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Lotman's "Semiosphere" and Varieties of the Self

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working paper *

As Iurij Lotman implies via his image of our planet enmeshed in a vast and multileveled polyphony of voices and other kinds of communication, his concept of the "semiosphere" is meant to provide a semiotic explanation of the workings of all of human culture. The 1984 essay "On the Semiosphere" in which Lotman formally introduced the concept, and which he gave pride of place as the first item in his three-volume *Selected Essays* (1992-93), thus functions as a kind of brief "summa" of his lifetime of research and reflection on a daunting range of topics. However, the fundamental ideas and operative concepts that inform both his conception of culture and of the human self in the essay are relatively few in number. Because they also recur throughout his writings, they provide especially convenient access points for a critical examination of aspects of his theory. In the pages that follow, I would like to examine several key features of Lotman's ambitious and appealing claim to universality from the point of view of two disciplines with which he was not primarily concerned but which are nevertheless relevant to his interests: developmental psychology and cultural anthropology. In their own way, each addresses the individual and collective poles of human experience that were also Lotman's perennial concerns. My aim will be to suggest how current thought in these fields both confirms and questions Lotman's ideas, which, in the end, emerge as in need of some refinement.

Central to the concept of the semiosphere is the idea of *discreteness*. Both individuals and the cultures they constitute are conceived as defined by borders that are functions of the differences between them. Indeed, it is the existence of separate entities, be they indivi-

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dual or collective, that actually creates the ground and need for semiosis: the "structural heterogeneity of semiotic space forms reserves of dynamic processes and is one of the mechanisms of formulating new information within" the semiosphere [1]. Similarly, in a later essay Lotman says that the "invariant model of a sense generating unit presupposes ... its specific boundedness, self-sufficiency, the existence of a boundary between it and the semiotic space that lies outside it. This allows the definition of sense generating structures as sui generis semiotic monads ... including the separate human personality." [2]

In other words, it is the *differences* between distinct individuals and cultures that, via a process of translation, make possible the generation of new meanings; and these new meanings are, according to Lotman, the distinguishing feature of cultural change and therefore of culture in general.

The idea of *novelty* thus goes hand in hand with the idea of *discreteness*. Lotman underscores this point in "On the Semiosphere" when he states that "the dynamic development of elements of the semiosphere... is in the direction of increasing their *specificity*, and therefore, its internal *variety* [italics added]" [3]. And in the essay "The Phenomenon of Culture" he lists the ability to "formulate *new* communications [italics added]" as an essential defining characteristic of any "thinking entity." [4]

Lotman of course recognizes that hybridization occurs between cultures. He speaks of change as occurring especially rapidly in cultural borderlands, and argues that individual cultures are constituted via transactional semiotic exchanges with other cultures. But this does not vitiate the importance for him of an originative cultural discreteness, which is a larger-scale variant of the kind of difference that also undergirds his conception of the fundamental relations between individual human beings.

Virtually all of Lotman's later essays revisit this complex of relations among alterity, selfhood, and new meaning. One of his fundamental ideas is that thought, like meaning, can arise only as a result of relations between – at a minimum – two different things. He follows Bakhtin in seeing consciousness as "profoundly dialogic", and posits that "in order to function actively, one consciousness requires another." [5] Thus, according to Lotman, no form of thinking "can be mono-structural and monolingual: it absolutely must incorporate heteroglot and mutually untranslatable semiotic formations." [6]. Lotman's emphasis on the "untranslatability" of different languages underscores the pivotal role of alterity – i.e., the "new" or the "other"

– in the generation of what he understands by "meaning." "Untranslatability" should of course not be understood as the absolute impossibility of translation, because it is obvious that if no translation between two languages were possible, then no meaning could arise between them. This point also underscores that Lotman's conception of difference between any two entities nevertheless implies that on a higher level there must be some common ground between them, because without it no negotiation of the differences that distinguish the entities could ever take place.

Indeed, as Lotman argued with special eloquence toward the end of his life, human beings are what they are only because they do their best to surmount the differences among them through their common facility for language. And although these attempts at understanding can never fully succeed, in their novelty the "imperfect" results that arise constitute nothing less than the *primum mobile* of culture [7].

To sum up, therefore: as Lotman sees it, the life of a global cultural network is predicated on the generation of new meaning; and meaning is always predicated on the principle of difference between discrete entities. This principle holds on all possible levels of Lotman's theory: within a sign; between signs; between phrases, sentences or utterances; between larger subdivisions of a language such as dialects or jargons; between individuals; and within the phenomenon we call a conscious self. Lotman goes even farther in this great chain of semiosis, to the antipodes "below" the self and "above" an individual language, when he hypothesizes an explicit parallel between the functioning of the large hemispheres of the human brain and the workings of entire cultures: "in both cases we discover as a minimum two fundamentally *different* methods of reflecting the world and of generating *new* information, with the result being complex mechanisms of exchange between these systems [italics added]." [8] In another essay he becomes even more daring in his speculative reach when he refers to "left" and "right spins" in the "structure of matter" as being the deepest level of the symmetry/asymmetry relation (difference within similarity, or similarity encompassing difference) that is fundamental to all meaning creation [9].

