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The Manifesto of Tartu-Moscow Semiotics since 1973

Abstract: In 1973, a collectively written manifesto titled *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures* was penned under the leadership of Tartu scholar Juri Lotman together with his Moscow colleagues Vjacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Toporov, Aleksandr Pjatigorskij, and Boris Uspenskij. The appearance of this work marked the birth of a new scholarly field of research called *the semiotics of culture*. In the present contribution we provide a bibliographic list of republications and translations of this seminal text.

Keywords: Juri Lotman; semiotics of culture; Tartu Semiotics summer schools; Tartu-Moscow School

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1 Background

In 1973, already nearly a half century ago, a collective manifesto titled *Theses on the semiotic study of cultures* was written under the leadership of Juri Lotman and Vjacheslav Ivanov, launching the academic field of research called *the semiotics of culture*.

In the previous decade, during the 1960s, intensive work on semiotic approaches to the studies of texts, first literary texts and later various cultural texts, along with discussions at the Tartu Semiotics Summer Schools in Kääriku, led to the formation of understanding of the possibility of an integral approach to culture from a semiotic perspective. It is marked by the use of the term *the semiotics of culture*, which began to appear from 1970 (see Salupere 2012).

In the introduction to the 4th Summer School on Semiotics that took place in Tartu and Kääriku in August 1970, Juri Lotman formulated explicitly the tasks of the semiotics of culture, using this name for the field (Lotman 1970). In the same year, Lotman and Uspenskij used the term in their abstract for a conference in Tbilisi (Lotman and Uspenskij 1970), followed by their article on the topic (Lotman and Uspenskij 1971).

In 1973, on the proposal of Juri Lotman, a collective formulation of the principles of this new field was made. To write these theses was Lotman's idea. The text was compiled when the group gathered in Uspenskij's apartment in Moscow, at Jugo-Zapadnaja. The authors included the core members of the Tartu-Moscow semiotics school — J. Lotman, V. V. Ivanov, V. N. Toporov, A. M. Pjatigorskij, and B. A. Uspenskij. Lotman also wanted to include Roman Jakobson, who worked at that time at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but it is not clear whether this message reached him (Ivanov 1994: 488; 1999: 248; Velmezova and Kull 2011: 300). The theses were written for the 7th International Congress of Slavists that took place in 1973 in Warsaw.¹ The writing process was rather quick — Uspenskij had to take the text to Warsaw.

Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures was published in 1973, almost simultaneously in Russian (in Poland, in the Congress proceedings) and in English in the Netherlands, in a book published by Mouton).² (The work was later translated into French (1974), Italian (1979), Arabic (1986), German (1986), Estonian (1998), Portuguese (2003), and Spanish (2006). Below, I provide the list of republications and translations of this text. A thorough analysis of the *Theses* has been published by Irene Portis-Winner and Thomas Winner (1976).

In 1979, a *Postscriptum to Theses*, written by Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij, was published in an Italian collection (Lotman, Uspenskij 1979; republished in 2006 under a slightly changed title)³. This text, compiled for the purpose of that volume, was not published in Russian, however published later in Portuguese (Lótman, Uspiênski 2003) and Spanish (Lotman, Uspenski 2007) in a translation from Italian.⁴

The 2013 Tartu Semiotics Summer School takes place again at Kääriku and is dedicated to the development of the semiotics of culture, under the title “Autocommunication in Semiotic Systems: 40 years after *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture*”.⁵ On this occasion, the book series *Tartu Semiotics Library* (vol.

¹ Roman Jakobson also attended this meeting (Rudy 1999: 100).

² This was the first Lotman paper that was published in English translation. See the complete bibliography in Kull (2011).

³ The volume includes postscriptums also to some other texts republished in that book.

⁴ In 1992, Lotman wrote the article “Theses towards a semiotics of Russian culture” as a study program for the Department of Russian culture of the Institute of world culture of Moscow State University (published in Russian and in English — Lotman 1994a; 1994b), focusing on some specific characteristics of Russian cultural history. See also Torop (1999).

⁵ This is the second after the revival of Tartu Semiotics Summer Schools. The previous one took place in 2011 at Palmse on the topic of semiotic modeling (see also Kull, Salupere *et al.* 2011; Kull, Lindström *et al.* 2011).

13) republishes the *Theses* and some accompanying texts again, the background and further role of these texts being described in the accompanying article by Silvi Salupere and Peeter Torop (Salupere et al. 2013).

2 In this issue⁶

The Special Section for Tartu Semiotics of this issue of *Chinese Semiotic Studies* presents three articles.

Peeter Torop, professor of semiotics of culture, Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, briefly describes the context in which the *Theses on the semiotic study of cultures* was written.

Anti Randviir, Senior Researcher in social semiotics, Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, has contributed “The City: A Window to Utopia?”, a study on a semiotic approach to utopias.

Han-liang Chang and **Lei Han** of Fudan University, Shanghai, and **Shuo-yu Charlotte Wu** of Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, are co-authors of “The Reception of Tartu Semiotics in China: A Preliminary Survey and a Few Case Studies”.

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⁶ The contributions for the Special Section for Tartu Semiotics are related to the project IUT2-44 (Semiotic modeling of self-description mechanisms: Theory and applications), and the Center of Excellence in Cultural Theory (supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund)

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⁷ See <http://www.ugr.es/~mcaceres/entretextos/pdf/entre7/entretextos7.pdf>.