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CULTURE AS A SUBJECT AND AN OBJECT IN ITSELF

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Abstract: In the classic works on the history of separate cultures, culture was considered as a kind of object standing outside of the researcher. Later, when the process of research by itself had become a subject of research, the history of culture appears in the aspect of evolution of its interpretations. These approaches to the study of culture could be considered as respectively as “objective” and “subjective”. The author argues that the culture as a whole and any sufficiently complicated text incorporated in it constitute a meaning-generative unit (monad) existing within the semiosphere. Any such monad can create relations with other monads forming a bipolar unity at a higher level. The emergence of cultural areas is an example of this process. This suggests that the relationships between monads is not the one of subject-object which implies an unidirectional reception, but a complex pulsating dialogue. Translated from Russian.

The brief statements of a few research principles offered to the reader of this article should not be regarded as aspiring to any philosophical significance.¹ The author is far from having pretensions of such kind. It is just an attempt to summarize the experience based on the results of the investigation of concrete facts from the history of culture. At the same time, the author was induced by dissatisfaction with the way several customary theoretical categories in the history of art and culture have been tackled.

The classic works on the history of separate cultures, written in the 19th century, were based on the mentality developed under the influence of the ideas of Hegel and Darwin. First of all, culture was considered as a kind of an object standing outside of the researcher. This object is on a certain stage of development, which is a regular, progressively directed evolution. The researcher remains outside of the object. The act of cognition is considered as an unveiling of the regularities (structures) hidden within the object (culture). The researcher equipped with logic remains in the position of truth. “Subjective factors” are considered as various deviations from the truth under the influence of non-scientific tendencies: partiality, ignorance, or just dishonesty.

¹ The paper is translated from Russian and has first appeared as Lotman (1989a).

However, to the extent that the process of research by itself had become a subject of research – the understanding of the position of the investigator became more complicated, and the tradition dating back in its final perspective to Kant came into prominence again. The mechanism of analysis itself becomes a subject of scientific analysis – knowledge about knowledge. The main interest moves from the question of how the spirit is realised in the artistic text to the problem of how the text is perceived by the audience. On this basis, various trends of hermeneutics are developing. In its extreme manifestation, the aforementioned method entirely concentrates attention on the subject of culture. The history of culture appears in the aspect of evolution of its interpretations, provided by its contemporary audience on the one hand, and by [the] subsequent generations (including the tradition of scientific interpretation) on the other. In the first case, the interpretation occurs within the framework of synchrony of the given culture, as if acting as its incorporated part; in the second case, it has been brought to diachronic scale and is subjected to all the difficulties of translation from one language into another.

Though in the first case, the object (text) is being emphasized and in the second, the subject (interpreter) is being stressed, the classic dichotomy “subject-object” is immediate in both cases.

The classic model of communication, worked out by Roman Jakobson, seems to reconcile the two approaches, introducing the bipolar structure of circulation of an illocutionary act: from sender to addressee. There are two correspondent investigation types for them: the analysis of generation of texts – the grammar of the speaker, and the analysis of interpretations – the grammar of the listener. Accordingly, in the case of literary texts, the fields of generative and interpretative aesthetics have also emerged. Thus the notion of the text as a self-sufficient and closed space, propounded by the Russian formalists, has been embellished with the conception of codifying or decodifying devices, lying in the extratextual realm. Correspondingly, the researcher has been consistently moving between the “outside” and the “inside” position in respect to the text. The evolution of the *Rezeptionsästhetik*, successfully developed in the works of the representatives of the “Constance School” (see Warning 1988), emphasized the one-sidedness of both the “objective” and “subjective” approaches and considerably improved our comprehension of the operating mechanisms of the text. However, the distinction between “subjective” and “objective” aspects has been even more stressed and absolutized by this. Although these aspects are useful as heuristic principles at a certain stage, in actual operation of the text (at all levels, including culture as an integral text) they have such an enormous ability for mutual conversion that it sometimes seems reasonable to abandon these fundamental philosophical concepts altogether. Therefore it would be possible to point out that the concepts of “objective” and “subjective”, on the one hand, act as universal instruments for the description of any culture as a phenomenon in all manifestations, and on the other, they themselves are an outcome of a certain

(European) cultural tradition in a particular period of development. A. M. Piati-gorsky, for example, has repeatedly indicated the inapplicability of these categories in the Indian cultural tradition. Remaining within the framework of the European cultural tradition, one should remark that beside the above-mentioned great founders of the new European thought – Hegel and Kant – it would probably be useful to recall a third name, that of Leibniz, whose ideas seem to gain new intellectual interest once again.