Lotman's semiotic theory of culture thus has a lot to say about how the human mind works. What happens if we consider his ideas from the perspective of other disciplines concerned with the same questions?

The core of Lotman's argument can in fact be coordinated with one drawn from developmental psychology, or, to be more precise, with

developmental psychology as it is conceived in the West, which is an important qualification to which I will return when I consider certain anthropological data.

This developmental scheme hinges on the ineluctable role of transactional exchanges between self and other in the process of individual maturation. Jean Piaget's highly influential theory of intellectual development from childhood to adulthood includes the fundamental idea of "accommodation", which is one of two functional invariants in his system of human knowledge, and which involves the progressive modification and restructuring of this system in a way that allows the individual to assimilate new information. Although for Piaget representational thought in the young child does not depend on internalizing verbal signs from the social environment, natural language, and therefore other selves, come to play an enormously important role in the development of conceptual thinking at later stages. In its essence, the "genesis of cognition" for Piaget "is above all a constructive process." [10]

The recognition and negotiation of alterity, whether of things or other persons, also lies at the heart of Lev Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," which the great psychologist defined as "the discrepancy between a child's actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance." [11] This "zone" is thus the locus of the "loan of consciousness," in Jerome Bruner's apt phrase, that adults make to children in order to help them achieve ever higher levels of linguistic competence via incremental steps through heretofore unknown areas of knowledge and experience. Bruner, himself a well-known American psychologist, adapts and extends Vygotsky's ideas to a "constructivist" view of human development as a process of learning and manipulating new arrangements of already existing sign systems about the world – especially narrative art – which in their ensemble constitute what is known as "culture." [12]

Additional support for a conception of human development that hinges on language and the necessary alterity of the "other" comes from the ambitious theory of a biological basis of mind that has been advanced by the Nobel Laureate and neuroscientist Gerald Edelman. He posits the existence of a human capacity for what he calls "higher-order consciousness," which "is based on the occurrence of direct awareness in a human being who has language and a reportable subjective life," and which distinguishes humans from other animals, who have only a lower "primary consciousness" that is "limited to the remembered present." [13] The crucial connection

between selfhood, language, and other human beings emerges from Edelman's explanation that "higher-order consciousness depends on building a self through affective intersubjective exchanges. These interactions – with parental figures, with grooming conspecifics, and with sexual partners – are of the same kind as those guiding semiotic exchange and language building. Edelman goes on to add that these "affectively colored exchanges through symbols initiate semantic bootstrapping," by which he means that the process of self-formation that begins with a semioticization of emotionally colored transactions between self and other leads in turn to the process of "connecting preexisting conceptual learning to lexical learning." [14] The result of the interaction of higher-order consciousness with primary consciousness "is a model of a world rather than of an econiche, along with models of the past, present, and future." [15] In sum, Edelman's conception of how a distinctly human consciousness is formed is predicated on the individual's relations with unique others that are mediated by the same kind of process of meaning formation that underlies semiotic exchanges in general.

I might mention that in its general shape, if not in its scientific provenance, this conception of human development resembles not only Lotman's but also Mikhail Bakhtin's, much of whose thinking Lotman was in fact able to incorporate into his own theory. Vygotsky's, Bruner's, and Edelman's schemes in particular recall Bakhtin's fundamental conception of dialogue, which lies on the borders among psychology, epistemology, and theory of language, which is predicated on a similar, mutually co-creative role of interlocutors, and which also posits a self that cannot even be conceived outside of verbal exchanges with an other [16]. For Bakhtin and Lotman as for these students of mind, existential and verbal alterity are negotiated in the same way.

It is also worth noting that this conception of the self and of how the self develops has specific ethical implications that are widespread throughout contemporary Western cultures. However, although these are explicit in Bakhtin's idea of "answerability/responsibility" ("otvetstvennost"), they are only implicit in Lotman. Kant's "categorical imperative" is a well-known eighteenth-century version of the moral argument in question: "Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. In all his actions, whether they are directed toward himself or toward other rational beings, he must always be regarded at the same time as an end." [17] In other words, there is a moral imperative to grasp as precisely as possible

the irreducible uniqueness of the other. To do otherwise is to deny that other an essential measure of his/her humanity. An argument such as this of course presupposes the absolute value of all human beings, which is a natural outgrowth of the conception of the self as a discrete and autonomous entity with the potential to develop freely in uncharted directions.

I would now like to turn to another context in which Lotman's ideas can, indeed, must be examined. As we have seen, his entire theory hinges on a particular conception of the self that is bounded, co-terminous with its physical being, autonomous, and always developing toward something new. Despite the agreement between this conception and developmental psychology as formulated in the West, there are also significant differences between Lotman's ideas and the conclusions of the new discipline of "cultural psychology."

