Estonian Approaches to Culture Theory
Aims & scope

The Approaches to Culture Theory book series focuses on various aspects of analysis, modelling, and theoretical understanding of culture. Culture theory as a set of complementary theories is seen to include and combine the approaches of different sciences, among them semiotics of culture, archaeology, environmental history, ethnology, cultural ecology, cultural and social anthropology, human geography, sociology and the psychology of culture, folklore, media and communication studies.
Estonian Approaches to Culture Theory

Edited by
Valter Lang & Kalevi Kull
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Language editor: Daniel Edward Allen
Design and layout: Roosmarii Kurvits
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Notes on editors and contributors

Aili Aarelaid-Tart (1947‒2014) was head of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University. Her research focused on theoretical problems of human time and generational consciousness as well as adaptation to cultural changes in the 20th century. She was the head of the research group of contemporary cultural studies at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory.

Martin Ehala (ehalam@ut.ee) is professor at the Department of Estonian, University of Tartu. His main research interests are the development of the Estonian linguistic environment, language maintenance and ethnonlinguistic vitality. He has also published extensively on topics related to language and identity, and contact-induced changes in Estonian.

Halliki Harro-Loit (halliki.harro@ut.ee) is currently professor of journalism at the University of Tartu and is heading the research group of cultural communication at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory. Her research interests include journalism culture and diachronic changes in mediated culture.

Tiiu Jaago (tiiu.jaago@ut.ee) is senior lecturer at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu. Her fields of interest are problems of understanding time and history in folklore (popular narrated histories, family histories, etc.), the social context of the folk song tradition, and the history of folklore studies in Estonia.

Anne Kull (anne.kull@ut.ee) is professor of systematic theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Tartu. She is a founder and head of the Collegium of Science and Religion. Her main research interest areas are science and religion, nature, technology and theological anthropology.

Kalevi Kull (kalevi.kull@ut.ee) is professor of biosemiotics at the University of Tartu. His research deals with semiotic approach in biology, semiotic mechanisms of biodiversity, and the theory and history of semiotics. He has edited the volume Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics, co-edited (with C. Emmeche) the book Towards a Semiotic Biology: Life is the Action of Signs, etc. He is book series co-editor of Semiotics, Communication, Cognition
Notes on editors and contributors

(with P. Cobley) and Tartu Semiotics Library, and a co-editor of the journal *Sign Systems Studies*. Kalevi Kull is head of the semiotics research group at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory.

**Kristin Kuutma** (kristin.kuutma@ut.ee) is professor of cultural research at the University of Tartu. Her research and teaching focuses on cultural theory, cultural history and anthropology, ethnographic studies and knowledge production, critical studies of cultural heritage and representation. She is head of the Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts’ programme in the University of Tartu.

**Valter Lang** (valter.lang@ut.ee) is professor of archaeology at the Institute of History and Archaeology, University of Tartu. The main areas of his research are the Bronze and Iron Ages in Estonia, settlement and landscape archaeology, the history of agriculture and land use systems, and social structures of prehistoric society. He is the author of the monographs *The Bronze and Early Iron Ages in Estonia* (2007), *Muistne Rävala* (1996), *Keskusest ääremaaks* (2000) and *Baltimaade pronksi- ja rauaaeg* (2007), and more than 150 articles. He has been the editor-in-chief of the *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* since 1997 and of Muinasaja teadus since 1991. He is head of the archaeology research group at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory and leader of the Centre.

**Art Leete** (art.leete@ut.ee) is professor of ethnology at the University of Tartu. His research interests relate to subsistence technologies and social and religious changes, as well as the history of descriptions of northern Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples in Russia (the Khanty, Mansi, Tundra and Forest Nenets, and Komi). He is head of the ethnology research group at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory.

**Kati Lindström** (kati.lindstrom@ut.ee) is currently a researcher at the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, and a post-doctoral researcher at the Environmental Humanities Laboratory of the KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Her research interests range from ecosemiotics, landscape phenomenology, national landscape imagery and environmental protection, to Japanese studies and the environmental history of East Asia and the Baltic region.

**Mihhail Lotman** (mihhail.lotman@ut.ee) is senior researcher at the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, and professor of cultural semiotics and comparative literature at Tallinn University. He is a co-editor of the journal *Sign Systems Studies*. His research interests relate to general and cultural semiotics,
Notes on editors and contributors

the semiotics of verse, rhetoric and poetics, the analysis of film, text theory and Russian literature.

**Hannes Palang** (palang@tlu.ee) is professor of human geography at the Center for Landscape and Culture, Tallinn University. His main field of interest is landscape studies. He is head of the landscape studies research group at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory.

