in such a way as to show the inevitability of their outcome. History, faithful to its apostle, Hegel, tenaciously demonstrates that, for it, the chance event does not exist and that all future events are secretly located in the phenomena of the past. A logical consequence of this approach is the eschatological myth of the movement of history towards its inevitable conclusion. (Lotman 2009, p. 158)

14 The “road”, for example, is the symbol through which Gogol expresses the idea of man and humanity, one antithetical to the Enlightenment’s. The road of Gogol’, Lotman writes, is similar to the life and the itinerary that can take, “unlimited in both the directions: it can be endless rise or endless fall”. Those who go through it exceed their “innate moral norm” and, with their vices and their virtues, give it the vertigo of absolute degeneration as well as of the absolute perfection (Lotman 1975, p. 246).
This vision has immediate repercussions on the view of “social” because the conception of unity of the human spirit’s path developed by Hegel as well as that developed earlier by Voltaire (Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations) and Condorcet (Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain) makes implicit an idea of history as an evolution of human perfectibility, in the name of which the intruder, the other, the outsider must be automatically expelled.

The model of European development, according to Lotman, is different. It can be defined as “ternary”. In his 1992 essay The Mechanism of Troubles: On the Typology of the History of Russian Culture (Lotman 2002b, p. 34), he emphasizes that in Europe even the most “eschatological” revolutionary moments aren’t characterized by the general catastrophe but rather emit a constructive force (третья сила, третья сила) that acts as a mediator between the old and the new. In other words, “the dynamics of the ternary system is characterized by a relative gradualness. [...] The explosion clears the “Augean stables” of history and opens the way to a new phase”, without totally erasing the past. This happened in the French Revolution (Lotman 2009, p. 173): in spite of its explosive feature, it had the ability “to preserve immutability in the process of change and to transform immutability into a form of change, [which] has had a considerable influence on the fundamental characteristics of western European culture”.

In the “ternary” model, a cultural process of mnemonic self-consciousness, interpretation and mediation between opposites intervenes, bringing about a slow transformation of the cultural identity (or center). In the binary model the conflicting trends, having not any third alternative, must clash one against the other.

In these conditions, the change inevitably takes on the feature of catastrophe and can only be realized in two forms: either the tendency to give up the change in general and move towards the maximum stability of the established structure, or the tendency to the complete apocalyptic annihilation of the existing and the creation in its place of an ideal order that is likewise apocalyptic. According to Lotman (Lotman 2002a, pp. 34-35), an example of the first tendency is China, and of the second is Russia, where there has been a “complete destruction of all that already exists [...] considered to be irremediably corrupt” (Lotman 2009, p. 166).

4. The Rhetorical Imitation of the French Revolution. A Radical Version

We can well understand that the imitation of the French Revolution by the Bolsheviks could only lead to an unexpected results. As Lotman wrote: “the ternary system strives to adapt the ideal to reality, whereas the binary system seeks, in practice, to actualize an unrealizable ideal” (ibidem). Between 1905 and 1924, the rhetoric of the Russian revolutionary movement, imitating slogans of the French Revolution, was inserted in a cultural terrain completely alien to the European forma mentis – one that, as Lotman pointed out, at least recognized the juridical principle of the contract and, therefore, the existence of the counterparty. These implicit notions of the other and of consequences did not exist in the psychology of binarism, nor did the idea of tolerance. Victory was pursued without compromise since there was no counterparty with which to form a contract of agreement. For this reason, the maximalist imitation of the French Revolution and its ideological rhetoric of the Apocalypse had an explosive and exacerbating impact on almost all cultural structures. Lotman writes in The Mechanism of Troubles (Lotman 2002b, p. 37):

The apocalyptic idea of the passage to the Good through the Evil [...] is repeated regularly in diverse mystical doctrines, which confirm the final victory of the earthly paradise. But the same idea can be found also in the revolutionary doctrines. Let’s compare, for example, the revolutionary socialists’ slogan: “Across the defeat – towards the victory”. Revolutionaries live every attack as an eschatological onslaught of the evil before the inevitable final victory. Hence, the mythology of the “last decisive battle”. To this, it’s linked the poetry on the death and the whipping sacrifice.

The tendency to perceive the metaphor as reality and the ideal as practice, a tendency rooted in the primarily Russian inseparability between theory and practice, led the “third Russia” to continuously self-generate an enemy. Though it was one more imaginary than real, it served to justify and legitimate
the bloody efforts leading to the theory’s final goal. But it was a goal that never came about and that instead acted to corrode the Soviet Union from the inside. The creation of the “own” and the “other” (svoe e čužoe) was, in other words, its destructive Leitmotiv; one that manifested itself in a unique, primarily Russian way.