As its name suggests, this field developed from attempts by cultural anthropologists to understand the psychological specificity of the individuals in the cultures they were studying. Richard Shweder, one of its leading exponents, defines cultural psychology as "psychological anthropology without the premise of [the] psychic unity [of human kind]. It is the ethnopsychology of the functioning psyche, as it actually functions, malfunctions, and functions differently in the different parts of the world." [18] One of the most important conclusions of this field is that the kind of sense of self that Lotman appears to take for granted is far from being representative of human kind in general. This inevitably raises questions about the adequacy of Lotman's theory of the semiosphere.

Cultural psychologists are relativists who take it as axiomatic that the investigator's frames of reference are a form of mediation that can occlude the specificity of the culture under examination. Kenneth Gergen describes well the pitfalls that threaten the insufficiently self-conscious investigator: "attempts at accessing implicit meaning systems of other peoples are themselves saturated with assumptions about the nature of human functioning – or to put it more directly – the nature of selves. To enter the field with a given view of the nature of human understanding is to circumscribe a priori the range of conclusions that may be drawn about the persons one wishes to understand." [19]

From this general caveat, Gergen moves to what he sees as a specifically Western bias: "by virtue of the commitment to understanding as intersubjectivity, there is an abiding tendency in Western ethnography toward *individualization* of the other. That is, others tend to be

characterized in terms of individual units, and to be understood as viewing each other in the same terms.... [And] if understanding in general is achieved by treating persons as separate or individual entities, then other cultures must be constituted by such entities."[20] The resemblance between this characterization and Lotman's *a priori* assumptions is clear.

Gergen's view is also echoed by Kitayama and Markus, two psychologists with a specific interest in internationalizing their discipline, who argue that a Western bias is automatically built in to conceptions of the self because "virtually all Euro-American research on the self, which is to say 99% of all research on the self and identity, has been done on one particular population – ontemporary, secularized, Western, urban, white middle-class people... The self is conceived of as an autonomous bounded entity, and there is an assumption of the inherent separateness of individuals."[21] This conclusion would appear to have a bearing on the kinds of views advanced by the developmental psychologists I cited above, as well as Edelman (and Bakhtin).

In fact, practicing psychologists with different specializations in both Europe and the United States now routinely approach their tasks with a heightened awareness of the far-reaching implications of different conceptions of personhood that derive from ethnographic evidence. This is well illustrated by Hope Landrine, who cites research indicating that

> of the many definitions and meanings cultures take for granted, those regarding the self are the most basic, the "deepest," the furthest from awareness, and are thus rarely ever made explicit. Simultaneously, while assumptions about what a self is are furthest from our conscious awareness, they also are the most powerful and significant assumptions behind and beneath our behavior. This is *because what we assume a self is by and large predicts our assumptions about how a self relates to others, takes control, develops, "ought" to behave, think and feel, and "goes wrong."* Thus, culturally determined assumptions about the self are beneath all Western cultural, clinical concepts and understandings of normalcy, psychopathology, and psychotherapy. Lack of awareness of the Western cultural definition of the self ... can lead to misdiagnosis and failed treatment of minority groups [italics added][22].

Landrine goes on to argue that the "basic, unconscious assumption of Western culture is that there is an unequivocal, irrevocable distinction between that which is the self on the one hand, and that

which is the nonself on the other. From this tacit assumption it follows that Western culture defines the failure to construct and maintain a distinction between self and nonself as psychopathology (i.e., failure to maintain ego boundaries, enmeshment, identity diffusion, delusion, or psychosis)."[23] Ethical implications follow automatically from this view, with the result that the Western self is "presumed to be a free agent – to be an agent that does what it wishes. Thereby, the self has rights... [and is] assumed to be morally responsible."[24]

As we can see, Gergen's, Kitayama and Markus's, and Landrine's conclusions resemble closely the conception of discrete selves that undergirds Lotman's theory of culture, which thus emerges as operating within specifically Western preconceptions. I will return later to Lotman's own curious confirmation of this conclusion. What I would like to do now, however, is illustrate some of the other ways in which personhood has been conceived, and how this challenges the universality of the theory that Lotman proposes via the "semiosphere."

However, before turning to these examples, it is of course essential to make the caveat that it is an oversimplification to speak of the "Western" sense of self as homogeneous or uniform. Cultural differences obviously abound *within* the "West," and these cannot but affect conceptions of the self. For example, as has often been noted, Russian lacks a term denoting "privacy," which has been taken to imply a greater emphasis on communality and, consequently, a different conception of the self than is the case with a language like English. Culturological data can be mustered in support of this post-Humboldt, post-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Differences such as these can have major practical consequences for psychiatrists who must treat patients from different cultural traditions. A telling example of this is a study that focuses on fundamental distinctions between large regions of Europe and shows

> *that complaining about health and personality problems among impoverished members of Southern European cultures has a long history of providing the status of cynosure to so-called visible saints, individuals who become moral exemplars of the burden of life's difficulties and the obdurate grain of martyrdom in human nature. Complaining in this cultural context is positively valued and rewarded. This is in strong contrast to Northern European traditions that emphasize austerity, continence and understatement of personal troubles and that attach great stigma to the open expression of complaints as an indication of personal "weakness."*[25]