**Rein Raud** (rein.raud@tlu.ee) is a cultural theorist and Japanese studies scholar, focusing mainly on classical literature and philosophy. He is also known as an author of literary fiction, an essayist and translator into Estonian. He is currently professor of Japanese studies at the University of Helsinki as well as a distinguished research fellow of the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University.

**Raul Tiganik** (rault@hot.ee) has studied law and the anthropology of religion. Since 2003 he has worked for the Estonian Tax and Customs Board. His PhD dissertation *Social Control and Religion* was defended in 2013 at the Faculty of Theology, University of Tartu.

**Peeter Torop** (peeter.torop@ut.ee) is professor of cultural semiotics at the University of Tartu. He is a co-editor of the journal *Sign Systems Studies* and the book series Tartu Semiotics Library. In recent years his publications have included the books *La traduzione totale. Tipi di processo traduttivo nella cultura* (2010), *Translation and Culture* (in Estonian; 2011), the co-edited volume (with K. Kroó) *Text within Text – Culture within Culture* (2014), articles about cultural semiotics, the semiotics of translation, autocommunication, transmediality, identity and literary studies.

**Ülo Valk** (ulo.valk@ut.ee) is professor of Estonian and comparative folklore, University of Tartu. His publications include the monograph *The Black Gentleman: Manifestations of the Devil in Estonian Folk Religion* (2001), the co-edited volume *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (2012) and other works on folk narratives, folk belief, demonology, the history of folkloristics, and folklore in social context. He is head of the folkloristics research group at the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory.

**Tõnu Viik** (tonu.viik@tlu.ee) is director of the Estonian Institute of Humanities and professor of philosophy at Tallinn University.
Acknowledgements

This volume was initiated at the annual meeting of the board of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) in Põhjaka manor, Estonia, November 17, 2011. All CECT research groups were invited to suggest fitting articles in order to compile an interesting contemporary overview of culture theory works in Estonia. We are grateful to those who responded to our call, although it was not possible to include all of the material received – nevertheless, the initial selection set the tone of the present volume. This volume is recognition of both the fruitful discussions of CECT board meetings as well as the willing nature of CECT researchers to be challenged by new ideas and create new forms of cooperation.

We would like to thank the volume authors for their kind responses to editing their articles and for enduring the long process of compiling this volume. Our ambition to introduce modern Estonian art parallel to contemporary culture theory was encouraged by the Art Museum of Estonia – we are especially happy that our collaboration began with this volume.

We are grateful to Marek Tamm for some good ideas that we have used in the introduction. We would also like to thank Daniel E. Allen, our language editor and keeper of our house style, our editor Anu Kannike, and our managing editor Monika Tasa.
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Preface: Estonian approaches in culture theory

Valter Lang, Kalevi Kull

Credo

Culture depends on its self-description. This means that the development of any culture cannot be understood without knowing what the people knew about their culture. Likewise, theoretical knowledge, including local studies in the field of culture theory, can play a remarkable role in cultural self-awareness. Therefore, culture theory studies in Estonia do not represent only a certain field of local science; these studies, in the vanguard of the self-understanding of culture in Estonia, represent an obligatory part of the culture itself.

Culture is everything that symbolic communication does. While the capacity to build symbolic relations is the basis for the faculty of language, it is also responsible for the diversity and power of culture. This includes not only human relations and artefacts, but also accounts for our relationships with place and cross-temporal phenomena. Thus the framework of culture theory should also deal with the modification of landscapes, and with the sustainability of the ecosystem that contains a culture and is related to it. Culture is a chronotope, a spatio-temporal world that meaning-making humans are permanently creating; culture is also a semiosphere, a space of signs. These formulations represent the approach developed by contemporary Estonian culture theorists.

Progenitors

Estonian research in cultural theory has received worldwide attention since the 1960s, due to the pioneering work of Juri Lotman on the semiotic theory of culture. However, the history of professional culture theory research in Estonia can be traced back at least two centuries. Initially, the impact of Victor Hehn, Leopold von Schroeder, and Hermann von Keyserling, is visible. Upon closer inspection, a veritable group of scholars opens up.

