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BEGINNINGS OF THE SEMIOTICS OF CULTURE

Edited by
Silvi Salupere
Peeter Torop
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Preface

A landmark of Tartu semiotics for nearly half of a century now is the semiotics of culture. The semiotic study of cultures was at the centre of interest in Juri Lotman's group, and in the Tartu-Moscow semiotics school in general.

In 1973, the collective manifesto *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures* was written under the leadership of Juri Lotman together with his Moscow colleagues Vjacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Toporov, Aleksandr Pjatigorskij, and Boris Uspenskij. This marked the real birth of the research field called the *semiotics of culture*.

The intensive work of the 1960s on the semiotic approach to the study of texts, at first literary texts and later other kinds of cultural texts, and the discussions at the Tartu Semiotics Summer Schools in Kääriku (Salupere 2012), led to the formation of an understanding of the possibility for an integral approach to culture from the semiotic point of view. It is marked by the use of the term *semiotics of culture* that came into use since 1970.

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 of the field (Lotman 1970). In the same year, Lotman and Uspenskij used the term in their abstract for a conference in Tbilisi (Lotman, Uspenskij 1970), followed by their article on the topic (Lotman, Uspenskij 1971).

In 1973, at the proposal of Juri Lotman, a collective formulation of the principles of this field called 'semiotics of culture' 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. M. 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, 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.

¹ Roman Jakobson also attended the Warsaw meeting in 1973 (Rudy 1999: 100).

The *Theses* were published in 1973, almost simultaneously in Russian (in Poland for the Congress proceedings) and in English² (in the Netherlands for a book published by Mouton). Subsequently, the *Theses* have been translated into French (1974), Italian (1979), German (1986), Estonian (1998), Portuguese (2003), and Spanish (2006). Below, we provide the list of republications and translations of this text. A thorough analysis of the *Theses* has been produced 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 under a slightly changed title in 2006). This text, compiled at the request of the editor of that volume,³ was not published in Russian, although it was published later in Portuguese (Lótman, Uspiénski 2003) and Spanish (Lotman, Uspenski 2007) in a translation from Italian.⁴

The 2013 Tartu Semiotics Summer School (the 8th in the general sequence⁵) takes place again at Kääriku and is dedicated to the development of semiotics of culture, under the title “Autocommunication in Semiotic Systems: 40 years after the Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture”. On this occasion, we republish here (1) the introduction to the 4th Summer School, written by J. Lotman, also in translation into English and Estonian, (2) the *Theses* in three languages (these were also published in vol. 1 of *Tartu Semiotics Library*, in 1998; here the translations are slightly corrected), and (3) the *Postscriptum to theses* (in English, translated from Italian, since we could not establish the Russian original of this text). The background and the further role of these texts is described in the accompanying article by Peeter Torop and Silvi Salupere.⁶

Silvi Salupere
Peeter Torop
Kalevi Kull

² This was Lotman’s first paper that was published in English (see the complete bibliography of Lotman’s works in English in Kull, Kalevi 2011. Juri Lotman in English: Bibliography. *Sign Systems Studies* 39(2/4): 343–356.).

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

⁴ In 1992, Lotman wrote “Theses towards a semiotics of Russian culture” as a study programme for the Department of Russian Culture in the Institute of World Culture at Moscow State University (published in Russian and in English – Lotman 1994a; 1994b), and focused 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 (the 7th) took place at Palmse, in 2011, on the topic of semiotic modelling. The first six were held in 1964, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1974, and 1986 (see also Kull, Salupere *et al.* 2011; Kull, Lindström *et al.* 2011; Salupere 2012).

⁶ *Acknowledgements.* We thank Tanel Pern, Remo Gramigna and Tyler Bennett for their help in improving translations. This volume is related to the project IUT2-44 (Semiotic modelling of self-description mechanisms: Theory and applications), and the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund).

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