The fundamental question of the semiotics of culture is the problem of the generation of meaning. By the generation of meaning we understand the ability of the culture in general and its separate parts to produce at its “output” new non-trivial texts. By new texts we understand the texts resulting from irreversible processes (the concept introduced by I. Prigogine), which are to a certain extent unpredictable. The generation of meaning occurs at all structural levels of culture. This process implies the entering of several texts from the outside of the system and their specific unpredictable transformation during their movement between the input and the output of the system. The systems of this kind – from the minimal semiotic units to the extensive ones, e.g. “culture like a self-sufficient universe“, are structurally isomorphous despite the difference of their nature. On the one hand, this permits to build their minimal model and on the other, it will be extremely significant in analysing the meaning-generative process.

The invariant model of the meaning-generative unit signifies, first of all, its definiteness, self-sufficiency and the presence of a border between the unit and the “outside“ semiotic space. This enables us to define the meaning-generative structures as semiotic monads of their kind, functioning at all levels of semiotic space. The monads of this kind are both the culture as a whole and any sufficiently complicated text incorporated in it, including separate human personalities, regarded as texts. The above-mentioned separateness of such a monad (within certain limits) not only presumes the presence of borders and an immanent structure but, at the same time, the existence of “input” and “output”. Since the monad does not possess a material but rather a semiotic-informational existence, the “consumption” of any entering text by the monad results not only in its physical, but also in its informational destruction: being transformed during the process of the “consumption”, in the course of which a new text appears at the exit, the initial text is retained in its original form and is able to enter into new relations with its own transformation.

Thus, when a cat eats a mouse, the latter ceases to exist as a physically real biological structure through the “consumption”; when some technical invention is “eaten” by a new one, it is subjected to informational destruction though preserving its physical existence: when a new text is being created during the artistic evolution, it does not destroy the previous one either physically or semiotically, though the previous one can be temporarily deactualized. In this meaning, the very concept of evolution, applied to such a complicated semiotic

phenomenon as art, could be used only in this transformed sense, and therefore it would probably be better to avoid it.

The other feature of the functioning of this structure is its ability to enter through its own input and, accordingly, to transform itself, since from its own point of view, it acts like a text among texts and is therefore a normal semiotic “food” for itself. It means that the ability for self-description (self-reflection) and self-interpretation at the metalevel is programmed into the very nature of the monad.

Therefore, the monad of any level is an elementary unit of meaning-generation, and possesses at the same time a sufficiently complex immanent structure. Its minimal organization includes a binary system, consisting at least of two semiotic mechanisms (languages) which are in a relationship of mutual untranslatability, yet at the same time being similar, since by its own means each of them models one and the same extrasemiotic reality². Thus a text being received from “outside” immediately obtains at least two mutually untranslatable semiotic projections. The minimal structure also includes a third element – the module of conventional equivalents, a metaphorogenic tool, allowing the realisation of the translational operation in case of untranslatability. Due to these “translations”, the text is subjected to an irreversible transformation and the act of the generation of a new text takes place.

However, no semiotic mechanism is able to function as an isolated system, deeply immersed in vacuum. The inevitable condition for its functioning is its immersion into the semiosphere (semiotic space; see Lotman 1989b). Any semiotic monad, merely due to its independence and semiotic originality, can create convergent relations with another (other) monad (monads), forming a bipolar unity at a higher level. However, from the two unconnected neighbouring elements, they turn into an integrated whole of a higher level only on condition of their belonging to the same structural association of the supreme order. Thus the structures, “predisposed” to the above, are those possessing antonymic languages (e.g. mirror structures, contrasting according to the principle “right – left”) and being described on the higher level by the same metalanguage; generally speaking, the structures acting ordinarily as “individuals” before their collision can later be regarded as having one or another type of symmetry. Thus, for instance, the two independent and unconnected tribes in the case when one has been conquered by another are able to form a social structure with symmetrical-asymmetrical organization, of hierarchic type. The opposite example is also curious: despite the 300 years of dominion of the Mongols in Russia, an integrated social structure did not appear, and the numerous contacts on the governmental and military levels (which would not have occurred without [the] appropriate forms of communication) did not create any kind of common semiotic mechanism. The