At the beginning of the 19th century, probably under the influence of Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche (1762–1842), philosophy professor of the University of Tartu and...
a pupil of Immanuel Kant, the rationalist approach gained popularity in Tartu. This aspect did not diminish the scope of studies, rather it broadened the diversity of approaches, adding the emphasised dimension of depth to each of them. Carl Gustav Jochmann (1789–1830), who was born in Pärnu and later travelled in Europe, wrote influential essays on cultural philosophy, yet his relationship to Estonia remained disconnected. However, University of Tartu grew into one of the major intellectual centres of 19th-century Europe and gave rise to numerous studies that have underpinned the deep investigations of culture. For instance, Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1896), who was an eminent scholar in many fields – biology (including embryology, ecology, theory of development and evolution), anthropology, geography, history – carried out outstanding research in ethnology. Historian of culture Victor Hehn (1813–1890), who studied and taught in Tartu, wrote a remarkable work on the domestication of plants and animals. Gustav Teichmüller (1832–1888), a long-term philosophy professor in the University of Tartu, made an extensive study of the history of concepts. Linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), a professor at the University of Tartu from 1883 to 1893, developed an early structuralist approach. Indologist Leopold von Schroeder (1851–1920), who was also interested in general linguistics, studied human ethology. Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who studied theology in Tartu (and later established the Keiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, now the Max Planck Society, in Germany), performed a study of early Christian culture. Alexander von Staël-Holstein (1877–1937) was an Estonian (Baltic German) orientalist – this field has been permanently present in Tartu. Biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) made attempts to use general functional models of meaning-making for all organisms, applying this to the description of human society. Hermann von Keyserling (1880–1946), who studied chemistry in Tartu, was an influential cultural philosopher of the early 20th century.


University of Tartu geography professor Johannes Gabriel Granõ (1882–1956), who studied Estonian landscapes, and Walter Anderson (1885–1962), who was a
long-term folkloristics professor in Tartu, also exerted remarkable influence on our cultural studies.

Juri Lotman (1922–1993), a specialist in Russian literature and the history of culture, introduced the whole field of the semiotics of culture into the humanities. He organised a series of legendary summer schools on semiotics, or secondary modelling systems, in Kääriku (Estonia) from 1964 to 1986. These meetings enabled the establishment of the Tartu–Moscow School of semiotics. Almost all subsequent research in theory of culture benefits from the influence of this school.

Later, Linnart Mäll (1938–2010) studied the role of humanistic base texts in Eastern cultures. Cultural psychologist Peeter Tulviste (b. 1945) has studied cultural historical types of verbal thinking. Jaan Valsiner (b. 1954) has developed a semiotic approach in cultural psychology.

The work of the abovementioned scholars with their diverse backgrounds prepared the conditions for top-level research in the theory of culture in Estonia in the 21st century.

Centre of Excellence

The Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) was established in 2008. The Centre acts as an umbrella organisation for eight established research groups – archaeology, cultural communication studies, contemporary cultural studies, ethnology, folkloristics, landscape studies, religious studies, and semiotics. In order to advance the theoretical analysis of culture, the CECT focuses on ancient social and cultural systems, folklore and heritage, the evolution and translatability of sign systems, contemporary everyday practice, landscape and sociological processes, media and life story research, the theoretical problems of cultural semiotics, etc. Enhanced interdisciplinary communication and joint seminars have turned the Centre into an inspirational environment for further steps in the field of the humanities.

Since 2008, the Centre has organized a series of international annual conferences on culture theory:

- 2008 – *The Analysability of Culture* (Tartu, 21–22 November)
- 2009 – *Spatiality, Memory and Visualisation of Culture/Nature Relationships: Theoretical Aspects* (Tallinn, 22–24 October)
- 2010 – *Time in Culture: Mediation and Representation* (Tartu, 28–30 October)
- 2011 – *Things in Culture, Culture in Things* (Tartu, 20–22 October)
- 2012 – *In, Out and in Between: Dynamics of Cultural Borders* (Tallinn, 17–19 October)
• 2013 – Embodiment, Expressions, Exits: Transforming Experience and Cultural Identity (Tartu, 30 October – 1 November)
• 2014 – Deep Mechanisms of Estonian Culture (Tallinn, 29–31 October)

The international book series Approaches to Culture Theory, published by the University of Tartu Press, was established in 2011. The majority of papers from the conference in 2009 were published in the first volume of the series, under the title The Space of Culture – the Place of Nature in Estonia and Beyond (2011). The second volume of the series, The Curving Mirror of Time (2013), presents research of the Cultural Communication Studies group in Tartu. A selection of papers from the 2011 conference were published in the third volume Things in Culture, Culture in Things (2013).

Current volume

The aim of the current volume is to present a ‘contemporary anthology’ – a representative selection of research in the field of culture theory in Estonia. The articles have been selected from recently published works; some of them were translated from the original languages of publication into English and improved especially for this volume. As any other anthology, this one can hardly be an exhaustive selection, more something of a ‘best of Estonian cultural theory’, an overview of what some of our scholars are dealing with today. The authors represent all eight of the Centre’s research groups:

• Archaeology: Valter Lang
• Cultural Communication Studies: Halliki Harro-Loit
• Contemporary Cultural Studies: Aili Aarelaid-Tart
• Ethnology: Art Leete, Kristin Kuutma
• Folkloristics: Ülo Valk, Tiiu Jaago
• Landscape Studies: Hannes Palang, Rein Raud, Tõnu Viik
• Religious Studies: Anne Kull
• Semiotics: Mihhail Lotman, Peeter Torop, Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull
• In cooperation with the Centre: Martin Ehala, Raul Tiganik.

