

SEMIOTICS OF HISTORY

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If the past is a foreign country, then it is another culture
[Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides*]

From the times of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, semiotics favoured synchronic analyses to such an extent that its studies on diachronic processes came to a standstill for almost half a century after the publication of the Swiss linguist's work. When, however, diachrony started to be incorporated in studies on sign processes at least since the 1970s, semiotics has flourished in two particular directions: social semiotics and semiotics of history. Within the latter trend, associated mainly with the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, the most clearly formulated theory was the theory of historical process, although the scholars who belonged to this 'school' did not agree on what semiotics of history was supposed to be, and views on this matter evolved together with the more general development of semiotic theory.

Among Polish historians and theoreticians of history, the interpretational potential of the theories created by the scholars gathered around Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky was used only to a small extent. The ideas of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics entered cultural anthropology in the 1980s, mainly through the circle surrounding the New Polish Ethnology project. The main object of reception at the time was the semiotic concept of culture in the form of an older, static, synchronic model, in which culture was understood and studied as an ordered bunch of semiotic systems with the texts which appeared within their boundaries. New challenges, which came with postmodernism, distracted many scholars' attention from the final formula of a semiotic theory of culture with its dynamic concept of semiosphere and the notion of translation as a mechanism of change of cultural imaging. The many years of translational and interpretational effort by the outstanding expert in the field, Bogusław Żyłko,

did however bring us the opportunity to rethink theoretical and interpretational proposals made by semioticians of culture.¹

In the 25th and last volume in the *Sign Systems Studies (Trudy po znakovym sistiemam)* series, published in 1992, Yuri Lotman argued that “During the last few decades semiotics has changed. One of the achievements on this difficult path has been connecting it to history. The study of history has become semiotic, while semiotic thinking has taken on historical features.”² These words may be used as an excellent explanation of the outlook on the potential of semiotics of history we propose. Citing the ambiguity of the term ‘history’ (*historia res gestae versus historia rerum gestarum*), we can look alternately at the practice of studying history and the past constructed in accordance with semiotic thinking.

The fact that history became the centre of interest of the Tartu-Moscow semioticians is unsurprising, since they defined culture as non-hereditary memory of society, in which the coding mechanism requires constant updating. The updating is always a translation, so the historical process is a process of semiosis, selective by nature. In the field of history grappling with the problem of historical fact, the consequences of a perspective outlined in this way are serious. Roland Barthes quite aptly expressed their essence. In his well-known essay *The Discourse of History*, he wrote: “From the moment that language is involved (...), the fact can only be defined in a tautological fashion: what is noted derives from the notable, but the notable is only (...) what is worthy of recollection, that is to say, worthy of being noted. Thus arrive at the paradox which governs the entire question of the distinctiveness of historical discourse (in relation to other types discourse). The fact can only have a linguistic existence, as a term in a discourse, and yet it is exactly as if this existence were merely the ‘copy’, purely and simply, of another existence situated in the extra structural domain of the ‘real’”.³ Let us clearly emphasise that the postulated linguality of historical discourse does not mean only its narrativeness, figurativeness (rhetoricalness) – these are merely ‘what is visible’ and what to some extent impacts ‘what we know’ – but it is situated on a deeper level of linguality, on the level of ‘gram-

¹ See B. Żyłko, *Semiotyka kultury. Szkoła tartusko-moskiewska*, Gdańsk 2009; id. *Kultura i znaki. Semiotyka stosowana w szkole tartusko-moskiewskiej*, Gdańsk 2011. Translations from Russian: J. Łotman, *Kultura i eksplozja*, Warszawa 1999; id., *Rosja i znaki: kultura szlachecka w wieku XVIII i na początku XIX*, Gdańsk 1999; id. *Uniwersum umysłu: semiotyczna teoria kultury*, Gdańsk 2008; B. Uspienski, *Historia i semiotyka*, Gdańsk 1998; id., *Krzyż i koło: z historii symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, Gdańsk 2010.