² For example, the projection of one and the same reality to the spaces of everyday speech or poetry, poetry or painting, the right or the left cerebral hemispheres of a human being will produce untranslatable, yet similar reflections, constructed like metaphors.

cause of this can be seen not only in the incompatibility of the urban and steppe cultures, but from another interesting aspect as well: the Tartars were tolerant and did not persecute the Orthodox religion in Russia. This led to incompatibility with the Russian Orthodox culture where the Church played an extremely important organizational role. If the Tartars would have been the persecutors of Christians, they would have been more “easily understood” and would have been regarded as tyrants in the hagiographical consciousness. In that case, they would have formed a kind of double-unity with Russia, resembling the double-unity of pagan Rome and its Christian community (the behavior of a Christian martyr and that of a Roman bureaucrat is mutually alienated and seems from their opposite points of view as “barbarian”, “unenlightened”, “fanatic”, “tyrannical”, “satanic”, but both can be described within the system of some common metalanguage; the religious indifference and the enlightened state pragmatism of the Mongols, enabling their culture to create a semiotic relationship with Chinese culture, made it incompatible with Russian culture). It would be extremely tempting to describe various semiotic systems from the viewpoint of their predisposition/non-predisposition to mutual convergences.

As soon as two monads make contact, forming a common semiotic mechanism, they proceed from the state of mutual neutrality to the condition of mutual complementarity, structural antonymy, and they start to cultivate their own specific character and mutual contrast. The accentuation of symmetry and asymmetry are aspects of a single process, from the sexual symmetry/asymmetry which developed during the evolutionary process, and the symmetry/asymmetry in the functions of the big cerebral hemispheres of a human being (at some more profound structural layers it would be possible to point out the right and the left rotation in the structure of the substance) up to regularities of forming complex semiotic units. The emergence of cultural areas, for instance, is on the one hand connected with the fact that various cultures, while being incorporated into a more complex unit, create mechanisms of intercultural communication and intensify the features of mutual unity. However, on the other hand, their mutual interest in each other is nourished by the untranslatable specific character of any of them – no matter whether we talk about “the mysterious East” (“the West is the West – the East is the East”), “enigmatic Slavic (or German) soul”, “unintelligible female nature”, “negritude” or some other affirmations of cultural specificities. First, they never appear in isolated cultures. An isolated culture does not have any specific character and does not show any interest in the problem. Concepts like “a man” and “a man of our tribe” are synonyms, being opposed to God, a corpse, a demon, an animal (sometimes a woman), but they do not co-exist with some other national-cultural specificity. Second, the national-cultural specificity primarily reveals itself in a foreigner’s eyes. It was not by accident that the first grammars were written by foreigners or were intended for foreigners; all this also applies to the earliest descriptions of customs. At this stage, the one who describes, imagines himself a bearer of descriptive metalanguage and, therefore, not as endowed with

any specificity, but as being the carrier of a neutral standard. Third, when the culture which so far had existed as an object of description reaches the level of self-description, it accepts, as a rule, the external viewpoint on itself and starts describing itself as a unique and specific object. Thus, the cultural self-consciousness of Slavophiles was to a large extent determined by their belonging to the German historiographic tradition and, in the first instance, to the tradition of Schelling, whereas Mme de Staël's *About Germany* did not only codify the German culture as the romantic one for the whole Europe, but also significantly determined the way of its self-codification. And fourth, there arises the question about the specific character of those cultures which, aiming to provide the standard for any culture, find themselves left without any specific character. The specifics of "the man of the East" compel Kipling to construct the character of "the man of the West" while the ethnologic descriptions of the "exotic" populations regularly lead to the idea of studying one's own contemporary society with the help of anthropological and ethnographic methods.

The ability of one and the same monad to enter into different monads of higher levels as a sub-structure and, consequently, while preserving its unity, to become a part of various other wholes, and in this respect to be non-identical to itself, inevitably presumes a complex polyglotism of its internal structure.