In recent years, the practical efforts of anthropologists and others who work in the emerging field of cultural psychology have been directed at trying to grasp the specific nature of fundamental concepts in the cultures under investigation. One of the most important of these is how different cultures conceive of personhood. Shweder cites the following example from the Gahuku-Garna people of New Guinea. Their conception of man "does not allow for any clearly recognized distinction between the individual and the status which he occupies." The Gahuku-Gama "do not distinguish an *ethical* category of the person. They fail 'to separate the individual from the social context and, ethically speaking, to grant him an intrinsic moral value apart from that which attaches to him as the occupant of a particular status'." For the Gahuku-Gama, people "are not conceived to be equals in a moral sense; their value does not reside in themselves or persons; it is dependent on the position they occupy within a system of inter-personal and inter-group relationships." Thus, in their view, being human "does not necessarily establish a moral bond between individuals, nor does it provide an abstract standard against which all action can be judged." Rather, the "specific context," the particular occasion, "determines the moral character of a particular action." As a consequence, "it is wrong to kill members of one's tribe, but it is commendable to kill members of opposed tribes, always provided that they are not related to [one]. Thus a man is expected to avoid his maternal kinsmen in battle though other members of his own clan have no such moral obligations to those individuals." [26]

Although some elements of this approach to personhood are familiar in the West (e.g., the military convention of "saluting the uniform," which defines certain kinds of interpersonal relations, and "not the man" wearing it), in their totality they constitute something quite alien to the conception of the self in contemporary liberal Western democracies (at least in political theory), and in post-Kantian (and generally judeo-Christian) ethics.

We find a similar devaluation of individuality, and an implicit rejection of innovation – which, it will be recalled, also plays a major role in Lotman's theory – in the following broad characterizations by Landrine: "in Indonesian, Polynesian, many Asian (e.g., Hindu), several Southeast-Asian, and many Native-American cultures... the self is understood as a mere vessel for immaterial forces and entities; the individual is understood as a more or less irrelevant and dead shell through which the spirits of ancestors and a multitude of imma-

terial entities pass, thereby lending the appearance or illusion that the individual has characteristics."[27] She cites research indicating that for "the Lohorung of East Nepal... the self, person, or *lawa* within anyone's body is conceptualized as nothing more than an entity-force that is shared by the community and links individuals to ancestors. This shared self is construed as something that travels from person to person and place to place, belonging to no one in particular."[28] Even in the hybrid cultural society of Hindu-Americans, the distinctly non-Western belief persists "that only one being exists, the *brahman*, who is formless" – all else "are erroneous superimpositions on the... *brahman*. The task of the wise is to break through this delusion of multiplicity."[29]

Clifford Geertz is the anthropologist whose work has probably had the greatest influence on the view that differences in fundamental cultural categories are far more important than the apparent similarities between peoples. As Geertz puts it in a famous and often-reprinted essay, "'From the native's point of view,' On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" (1974): "the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against such other wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures."[30] He argues for the need to understand what other cultures' conceptions of the self entail, and provides examples from his own field research to make his point.

One of these comes from the traditional Javanese sense of what a person is. Among their relevant beliefs are that the inside life of the self is "considered to be, at its roots at least, identical across all individuals, whose individuality it thus effaces." The outside life is "again conceived as in its essence invariant from one individual to the next." Moreover, these two realms are not seen as functions of each other, but as "independent realms of being to be put in proper order independently." This is achieved through religious discipline on the one hand and elaborate etiquette on the other, with the result being "an inner world of stilled emotion and an outer world of shaped behavior [that] confront one another... any particular person being but the momentary locus, so to speak, of that confrontation, a passing expression of their permanent existence, their permanent separation, and their permanent need to be kept in their own order."[31]

Another of Geertz's examples is drawn from traditional village life in Bali, where, he explains, there is

> a persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal expression to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically, or biographically, is muted in favor of his assigned place in the continuing and, so it is thought, never changing pageant that is Balinese life. It is dramatis personae, not actors that endure; indeed, it is dramatis personae, not actors, that in the proper sense really exist. Physically men come and go, mere incidents in a happenstance history, of no genuine importance even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and, most important, the spectacle they mount remain and comprise not the façade but the substance of things, not least the self[32].

Geertz further explains that the Balinese fear precisely that the "public performance to which one's cultural location commits one" will fail and that what we in the West would call the "personality" of the "individual" would become visible through the "standardized public identity." This fear of acting out of character, which, Geertz adds, is in fact *likely* to occur because of the "extraordinary ritualization of daily life," guides social relations along "deliberately narrowed rails." In terms of the implications of Geertz's findings for Lotman's theory, it is noteworthy that Geertz understands the Balinese "roles" and prescribed relations as protecting "the dramatistical sense of self against the disruptive threat implicit in the immediacy and spontaneity even the most passionate ceremoniousness cannot fully eradicate from face-to-face encounters."[33] This explicitly evaluative remark suggests that although Geertz is capable of understanding Balinese alterity, his own cultural orientation is obviously more like Lotman's. An alternative explanation is that Lotman is in some sense more right than not when he posits the negotiation of alterity as the inevitable motor of culture: since change is inevitable – no "traditional" society will or can resist it for long. This is a point to which I will return.

