

# **The future orientation of culture and the memory of the past in the making of history**

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**Abstract:** The article describes the semiotic approach developed by Boris Uspenskij to study the historical process. Uspenskij's semiotics of history is integrally bound with the Tartu-Moscow School's programme of cultural semiotics and is rooted in the fundamental premises of that programme, which he helped to shape. These premises contain a complex ontology of culture, encompassing three levels: cultural memory, sets of cultural texts, and semiotic systems, which model both the image of the world and programmes of action. Uspenskij's analytical model of semiotics of history highlights the pragmatic aspect of the process of historical communication: the agency of its participants as carriers of culture and sign users. This article presents the role of reflexivity in the historical process, associated with reconstruction of the meaning of the past and prospective shaping of the future. Making history means constantly renewing the narrative about past events, which determines the future course of history in the present. Uspenskij presents opposite cultural tendencies in the historical process, associated with different types of semiosis, as symbolic conflicts. The article shows the role of symbolism and symbolic politics in the processes of making history in the model of semiotics of history. This model makes it possible to link together research on cultural memory, time, communicative action and symbolism.

**Keywords:** Boris Uspenskij; semiotics of history; cultural memory; pragmatics; symbolic politics

## **Introduction: The making of history in a semiotic perspective**

Semiotics of culture enables us to recognize the functioning of culture as a sign system (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 217). The significance of diachrony in works of semioticians from the Tartu–Moscow School has been emphasized, as it outweighs a purely structuralist, i.e. synchronic view of culture. However, interpretations do not necessarily pay sufficient attention to semiotics of history (Boyko 2015: 277). This

article presents Boris Uspenskij's proposed approach to the semiotics of the historical process, while highlighting the oft-undervalued pragmatic aspect of this approach. The seminal thesis of the initial research programme of cultural semiotics, formulated in 1973, mentions the importance of relationships between sign systems. Some of these systems can sustain one another (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 1). Uspenskij analysed precisely such semiotic relations and interdependencies, especially the associations between power and religion as semiotic systems. These associations are apparent in the influence of religious symbolism on symbolism of political power, as exemplified by the figure of the "Tsar and God" in Russian history (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012). The aim of this article is to draw attention to the semiotic perspective of historical process analysis proposed by Uspenskij. Hence, we will not offer a critical discussion or commentary on the substantive findings and theses developed by Uspenskij on the basis of the historical material he studied. Instead, using his works as groundwork, we will discuss the analytical model of Uspenskij's semiotics of history. These reflections are presented with the conviction that Uspenskij's concepts retain a heuristic and methodological potential which may prove useful for contemporary culture studies, weakened by the postmodernist crisis in understanding and explaining cultural processes. This holds particularly true for studies involving memory, history and symbolism.

A systematic presentation of Uspenskij's theoretical and methodological contribution to semiotics of history obviously lies outside the scope of the brief outline presented here. Such an exhaustive study would prove very useful, as would an in-depth study of the polyphonic works of the scholars belonging to the movement known as the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics. Although the Soviet system in the last decades of its existence continued to limit scholars' contacts with the West, this movement emerged in the worldwide sphere of influence of various theories of semiosis, most notably in the field of tension between European structuralism, initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles S. Peirce's American pragmatism; in other words, between the programmes of semiology and semiotics. Of fundamental importance for the Tartu-Moscow School was the influence of the Prague School of Linguistics, especially the work of Roman Jakobson, largely inspired by de Saussure's structuralism, but also drawing upon Peirce's semiotics (Jakobson 1989a: 51–58; see Pilshchikov, Trunin 2016: 374–380). Generally speaking, the common factor was placing emphasis on contextual analysis of the communication process, based on the system of natural language (Hałas 1985: 151–153).