The monad, defined in this way, acts as a unity, permanently extending itself within the limits of a certain individual semiotic space and, at the same time, like a decimal numeral obsessed by the idea of becoming a whole, endlessly enters into new combinations. By and large, each monad, irrespective of its relation to any level, is a part and a whole at the same time. I have already mentioned that the monad is a generator of new messages, i.e. messages not constructed by automatically operating algorithms. In other works I have already pointed out its ability to store the information received, i.e. memory. I should also note that informational exchange and blending of texts takes unceasingly place within the semiosphere. This is granted by the structural isomorphism of monads, their integration into metalanguage communities, those communities where some kind of unified level of semiosis is being established. The presence of all these qualities permits us to define the semiotic monad as an intellectual unit, a bearer of the mind. But a human being not only thinks, he also exists within a thinking space, just as a speaker is always immersed into a certain linguistic space. The intellectual capacity of the semiosphere is determined by its ability to present itself as an intersection, combination or incorporative insertion of an enormous amount of monads into each other, each of which is capable of performing meaning-generative operations. This is a huge organism of organisms. The law of isomorphism between the parts and the whole, and the parts between themselves, which governs this organism could be imagined by recalling the biblical image of Man's resemblance to God as the lowest unity presented by millions of individual versions to the supreme and unique essence. The practically infinite variety of monads enables one to define them as semiotic individuals. There exists one more

fundamental basis for this assertion. A human person is endowed not only with an individual mind, but also with an individual behavior. It means that in any situation, allowing more than one solution for a problem, one has to make a choice. The sources of this principle are more profound than is normally assumed. Prigogine, analysing the irreversible processes in physics and chemistry, came to a conclusion which seems to have general theoretical significance for everybody who has taken interest in dynamic processes. Prigogine differentiates between processes occurring in equilibrium and non-equilibrium situations. The first evolve quietly, submitted to the laws of causality and forming reversible (symmetric) trajectories which enable us to forecast the future evolution from the evolution in past. The special features of the non-equilibrium situation is the appearance of bifurcation points (according to the terminology of Prigogine) on the dynamic trajectory, i.e. the points where the motion is about to start with an equal probability in two (or several) directions, and it is not possible to predict which one will actually be chosen. In the above-mentioned conditions, the role of chance, the secondary factor that is able to influence the future path of the evolution, becomes extremely important. The introduction of the chance factor to the mechanism of causality is the most important contribution of Prigogine's (see Prigogine 1976; Prigogine and Stengers 1981). This deautomatizes the picture of the Universe.

Since most of the processes occurring in human society can be characterized as irreversible, occurring in strongly non-equilibrium situations, they are of particular interest to the historian of culture. However, here we come across some interesting differences: an interference of mind into the dynamic process utterly changes the specific character of the dynamics. If the choice at the bifurcation point is being determined by chance, it is evident that the more complex the immanent structure of the object is at its stage of development (and, therefore, the more incidental details it includes as a text) – the more unpredictable its behavior will be at the point of bifurcation.

The most intricate object we can ever imagine is the object endowed with intellectual capacity. In this case, its behavior at the bifurcation point acquires the character of a deliberate choice. The possibility of the mind's existence has been programmed in the very existence of chance in nature. However, a structure advanced to the intellectual level transforms chance into freedom. Consequently, the most complex relations of causality emerge: an act of intellectual choice occurs between cause and effect, cancelling their causal automatism. It follows that, first, the intellectual action results from the development of asymmetrical irreversible processes and is inevitably connected with structural asymmetry, and second, it includes a complicated moment of chance in itself (in fact, the latter is simply a paraphrase of the well-known connection between unpredictability and information).

With certain caution, a parallel could be established between the semiotic monads and the concept of personality, since behavioural autonomy is to some

extent also characteristic to semiotic monads. This leads to the fact that the lasting process of the history of culture does not entail the rise of its predictability. A monad as a part of a unity is governed by strict laws of determination, whereas as a whole, as a “personality”, it has the possibility to choose and a certain reserve of freedom, autonomy from the whole, and its own semiotic context. But since the semiosphere is pierced with “semiotic personalities” of various levels, it presents itself as a special construction, being simultaneously an organized hierarchy of structures and an enormous number of freely floating worlds (“personalities”, “texts”). The more complex the structure of the monad, the more autonomous its behaviour, the more unpredictability it brings into the entire system. Such a kind of organization has a great informative capacity and practically unlimited possibilities of evolution.