Geertz provides a third example of a distinctly non-Western conception of the self from his study of traditional Moroccan society. In it, he states, "men do not float as bounded psychic entities, detached from their backgrounds and singularly named. As individualistic, even willful, as the Moroccans in fact are, their identity is an attribute they borrow from their setting."[34] What this means is that Moroccans are rather like ideal Bakhtinian dialogists who acquire their

identities – here, their names and social faces – from their specific interactions with others, which, in this case, are rendered in terms of different permutations of the names of peoples, regions, tribes, families, and religious sects. The result is not a personality with a given coherence, but a kind of additive, mosaic-, or collage-like assemblage of products of dialogic moments, which are different from each other. There is no privileged perspective from which all the parts of the mosaic can be viewed as coalescing into a totality with the kind of implied metaphysics of personhood and duration in time that is usually assumed in modern Western cultures.

Here is the example that Geertz gives: "a man I knew who lived in Sefrou and worked in Fez but came from the Beni Yazgha tribe settled nearby – and from the Hima lineage of the Taghut subfraction of the Wulad Ben Ydir fraction within it – was known as a Sefroui to his work fellows in Fez, a Yazghi to all of us non-Yazghis in Sefrou, an Ydiri to other Beni Yazghas around, except for those who were themselves of the Wulad Ben Ydir faction, who called him a Taghuti. As for the few other Taghutis, they called him a Himiwi." Geertz also adds that "calling a man a Sefroui is like calling him a San Franciscan: It classifies him, but it doesn't type him; it places him without portraying him."[35] Geertz concludes that this "hyperindividualistic" "way of looking at persons – as though they were outlines waiting to be filled in – is not an isolated custom but part of a total pattern of social life."[36]

It is illuminating to compare this Moroccan form of nomenclature and what Lotman says about personal names in his last book, *Culture and Explosion*: "Perhaps the most striking manifestation of human nature is the use of personal names and the underscoring of individuality connected with it, the uniqueness of the separate personality as the basis of its value for 'the other' and for 'others.' The self and the other are two sides of a single act of self-consciousness and are impossible without each other."[37] Despite the superficial similarity between Lotman's formulation and Geertz's Moroccan example, the implications of the two ways of conceiving of names are quite different. As Lotman makes perfectly clear, his approach is predicated on a kind of stability of the self and of the individual's name that is in fact absent from Moroccan experience.

In addition to the idea of discreteness, the issue of *novelty* – the creation of *new information*, is another major difference between Lotman and the psychologists and anthropologists who work in the field of cultural psychology. Lotman of course recognizes the existence of

traditional societies that resist change, but it is clear that his global model of culture does not focus on them, and that they are certainly not the ones dearest to his heart.

It is important to add that Lotman's emphasis on novelty is intertwined with the very nature of human communication as he understood it. He made it axiomatic that the process of communication could not escape what he calls "noise in the channel of communication" ("shum v kanale sviazi") – i.e., the inevitable misunderstandings that arise from the fact that no two individuals see things or express themselves in exactly the same way (because each is different from the other). These miscommunications are one of the most important causes for the appearance of "the new" – something that was *not* necessarily sent by the speaker, but that *was* received by the listener – and are one of the reasons why cultural stasis is impossible in the long run [38].

However, using Geertz's findings, one could respond to Lotman that members of traditional Balinese society, and of other cultures around the world that conceive of internal and external behavior in terms of transindividual and transmundane paradigms, *already know* what their interlocutors are likely to say to them: the repertoire of their discourse is fixed. Thus, their practice would be to translate what we might consider "noise" or "miscommunication" into familiar terms and categories, which effectively eliminates the possibility of novelty. In their approach to communication, or "reading" each other, members of traditional societies function like Freudians or Marxists in the sense that they see all experience as reconfirming fundamental truisms regarding human beings and the world.

The ethical consequences of such self-conceptions as those found in Java and Bali would also be antithetical to Western norms. Value would not lie in the tolerant acceptance of the other's independence, freedom, or uniqueness, but in having all members of the society conform to the regnant, monological cultural norms (even if these allow for structured traditional conflicts according to various criteria).

This conclusion is in fact suggested by a moving and telling example that Geertz provides. The wife of a young man in Java unexpectedly dies, and even though she had been the center of his life since her childhood, he greets "everyone with a set smile and formal apologies" for her "absence," all the while striving to "flatten out, as he himself put it, the hills and valleys of his emotion into an even, level plain." [39] In his own cultural terms, the man can hardly be called "hard" or "unfeeling." Neither does it seem accurate to think of him

as trying to "rationalize" his "pain" or to "deny it" in a way that evokes a priori Western assumptions about selves, the relations between them, or how they function.

If we accept the findings and the arguments of cultural psychologists, do we have to conclude that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere is entirely undermined? I do not think so, although I do believe that it requires some significant modifications.