Boris Uspenskij's semiotics of history, the focus of this article, is integrally bound with his work in the field of cultural semiotics. Importantly, though, semiotics of history could not have emerged, had the scholar not studied the functioning of sign systems in a pragmatic context as well. In this exposé, I draw particular attention

to the above-mentioned pragmatic dimension, following those interpretations that go beyond limited and schematic depictions of the Tartu–Moscow cultural semiotics as a repercussion of structuralist linguistics.<sup>1</sup> At this point, we should note that it is extremely important to underscore the role of carriers of culture and the users of sign systems. This is not at odds with discovering the semiotic “mechanisms” that govern communication processes, and therefore certain regularities, which cannot be reduced to individual consciousness. Realizing the inevitability of simplification when one sacrifices nuanced differences in favour of the accentuated similarities and highlighted identity of the intellectual movement, I will briefly present some of the basic concepts of cultural semiotics, as they were originally formulated in the programmatic *Theses* published in 1973,<sup>2</sup> co-authored by five members of the Tartu-Moscow group.<sup>3</sup> Some of those premises were subsequently underscored in a commentary to *Theses*, written by Uspenskij and Lotman in 1979.<sup>4</sup> In the following, we will focus on the relevance of those programmatic premises of cultural semiotics for Uspenskij’s semiotics of history, which will be presented in subsequent sections of this article.

## **The premises of cultural semiotics that lie at the root of semiotics of history**

According to the seminal theses formulated by the Tartu–Moscow circle of scholars, the structural method of semiotic analysis should be used to reconstruct history of culture. Simultaneously, as I attempt to show here, the theses lay the foundations for making history understood as a course of events and as a historical narrative about the past – in other words, *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* (Uspieński 1998: 20). To discuss this crucial issue and its elaboration by Uspenskij, it is necessary to present certain key concepts and premises which he developed and shared with other cultural semioticians from the Tartu-Moscow School, and which were important

<sup>1</sup> An article by Irene Portis Winner and Thomas G. Winner (1976) not only presents a systematic overview of the premises of the Tartu-Moscow semiotics of culture, along with perceptive interpretative insights that show the diversity of standpoints, but also uncovers a wealth of connections and, occasionally, surprising influences, such as the link with Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology.

<sup>2</sup> Theses originally published in Russian in a volume edited by Maria Renata Mayenowa (1973) were published in English in parallel. That first English edition (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973) is cited here.

<sup>3</sup> Uspenskij is listed as first author in the English version. His co-authors are Vyacheslav V. Ivanov, Vladimir N. Toporov, Alexandre M. Pyatigorsky and Juri M. Lotman.

<sup>4</sup> On the birth of cultural semiotics, see Salupere *et al.* 2013. On the role of the Tartu centre, see Torop 1998.

for the semiotics of history he pursued. We will begin with the concept of culture itself, which proves exceptionally ambiguous in the humanities, appearing in various semantic fields in numerous discourses about culture (Griswold 2008: 1–19). It is worth remembering that, although cultural semiotics is an extremely sophisticated branch, the language of this abstract theory frequently proves ambiguous or even cryptic, as more than one author has noted (Portis Winner, Winner 1976: 104).

In *Theses*, the term ‘culture’ is used both in its most general sense, referring to all processes of semiosis in the human world, and in a particular, differentiating sense, denoting the multitude of cultures which may be distinguished in time and space, such as Russian culture or Slavic culture. Here, I propose to interpret the *Theses* in such a way as to bring to the foreground those that pertain to culture understood in a general manner, albeit they will also be applied to historically distinct cultures.

To indicate an archaic or primordial tendency for cultures to emerge as distinct, coherent wholes, perceived from their own internal perspective, cultural semioticians use the term ‘culture’ in a particular, differentiating sense as well (e.g. ‘national culture’) (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 15). However, this does not mean that they follow in the footsteps of the scholars whose starting point (especially in the case of anthropologists) was the concept of cultural integration (Archer 1996: 1–21), since the Tartu–Moscow semioticians focused on opposite cultural tendencies. They simultaneously called attention to the intracultural perspective, which, in combination with geographic, historical, linguistic and other factors, can foster cultural unification of semiotic systems and the self-understanding of culture as a whole. However, the theoretical language of cultural semiotics, as mentioned earlier, initially introduces an abstract definition of culture as a cultural system, or more precisely, in plural form, as cultural systems<sup>5</sup>; generally speaking, as sign systems.