² J. Łotman, *Ot riedkollegiji*, “Trudy po znakovym sistiemam”, 1992, vol. XXV, p. 4; quoted after: B. Żyłko, *Kultura i znaki...*, p. 67.

³ R. Barthes, *The Discourse of History*, trans. S. Bann, “Comparative Criticism”, vol. 3, 1981, pp. 7–20.

maticality'. What this means is that both the material of history (sources) and, obviously, 'historical facts' belong firstly to the ideational order of the historian's culture. Of course, this statement does not have to mean the necessity to give up the belief that there is an objectivistically understood form of reality, which is a constant point of concern for many historians. After all, in the space of research on semiotics of culture there is a reality which is thoroughly humanistic. It is the shroud of a historical system of cultural meanings, tightly covering the objectivist background. The mechanics of constructing meanings in time is the subject of reflection of the semiotic model of culture.

Anthropologists using the semiotic concept of culture fully realised the possibilities it opened for reflection on history executed in its spirit. It is in such context that Czesław Robotycki argued that "history explains events even through selection and manner of collating."⁴ However, intuitions put forward by methodologists of history had similar consequences. Jerzy Topolski, writing that for historians a source is anything that can provide them with information about the past, clearly emphasised that firstly historians "must decide from where they can draw their information, that is they must decide what is (or may be) a source for them, that is what 'anything' is."⁵ It is worth noting here that the decision is made not only on the basis of the professional culture of historians, but also on the basis of what generally appears to be 'self-understood', belonging to the grammar of the researcher's culture. In the semiotic perspective, writing history is increasing the informativeness of what one wants to talk about; it is introducing this something to a different grammar/different grammars and it is an attempt to understand by transforming (translation).⁶ The entire strategy of studying history perfectly fits the semiotic understanding of culture, which is treated not only as memory of the past preserved in various texts, but also as an active, dynamic mechanism of generating new meanings.

The above conclusions operate in the field of historiography on the metalinguistic level, which is particularly willingly used by anthropologists of culture and theoreticians of history. However, we should taken into consideration the fact that a historian's activity analysed in the context of semiotics of history is merely a special case of human activity treated *en bloc* and it is subject to the same mechanisms, clearly defined by the semiotic theory of culture. In this way, we reach in a way the reverse side of understanding semiotics of history as

⁴ Cz. Robotycki, *Historia i tradycja – dwie kategorie opisu przeszłości*, "Zeszyty Naukowe UJ. Prace Etnograficzne", 1992, vol. 29, p. 17.

⁵ J. Topolski, *Wprowadzenie do historii*, Poznań 2009, p. 35.

⁶ Cf. J. Łotman, B. Uspienski, *Mit – Imię – Historia*, [in:] B. Uspienski, *Historia i semiotyka...*, p. 13.

a possible form of reflecting on the past. If culture is a historically established set of sign systems, it can be, as such, the target subject of study. Tracking the process of generating cultural sense is a study of many generative mechanisms included in the process, observing the overlapping of languages and codes, the penetrating, mixing, and multiplying of various 'rows of culture' within the translations being done. Such a perspective creates the level of metalinguistic reflection, but it can also be turned towards descriptive targets. Semiotic thinking, which has taken on historical features, may therefore provide a perfect, although still rarely used in historiography, heuristic model, which can successfully serve the purpose of redefining the subject of historical studies. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, we can therefore say that the semiotic theory of culture may invariably remain for us both a model of 'reality' (then it allows us to understand the nature of the human world) and a model for 'reality' (then it suggests models of studying it properly).

The Tartu-Moscow School's semiotics of culture was undoubtedly an important part of the theoretical awareness of New Polish Ethnology. While working on the present volume, we were dismayed to learn of the death of Professor Czesław Robotycki, one of its elite founders and creators. On 19 January, 2014, this outstanding humanist, model scholar, and great human being passed away; he was a Master for many of us, as well as a Friend or Colleague. He witnessed the birth of *Anthropology of History Yearbook* and continued to support us with his knowledge and experience until the end. We dedicate this volume to his memory.