One of these stems from a suggestion by Shweder. In responding to Geertz's essay "From the native's point of view," Shweder hypothesized that "the force of interactional experience in infancy and early childhood with the physical and social world would quickly lead to a universal differentiation at the skin of the self from others and external events. Certainly by age 3, and perhaps much earlier, all children in all cultures would be expected by most developmentalists to have this 'Western' conception – the idea of being bounded, self-motivated, of associating their observing ego and their will with their body and so on."[40] His argument with regard to a conception of self such as the one Geertz described in Bali is "that there must be a point of transition [from the 'Western' sense of self to the Balinese]. It seems that in Bali the adult cultural system does not build on the child's early experience in self-definition, which may emerge out of precultural or at least 'brute' interaction with the world. *In fact, it seems that the adult cultural system is capable of reversing early childhood understandings of the self...* The Balinese 3-year-old may be more like a Western adult than like a Balinese adult [italics added]."[41] Subsequent discussion of this point by Geertz and others at the conference where it was raised did not prove or disprove Shweder's hypothesis, which, nevertheless, remains interesting and suggestive.

It is also necessary to bear in mind the *time spans* to which Lotman's theory of culture is applied. Although Geertz and others have identified cultures that homogenize alterity, and thus either resist or do not register novelty, it is essential to recognize that this resistance or ignorance cannot last very long, especially in the present day, when cultural contacts are accelerated via modern communications technology. A constant stream of ethnographic evidence shows that "traditional" societies and varieties of selves are forced to change by virtue of incursions from the outside world. And more often than not the direction from which these come is the West.

For example, a recent article in *The New York Times* describes how feminist ideas penetrated into tribal life in Papua New Guinea. The killing of a clan leader in a remote region led to a demand that the

opposing clan provide compensation, or "head pay," in the form of money, pigs and a young woman[42]. As the reporter points out, "women have been bought as brides in parts of this Pacific island nation for centuries. It has only been a few decades since the tribes that populate the remote mountains here discovered that they are not the only people on earth, and village life still mostly follows ancient codes."

A male member of the woman's clan, who also happens to be a Cambridge University-trained professor of anthropology at the University of Papua New Guinea, explained further that although women appear to be treated as mere commodities in such demands for compensation (which is of course the Western, feminist perspective), this exchange actually reflects a spiritual world view in which woman is a "divine object" at the heart of a "botanical conception" of the family. When a young woman becomes a mother, she becomes known as the "'base' of the family tree. Her children are her cuttings or transplants. Her brothers – their uncles – are called 'root people.' The father... has no blood tie to the family and is known by a term that literally means 'the place where I stay most of the time'." After a generation has passed following a woman's marriage, "one or more of her granddaughters are expected to be returned to her family." This is seen as a way to repay the woman's original family for all the work that she did as a mother in her new family.

It is of course noteworthy that this description of local beliefs illustrates yet again the varieties of selves that exist in world cultures. Neither women, before or after motherhood, nor fathers are understood in terms that are compatible with what now passes for the norm in Western cultures. The ethical consequences of the Papuan tribal conceptions are similarly unacceptable from a contemporary Western perspective.

The problem in this case, and the reason why it is "news," is that the young woman in question refused to cooperate with her own clan as it prepared its compensation, and took refuge from her angry relatives three hundred miles away with the anthropologist, who is also her clansman. Her reasons were that she wanted to finish high school, to learn to be a typist, to have her own money, and not to have to depend on a man – all of which she admitted to the reporter with her hands covering her face in shame, thus showing a degree of ambivalence, or "hybridized" reaction to the appeal of the new. The matter now has to be resolved through a negotiation between the country's official legal system under its democratic constitution and

the customary laws of the country's highland tribes. And however it is resolved, the result will clearly be something new and objectionable in terms of tribal customs.

Among the many interesting details in all of this from the point of view of Lotman's theory of the "semiosphere" is that the Western-trained "native" professor of anthropology still upholds the traditional beliefs of his people even though he is simultaneously willing to shelter his clanswoman from them: I have maternal uncles. I have a daughter. I must repay the debt of all the work that my mother did. One way is to make the payment in a lump sum and give my daughter back in marriage... There must be a continuity, and this continuity is through the woman, the source of divine relationships... [the young woman's] case strikes at the root of things: it is kinship on trial."

Thus, on the one hand, the celebration of discrete selves and novelty that characterize Lotman's theoretical writings can be objectionable, or simply irrelevant, even to individuals who *themselves constitute* the "hybridized" border regions between cultures. Indeed, the professor of anthropology emerges as a kind of "fundamentalist" concerned with preserving a tradition in the face of alien forces with which he is perfectly familiar but which he tries to resist[43].

On the other hand, this example also adds a necessary caveat to the findings of cultural psychologists: traditional, non-Western conceptions of selves erode. Over the long term – perhaps over *centuries* in the past, but surely more quickly in the present – alterity and hybridization cannot be avoided. Although physically very far-removed from the parts of the globe known as "the West," the young woman in Papua New Guinea is clearly drawing nearer to her Coca-Cola-drinking brothers and sisters around the world.