The question of agency in social and cultural processes has been the starting point for criticism of structuralist approaches (Archer 1996: xi–xxix). Consequently, it is worth noting that according to the initial premise of cultural semiotics, at the base of cultural reality lies communicative human action (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 1). Studying that reality *sub specie semioticae* means focusing on the production and functioning of sign systems in accordance with definable rules. This circumstance carries implications for Uspenskij’s semiotics of history, where the use of symbolism is examined. Using slightly different wording, one can say that communication between senders and recipients lies at the heart of cultural processes. Discovering the rules that govern

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<sup>5</sup> The possibility of their specialized study by various cultural sciences shows a certain similarity with the culturological views of Florian Znaniecki (1952). Like Znaniecki, cultural semioticians from the Tartu–Moscow School emphasize the multiplicity of cultural systems, not accepting the notion of one cultural system, a hallmark of Margaret S. Archer’s theory (Archer 1996: 103–142).

the birth or emergence of cultural order (i.e. structured meanings contrasted with chaos and entropy) is specific to the perspective adopted by cultural semioticians from the Tartu-Moscow School as compared to other types of research on communicative processes (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 10–11). Elements of a communication model found both in *Theses* and in Uspenskij's later works resemble those that mark the triad of sign functions distinguished by Karl Bühler (2004: 29). They are also similar to the model developed by Roman Jakobson (1989b: 88). The sender, recipient, message, channel, code and reality (reference) constitute a basis for developing a programme for researching diachronic cultural processes, which necessitate going beyond the rules that govern the functioning of the system of natural language and its use in various contexts. Hence the notion of secondary modelling systems. They are, to quote the expression of Clifford Geertz (1973: 93), models of and models for; cultural visions of reality and programmes of behaviour. The concept that modelling cultural systems develop over time assumes the modification of cultural texts that provide a vision of the world and simultaneously serve as behavioural programmes, which change because of the accumulation of new knowledge (information) (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 18–19).

Considering issues associated with semiosis, namely sign formation and generation of meanings in communication processes, the *Theses* come to the basic definition of culture as memory, and therefore to a perspective that will determine the study of history *sub specie semioticae*. Cultural processes require some means of externally fixing the semantic messages (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 10), making it possible to distinguish the present recipients of the message from potential ones, and also meaning that reception of the semantic message requires a more complex process of interpretation than direct face-to-face communication.

The unique character of semiotic studies of culture from the angle of communication processes makes itself apparent in the key concept of the text. This concept neither fits into the frames of the philological approach to text defined as a written message (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 10), nor is it limited to the linguistic method of studying text, since the written word is not the sole vehicle of cultural text in the broad semiotic sense; images also serve this purpose, as exemplified by the icon in the culture of the Russian Orthodox Church. The act, most notably the meaningful gesture, should be listed as a third vehicle (although the *Theses* do not explicitly mention this), because action can also be treated as text, as Paul Ricoeur (1971) observed. All three vehicles of cultural text fall within the scope of Uspenskij's work.<sup>6</sup> However, particularly noteworthy is his interest in the embodiment of meanings through gestures and action, and thus also in the pragmatic dimension of meanings and communication.

<sup>6</sup> They correspond to three variants of symbolism, extensively studied from many angles by Pitirim A. Sorokin and others (Hałas 2008; Sorokin 1937).