How does this approach to culture correlate to the common dichotomy of subject and object? The existence of the meaning-generating monad demands its entire immersion into an intellectual whole at the higher level, and immediate inclusion into a monad at the higher level, based on the following principle: any intellectual whole is a part of an intellectual whole, and is a whole itself, in relation to its parts. But as a part and a whole, it communicates with itself as the whole and with its own parts only with the aid of interpretational mechanisms, as a participant in a dialogue. The correlation “object – subject” implies concentration of the intellectual activity on the one side and the structural organization on the other. On the basis of the above-mentioned viewpoint, the elements are in relationship of “switched on – switched off” where every thinking element is located within the thinking realm. The categories “subject – object” are likely to appear only at the moment when a separate monad, raising up to the level of self-description, starts modelling itself as an isolated and unique intellectual substance.

The reality looks like this if we consider it from the internal point of view in respect to the semiosphere. However, I have suggested above that the meaning-generating mechanism can operate on condition of the receipt of the texts from outside, i.e. through contacts with the extrasemiotic reality. In this sense, could it be useful to define the semiosphere as a subject, and the extra-semiotic realm as an object?

First of all, let us concentrate on our terminological inconsistency: we assert that the texts are received from outside, and at the same time, we suppose them to be an “extrasemiotic reality”. The contradiction appears due to the fact that the semiosphere is not in a position to establish contact with anything but the texts, although the texts by themselves are the products of the semiosis. It follows that any contact with the space, lying “on the other side of the border of the given semiosphere, demands the preliminary semiotization of this space. Just as the communication within the sphere of natural language is inevitably a communication with the help of natural language, communication within the cultural realm is always cultural communication. The existence of extracultural

space (“the space on the other side”) is an important condition for the existence of any culture and, simultaneously, it is the first step to self-determination. But the claim that the extracultural space is a non-semiotic one presents the reality only from the position of the present culture, which actually means that there are areas where the present languages are not used. But does this mean that languages are not used there at all? N. I. Conrad, in his lectures on the history of the relations between Eastern and Western cultures, used to bring the following example: during the first contacts between the Dutch and the Japanese, both sides considered the other to be “barbaric”, existing outside civilization, due to their inability to recognize *their own* culture. An “extracultural realm” often happens to be a space of alien culture, whereas the extrasemiotic realm is a space of an alien semiotics. However, the reality cannot be narrowed down to this very fact. It is necessary to remember that from the semiotic point of view, as soon as a non-assumed space has been represented – it has already been named, i.e. at least superficially semiotized. With a really extrasemiotic space, the semiosphere does not practically meet. It often happens that pre- or extra-semiotic categories and the concept of “naturalness”, produced within the given culture as a kind of ideal antistructure, are being interpolated to a non-assumed space. Thus, the ideal “savage” for whom the philosophers and missionaries of the 18th century searched in exotic countries proved to be the creature of the same civilization they attempted to escape from; the space of the subconscious, founded in the 20th century, was the anti-structure of its contemporary conscious, interpolated to the mental processes that had not been assimilated yet. The real essence of the myth about the universe, reflected in the popular culture of the end of the 20th century, is the same. All these examples contribute to the long history of the worlds “turned inside out”, created by one or another civilization.

However, the authentic extraspace is also an active participant in the semiotic exchange. The border of the semiosphere is a zone of an increased semiotic activity where the numerous mechanisms of the “metaphorical translation” operate, “pumping over” the accordingly transformed texts in both directions. It is here where new texts are actively generated. Actually, it is here where the same process is in operation which also works at the borders of different parts of a monad or at any other border within the semiosphere. An exact embodiment of this process is the increased cultural activity at the borders of great empires, e.g. Rome, during the periods when the internal culture-generating mechanisms are exhausted. The simultaneous process of the barbarization of Rome and the romanization of the barbarians is convincing evidence to the fact that now and again we are dealing with a complex pulsating dialogue, not an unidirectional reception. Thus the model “subject-object” once more turns out to be a conventional and one-sided abstraction.

Being aware of the monadian structure of the semiotic space and perceiving himself as a monad inside this space, the historian of culture will find himself in a more complicated, but probably in a more adequate position towards reality.

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