Who will prevail in the end? The tribesmen, the anthropologist, or the rebellious young woman? The answer seems obvious. In fact, the young woman in question is not even the first female from among her people to choose a new life for herself. Another woman who had broken with the same tribe actually became a lawyer and is now leading the legal fight to challenge the treatment of women under tribal law: as she put it in terms that could have been used by feminists from Los Angeles to Moscow: "this is a landmark case in recognition of women's rights to equality and freedom... Women are not animals."

Even the culturally conservative anthropologist can be said to have already failed in his rear-guard action because he views the assemb-

lage of cultural practices that he wants to preserve as a partial outsider. His attempt to explain local custom by describing the "barter of young women" as "not so very different from the marriage system of European royalty" constitutes a terminological equation, or translation, that implies his (ironic) distance from the local culture. And whatever he may try to do to preserve the culture will be colored by the fact that it has already been changed by the consequences of the young woman's rebellion. In short, if you watch any culture long enough, Lotman proves right.

I would like to turn in conclusion to some comments that Lotman made regarding his own cultural orientation. He was obviously well aware of cultural differences, both within the Russian historical tradition and elsewhere, and described these on various occasions[44]. But it is curious that he did not see this evidence as sufficient reason to modify his ideas. One reason why he did not do so may be the issue of time frames and the inevitability of change that I just discussed. His vision in the essay on the semiosphere is not merely global, it is virtually cosmic. This longer-term, megascopic perspective would tend to lose sight of the shorter-lived and smaller-scaled phenomena on which cultural psychologists focus, even if they are still numerous and important, especially to those who live them.
Another reason why Lotman may not have chosen to modify his ideas emerges from comments he made in the essay "Culture as Subject and Object for Itself," in which, among other things, he discusses the utility and limits of the concepts "subject" and "object." Lotman points out that they can change into each other so readily that it is at times better to abandon them. In a way that is not entirely clear, however, this leads him to the conclusion that these concepts "emerge, on the one hand, as universal instruments of description of any culture as a phenomenon in any of its manifestations, and on the other, they are *the results of a particular (European) cultural tradition at a particular moment of its development. A. M. Piatigorskii has repeatedly called attention to the inapplicability of these categories to Indian cultural consciousness*" (italics added). However, Lotman then indicates that he chooses to "remain within the European cultural tradition," and in effect drops the subject[45]. In short, he does not resolve the paradox of recognizing the cultural relativity of the subject/object opposition (which is a recognition that the cultural psychologists I quoted above did achieve) while continuing to use it as a universal concept for all cultures.

One final speculation regarding Lotman's ideological orientation. Judging by the evidence of his theoretical essays, he appears to have conceived of religious faith in terms of semiotics not metaphysics. For example, when discussing the likely evolution of human thought, and what would happen if an artificial intelligence were actually ever constructed, Lotman underscores that an increase in the complexity of thought inevitably gives rise to increasing uncertainty. By virtue of being able to react flexibly and effectively to changes in its environment via various mental processes of model building, the complexly thinking entity also experiences a constantly growing state of ignorance, defenselessness, and uncertainty about how to behave. The enormous advance achieved via the appearance of complex thought in human beings inevitably brought with it new complications and required new advances or inventions. According to Lotman, one of the two ways human beings were able to compensate for the "increase in uncertainty and ignorance was by turning toward beneficent and omniscient beings. It was no mere chance that the appearance of religion coincided stadially with the appearance of the phenomenon of thought."

This "demystification" of religion by Lotman, and his implicit preference for a secular and Western conception of the human condition – characterized by a kind of existential angst that one must strive to overcome, even as one realizes that this cannot be fully achieved – may have played a role in his tendency to reduce cultural differences to the one dominant paradigm with which he was most familiar. Indeed, Lotman adds that the *second* way that human beings have developed to overcome their existential difficulties is culture, which functions as a "transindividual intellect" that can provide individuals with the reserves of meaning and the ways to generate new ones that they lack themselves [46].

The enormous erudition and profound insights into a broad array of human institutions and endeavors that characterize Lotman's voluminous writings suggest that his preferred method – immersion in culture – can work exceptionally well for uniquely gifted individuals like him. But the persistence, indeed the resurgence around the world of various forms of religious fundamentalism and political reductionism in recent years implies that the denigration of individuality and the resistance to change, such as those that, on an abstract level, also characterize many "traditional" societies, still hold powerful sway over vast areas of our planet. Indeed, this fact implies that cultural change is not always an evolutionary or teleological process,

with "primitive" societies and mentalities necessarily giving way to those that are more "advanced," as Lotman appeared to hope, however guardedly[47].

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Notes

[1] "O Semiosfere, "in his *Izbrannye stat'i: Tom I* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), p. 16. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Hower (New York: Harper, 1984), p. 157, makes a related point: "any investigation of alterity is necessarily semiotic, and reciprocally, semiotics cannot be conceived outside the relation to the other."

[2] "Kul'tura kak sub"ekt i sama-sebe ob"ekt," in his *Izbrannye stat'i: Tom III* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1993), p. 369.

[3] "O Semiosfere," p. 20.

[4] "Fenomen kul'tury," in his *Izbrannye stat'i: Tom I*, p. 34.