However, in principle, cultural semiotics does not deal with any and all messages; neither does it focus solely on communication in the natural language. Thus, in the eyes of cultural semioticians not every message is a text, i.e. a vehicle of cultural memory and a programme that models human behaviour. Texts are created by following certain patterns or configurations of meanings (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 6). A text is a message with an “integral meaning”, which can be understood as a more or less fixed meaning; in other words, certain structures of meanings determine culture’s relative autonomy (Uspieński 2001a: 97)<sup>7</sup> in respect to processes of social interaction. This statement does not refer to some abstract semantics of culture, but to meanings situated in social contexts, recognizable in some culture, just like the speech genre described by Mikhail Bakhtin (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 11). Semiotic systems do not generate texts of their own accord; it is the participants in culture, its carriers, who create texts in the course of communication processes. Semiotics oriented towards the study of cultural history is supposed to help reconstruct the processes of creating texts; in other words, its aim is to study cultural agency.

Thus, one can infer that the semiotic structure of culture as memory revealed through analysis of the semantics of semiotic systems and their syntax (relations between systems) arises from the dynamics of semiosis processes. In research, this requires taking into account the pragmatic dimension of actions and interactions.<sup>8</sup> This plane makes it possible to find a bridge between semiotics of culture and symbolic interactionism, which grew out of the concepts of George H. Mead.<sup>9</sup>

The ontology of culture depicted by Tartu-Moscow semioticians in *Theses* is complex and multilayered. The mechanism of memory remains the deepest ontological level of culture. Regarded as memory, culture generates texts. “If we regard the collective as a more complexly organized individual, culture may be understood by analogy with the individual mechanism of memory as a certain collective mechanism for the storage and processing of information” (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 17). Culture can also be defined as “[t]he sum of texts and the functions correlated with them” (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 17). These two ontological levels of culture – cultural memory and cultural texts – enable us, in turn, to ascend to the highest, most complex level and describe culture as “a hierarchy of particular semiotic systems” (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 17), the elementary units of which are texts.

<sup>7</sup> A similar premise of the autonomy of culture appeared later in Jeffrey C. Alexander’s (2003: 22–25) programme of cultural sociology.

<sup>8</sup> A combination of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology with Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics can be found in the works of Roman Jakobson (1989a: 51–58). The unique “polyglotism” of the Tartu-Moscow semiotics of culture is evident in the blend of different inspirations (Portis Winner, Winner 1976: 102).

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the similarities between the concepts of semiosis, time, memory and history in the works of George H. Mead and Boris Uspenskij, see Hałas 2013a.

Semioticians from the Tartu-Moscow School have always ascribed primary importance to the differences between texts constructed with the use of words and texts constructed through images. However, it is necessary to emphasize once again that their attention also extends to “embodied texts”, which can be termed performative texts if we employ the category of performance (Alexander 2006). Uspenskij’s analyses of the meanings and functions of ceremonies associated with a religious cult and ceremonies involving a manifestation of political power clearly show his interest in this performative aspect. In his study of the religious schism sparked by Nikon’s reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church, Uspenskij analysed the differences in the meaning of gestures: the two-fingered or three-fingered sign of the Cross as symbols of the old and new faith respectively (Uspieński 2001b: 70).

The *Postscriptum* to *Theses* (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013) informs which of the founding concepts of the Tartu-Moscow semiotics of culture were particularly important for Uspenskij, and simultaneously constituted tangent points with the perspective of Lotman’s works (Lotman 2009). Accentuation of the dynamics of cultural development obviously merits attention, since problems from the field of semiotics of history are here the main focus of our interest in Uspenskij’s works. The complexity of processes of cultural change stems from the complex character of culture’s semiotic structure and from the rules that govern its functioning. These rules allow creative processes that give rise to new semiotic systems, instead of merely reproducing extant ones. Hence, our use of the term ‘mechanisms of culture’ should not obscure the fact that the dynamic of culture discussed here is a dynamic of meanings: the processes of creating texts, reconstructing and interpreting them. This implies the consciousness of its participants. The semiotic study of culture is also known as text reconstruction (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 14). Historical reconstruction brings out the primary, basic forms of cultural texts. It also allows us to trace the influence of other texts and their differentiation. Some of the goals of text reconstruction would fit under the notion of ‘interpretation’ in the hermeneutic tradition, e.g. reconstructing the author’s intentions or the recipient’s interpretation and his place in the system of culture. For example, the reforms carried out by Patriarch Nikon and Tsar Peter the Great, which Uspenskij analysed as text-creating cultural processes, show that in the process of semiotic production, a travesty of Pierre Bourdieu’s expression ‘symbolic production’ (Bourdieu 1991), certain agents can occupy privileged positions.