The first chapter of this collection is written by Mihhail Lotman. It draws attention to some paradoxes in Juri Lotman’s conception of structural semiotics, which did not find adequate expression in his publications. These paradoxical aspects of semiotics involve the separation of time from causality where result may precede cause in terms of information, and the relationship between sign and its meaning where meaning can be at the same time antecedent and subsequent, the cause and its result. Peeter Torop continues by analysing connections between culture and culture studies, particularly concentrating on the specificity
of translation – a concept that has been treated as central to discussion of the philosophy of culture. He elaborates the concept of the ‘thick translation’, which in parallel to C. Geertz’s ‘thick description’ is meant to signify translation that maximally opens up the cultural context. It follows that anthropology can be treated as culture translation and, therefore, translation can be examined not merely within the framework of translation studies but also within cultural anthropology. Tõnu Viik contributes by analysing Husserl’s account of the cultural uniqueness of Western civilization, focusing on cultural symbolic forms.

Martin Ehala turns to the theory of language ecology. He analyses the sustainability of language by distinguishing three main factors that influence it most: the external and internal environments, and the ethnolinguistic vitality of the community. According to Ehala, changes in the external environment of a language community must be adapted to by developing the internal environment (social institutions) of that community as fully as possible, while the strength of the latter depends on ethnolinguistic vitality, i.e. the ability of a community to behave in interethnic communication as a united collective factor. Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull and Hannes Palang, in their chapter analyse semiotic treatments of landscape, where approaches to landscape as analogous to a text with its language and both writers and readers have turned to more naturalised approaches. This also includes understanding of landscape as chronotope and an ecossemiotic view of landscapes that goes beyond anthropocentric definitions. Valter Lang goes 3000 years back in time and tries to define prehistoric culture by using Juri Lotman’s treatment of semiosphere and cultural typology. He describes different sub-phenomena or models of cultural behaviour within eastern Baltic Bronze Age culture, which as a whole is distinguishable from neighbouring cultural regions.

Rein Raud dedicates his chapter to the analysis of identity, treating this concept as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon rather than a relationship between things and objective reality. Raul Tiganik and Anne Kull discuss the relationships between religion with its emphases on love, compassion, caring and peace from one side, and criminality and behavioural deviance from the other. Although the latter decreases the sense of security and increases the sense of danger both in the individual and in society, criminology has not been regarded as a partner for theology and religious anthropology as frequently as might be expected. Anthropological approaches to religion from the perspective of collective and individual characteristics are the subject of analysis presented by Art Leete. He compares characteristic research strategies, employed to explain Christian religious identities and processes in modern anthropological tradition, and applies them to his fieldwork data dealing with local traditions and vernacular expressions of faith among the Komi Republic in Russia. Ülo Valk discusses oral storytelling on the
basis of Estonian material, showing how dominant beliefs in the supernatural are connected with social changes and power relations in rural communities. He argues that in order to understand traditional legends, these legends should not be detached from the social world of the communities who tell them.

In her chapter Aili Aarelaid-Tart interprets human time as a cognitive construction of social reality that brings order to social interaction and communication. According to Aarelaid-Tart, the division of time into past, present and future is quite illusory and relative because in real life streams of events from the past and the representations of the future are subordinated to current needs. The next chapter, written by Halliki Harro-Loit, provides the concept of the diachronic change of journalistic conventions, which enables the author to highlight journalism as a specific phenomenon in cultural communication and reveal universal and unique processes in certain journalism cultures. Tiitu Jaago poses the question of how to apply today’s research methodology in the analysis of source material collected during earlier periods. For instance, how do the memories of the 1905 revolution in Estonia, written down by historians in the 1920s and 1930s for the purpose of studying history, suit folkloristic narrative research today? She analyses the contact points between historical and folkloristic narrative research from three angles: the genre of these texts, the specificity of oral and written texts, and the impact of the researcher and narrator’s cooperation on the archival text. The last chapter by Kristin Kuutma is concerned with the scarcity of theoretical discussions in Estonian folkloristics and proposes development of particular concepts through international disciplinary histories, and also contemplation of their interpretations and interpretative potentials.

As relevant to the diversity of our culture, this volume covers a great variety of topics related to the theory of culture. It is the first of its kind in scope and aim and is thus an important constituent of our larger project of advancing, integrating and institutionalizing studies in culture theory in Estonia.

The illustrations for the current volume represent Estonian art from the period 1967–1985. They are chosen from the collections of the Art Museum of Estonia.