[5] "Tekst v tekste," in his *Izbrannye stat'i: Tom I*, p. 153.

[6] "Fenomen kul'tury," p. 36.

[7] See, for example, "Fenomen kul'tury," p. 45; and "Tekst v tekste," p. 153.

[8] "Ritorika," in his *Izbrannye stat'i, Tom I*, p. 168.

[9] "Kul'tura kak sub"ekt i sama-sebe ob"ekt," p. 371.

[10] John H. Flavell, *The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget*, with a Foreword by Jean Piaget (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1963), pp. 48-50, 155, 270-74, 408.

[11] Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 1986, p. 187.

[12] Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 73, 132. It should be noted that Vygotsky criticizes Piaget's deterministic theory in *Thought and Language*, chap. 2; for an analysis of differences between them, see Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 78-80.

[13] Gerald M. Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 115, 149.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 129.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

[16] This idea is omnipresent in Bakhtin's thought. For an example, see his "Slovo v romane," in his *Voprosy literatury i estetiki: Issledovaniia raznykh let* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975), pp. 72- 233, especially pp. 90 ff. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 206-207, give a concise characterization of Bakhtin's psychology. See also Holquist, *Dialogism*, pp. 78-81, for a discussion that anticipates mine. Of some relevance here is Lacan's theory of the linguistic basis of the self. However, his conception of "a subject constituted in relation to an Other it cannot know and oriented toward an object it can never possess" points in a direction opposite to Bakhtin's; see Michael P. Clark, "Lacan, Jacques," in Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth,

eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 450-54, quotation from p. 453.

[17] Quoted by Satya P. Mohanty, "Epilogue: Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures: Relativism, Objectivity, and the Challenge of Otherness," *PMLA* 110 (1995): p. 117 n. 9. As my subsequent discussion of ethnographic evidence from "Third World" cultures will imply, Mohanty's reliance on Kant's specifically Western conception of the self to defend multiculturalisrn actually (and ironically) recapitulates the kind of bias that also characterizes Lotman.

[18] Richard A. Shweder, "Cultural Psychology: What Is It?", *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, ed. James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, Gilbert Herdt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 17.

[19] Kenneth J. Gergen, "Social Understanding and the Inscription of Self," *Cultural Psychology*, pp. 573-74.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 574.

[21] Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel Rose Markus, "Culture and Self: Implications for Internationalizing Psychology," *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, ed. Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jody Bennet Veroff (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 369.

[22] Hope Landrine, "Clinical Implications of Cultural Differences: The Referential versus the Indexical Self," *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, pp. 745-76.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 746.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 748.

[25] Research cited by Arthur Kleinman, "Do Psychiatric Disorders Differ in Different Cultures? The Methodological Questions," in *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, p. 646.

[26] Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 123, citing Kenneth Read (1955).

[27] "Clinical Implications of Cultural Differences," p. 757.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 758.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 759.

[30] Clifford Geertz, "'From the native's point of view,' On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding" (1974), rpt. in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, ed. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. Le Vine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 126.

[31] C. Geertz, "From the native's point of view," pp. 127-28.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 133.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Kul'tura i vzryv* (Moscow: Gnozis, 1992), p. 54.

[38] See, for example, "Fenomen kul'tury," pp. 42-3.

[39] C. Geertz, "From the native's point of view," p. 128.

[40] Richard A. Shweder, "Preview: A Colloquy of Culture Theorists," in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, p. 12.

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

[42] Seth Mydans, "When the Bartered Bride Opts Out of the Bargain," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1997, p. A4.

[43] One can see in Lotman's apparent inability to recognize fully the possibility

of such a "reactionary" stance a parallel to Bakhtin's overly optimistic emphasis on "symmetrical" dialogue, rather than on the kinds of power-laden, assymetrical exchanges that often typify relations among individuals.

[44] See, for example, his description of a "mythological consciousness" in "Fenomen kul'tury," pp. 36-7, or his references to the collective conception of personhood in Muscovite Russia that included not only the nobleman but also his servants.

[45] "Kul'tura kak sub"ekt i sama-sebe ob"ekt," p. 369.

[46] "Fenomen kul'tury," p. 44.

[47] See, for example, his concluding remarks in *Kul'tura i vzryv*.

A

miotica, linguistica, semantica
miotique, linguistique, sémantique
miotics, Linguistics, Semantics

B

Semiotica narrativa e discorsiva. Retorica
Sémiotique narrative et discursive. Rhétorique.
Semiotics of narrative and discourse. Rhetoric

C

Socio-semiotica (socio- ed etno-lingu
Socio-sémiotique (socio- et ethno-linguistique)
Socio-Semiotics (Socio- and Ethno-Linguistics)

D

miotica letteraria; mitologia e folklore; etica
miotique littéraire; mythologie et folklore; étique.
erary Semiotics; thology and Folkloristics; Poetics

E

Semiotiche auditive.
Sémiotiques auditives
Audio Semiotics.

F

Semiotiche visive e audio-visive
Sémiotiques visuelles et audio-visue
Visual and audio-visual Semiotics