The externalization of culture through the idea of antithesis influenced all marginal spaces of the dominant culture represented by the Russian identity and even more, symbolically, by Moscow. Thus was created a paradoxical situation in which the Culture self-generated a universe of internal alien enemies (the Estonians, Ukrainians, etc.) which, however, were part of its identity. The different cultures of the Russian-Soviet Culture lived in a state of enforced and tamed estrangement, taking the shape of “rejects” and outcasts.

At the time, this mechanism had a crumbling effect on the supposed unity of the Soviet Union. Among other things, in a process of identitarian rebuilding like that which occurred in the post-Soviet countries, we can well understand that the trauma of this forced alienation can affect the process of self-recognition of one’s own new space: a domestic space and, at the same time, one open to the global dimension. Concerning this, the biographical process of self-recognition is particularly acute and thorny for the countries that today must rebuild a double identity: the national one and the meta-European one.

When Lotman wrote these reflections (1992-93) the Soviet Communist Party’s process of disintegration had already begun four years earlier. The same crossroad, that had appeared seventy years before with the introduction of the NEP (New Economic Policy), returned. In 1921-28, in fact, Russia almost reached the possibility of a “normal” historical course; the awareness of the impracticality of regenerative utopia and of the sacrifice that its continuation would have involved led part of the political class to drift toward a “ternary” system, one of mediation and tolerance. “However”, as Lotman wrote, “such a possibility was lost” (Lotman 2002b, p. 45) and maximalism prevailed. Yet, Svetlov’s ballad continued to be celebrated for at least another thirty years, until the death of Stalin.

According to Lotman, it is therefore essential to reconstruct the steps that led to this bankrupt passage, in order to avoid repeating them in the post-Soviet era.

The deep understanding of the historical rhythm that characterized the Russian world, a rhythm then coursing throughout Soviet world, could in fact lead to a virtual change of the evolutionary course of this cultural universe. To achieve this goal would be to require a profound dialogue with the Western European world which, despite of all its ideological impasse, learned how to link continuity with the vicissitudes of change and knew how to value the moment of the mediating openness, characteristic of the ternary model. Only in this way could the ineluctable final result of Russia’s historical binarism be replaced by the moment of unpredictability. For Lotman, this is synonymous with the awareness of the wide variety of historical possibilities that are opened onto men and their culture, past and becoming. Of course, these would require an effort to interpret events in the light of three fundamental attributes: ethical discernment, individual and collective responsibility, and antinomic mediation between opposites. Unpredictability thereby becomes synonymous with the freedom of new creation. It moves away from an a priori determination and so does not become a destroyer of the past nor a source of ideological retreat. In this regard, Lotman writes in Culture and Explosion (Lotman 2009, p. 174):

The radical change in relations between Eastern and Western Europe, which is taking place before our very eyes may, perhaps, provide us with the opportunity to pass into a ternary, Pan-European system and to forego the ideal of destroying “the old world to its very foundations, and then” constructing a new one on its ruins. To overlook this possibility would be a historical catastrophe.

According to Lotman, the transition process of the post-Soviet world should therefore perform the following actions: review its historical narratives in order to understand where they transmit semantic cores of conflict and radical transformation (the false new earth and a new sky) instead of gradual and concordant (not antithetical) transitions; encourage the discursive practices that require a different

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15 “Every culture creates its own system of ‘rejects’ or outcasts — those who don’t fit in the system and who find themselves simply excluded by a strict systemic accounting” (Lotman 1994, p. 31).
thinking process, one that involves dialoguing about the recognition of the other-from-self, in a constructive rather than in an antagonistic way; a way that can create unknown forms of acceptance and collaboration; redevelop language usage so that it avoids both a globalism that resets single identities as well as narrow localisms and nationalisms, neither the total closure, nor the total opening.

Lotman’s legacy consists therefore in the encouragement to *choose the paths* (1991, p. 170), i.e. to exercise the collective and (contemporaneously) individual capacity of discernment, the freedom of thought and the freedom of will. This in order to find a socio-political configuration which can bring to light a new subjectivity – a plural and personal subjectivity at the same time, able to ward off the *déjà vu* individual “consummation in an all-embracing totality” (*ibidem*).
Bibliography


