

YURI LOTMAN

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Lotman, Yuri Mikhailovich (1922–1993) was a widely-cited scholar of Soviet literary semiotics and structuralism. He established the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School at Tartu University in Estonia. This school is widely known for its Works on Sign Systems (published in Russian as *Trudy po Znakovym Systemam.*) Unusually prolific, he published some 800 works on a highly scholarly level. He is sometimes compared to Mikhail Bakhtin, another well-known Russian scholar.

Lotman began teaching at the University of Tartu in 1954. Starting as a historian of Russian literature, Lotman focused on the work of Radishchev, Karamzin, and Vyazemsky and the writers linked to the Decembrist movement. His later books covered all major literary works, from the Lay of Igor's Campaign to the classic nineteenth-century authors such as Pushkin and Gogol, to Bulgakov, Pasternak, and Brodsky. From traditional philology Lotman shifted in the early sixties to cultural semiotics. His first key publication of that time, Lectures on Structural Poetics (1964), introduced the abovementioned series *Trudy po Znakovym Sistemam*, which was one of the main initiatives of the Tartu-Moscow school.

Lotman's theory of literature rests upon two closely related sets of fundamental concepts—those of semiotics and structuralism. Semiotics is the science

of signs and sign systems which studies the basic characteristics of all signs and their combinations: the words and word combinations of natural and artificial languages, the metaphors of poetic language, and chemical and mathematical symbols. It also treats systems of signs such as those of artificial logical and machine languages, the languages of various poetic schools, codes, animal communication systems and so on. Each sign contains: a) the signifying material (perceived by the sense organs), and b) the signified aspect (meaning). For words of natural (ordinary) language, pronunciation or writing is the signifying aspect while content is the signified aspect. The signs of one system (for example, the words of a language) can be the signifying aspect for complex signs of another system (such as that of poetic language) superimposed on them.

Lotman defined structuralism as “the idea of a system: a complete, self-regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic structure.” He argued that any chosen object of investigation must be viewed as an interrelated, interdependent system composed of units and rules for their possible combinations. He defined culture itself as "the whole of uninherited information and the ways of its organization and storage." From the point of view of semiotics, anything linked with meaning in fact belongs to culture. Since natural language is the central operator of culture, Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow school deemed natural language to be a primary modeling system containing a general picture of the world. Language was the most developed, universal means of communication--the "system of systems." Lotman took keen interest in the way philosophical ideas, worldviews, and social values of a given

period are enacted in its literature (via language). For Lotman, a period's literary and ideological consciousness and the aesthetics of its trends and currents have a systemic quality. These categories are not a hodge-podge of convictions about the world and literature, but a hierarchic group of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic values.

Critics, such as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and others might object to perceived “scientific optimism,” reductionism, and polemics of the Tartu-Moscow School. The ideological pressures within the USSR with which the school coped probably discouraged internal debates and explicit criticism of its own views.

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