Thus, semiotic analysis of culture becomes another attempt to transcend antinomies such as ‘individualism – collectivism’, ‘individual consciousness – collective consciousness’, as well as (moving closer to semiotics of history) individual memory and collective memory. What is also telling in this context is referring to culture as a collective person (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013: 130) and focusing on the issue of supraindividual memory. If in the beginning lies the process of meaning-making described as the ability to transform the entropy of the surroundings into information,

then in the language of cultural semiotics (rather than theory of information) it is the ability to create new languages and new texts. Thus, according to this programme, analysis of cultural changes should encompass both the surface structures of culture and its deep structures, understood respectively as the level of texts and the level of structurizing code based on binary oppositions. Hence, cultural changes, too, can be superficial (the level of texts) or deep, involving the transformation of cultural codes.

Without going further into detail, it is necessary to note the unique dialectics of cultural processes that, over time, bring about an increase in either heterogeneity or homogeneity (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013: 129). At the same time, the influence of those internal (immanent) developmental processes of culture is mediated by interpretation processes. They have been described as, on the one hand, a multiplication of cultural languages that causes increasing difficulties in communication and weakening of the ability to model reality, and on the other hand, as processes of creating a metalanguage capable of simplifying this complexity and “flexibility” of culture; in other words, processes that disambiguate and stabilize the cultural system.

Processes of cultural change can also be affected by exogenous factors, i.e. by an external cultural influence which leads to the assimilation of differences, not infrequently by an autoreflexive choice. Significantly, it is precisely taking into account the subjective factors of cultural change (by which he understands the viewpoint of the bearer of culture) that plays a key role in the cultural semiotics pursued by Uspenskij.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to this approach, semiotics of culture, and consequently semiotics of history too, include axiology as well, since cultural systems comprised of semiotic systems are simultaneously presented as systems of performed valuations and established values. A particularly telling example is the natural language, to which various values can be ascribed, as Uspenskij shows in his studies on the Old Church Slavonic language in Russian Orthodox culture, in relation to Latin and Greek (Uspieński 2001b: 78).

Continuing with the analogy of the person and culture, one can also speak about the self-awareness of culture, the identity of which depends on the acceptance of some external point of view, rather than just self-description. In other words, the premises of cultural semiotics and the works of Uspenskij (this is also true for his semiotics of history) include the problem of reflexivity.

The combination of synchronic analysis of semiotic cultural structures as structures of meanings and diachronic analysis of their transformations necessitates the conceptualization of cultural space and time in its cultural sense (Hałas 2010b). Thus, cultural reality is presented as a textual space (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 13) giving rise to hierarchies of semiotic systems, which remain in various relations with each

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<sup>10</sup> A certain similarity is apparent here to the concept of the humanistic coefficient formulated by Florian Znaniecki, which can be interpreted semiotically (Znaniecki 1934: 39–41; Hałas 2010a: 65–82).

other as regards their span. At their intersection it is possible to observe border areas. Uspenskij's studies of Russian culture confirm this. He wrote that "borderlineness" is a defining characteristic of this culture (Uspieński 2001a: 98), which orients itself both towards the East and towards the West.

The basic binary opposition 'inclusion – exclusion' (between the elements belonging to a cultural system and those that remain outside it) constitutes the starting point for analysis of the space of semiotic systems. The internal viewpoint of any culture gives a different view of the semiotic space than an external viewpoint. The principle of binary opposition, i.e. 'inner' vs. 'outer', along with the possibility of absolutizing this opposition, serves as a focus for semiotic analysis of culture with implications for semiotics of history, since the sources and logic of cultural conflicts that determine history's course can all be traced back to this issue. Obviously, it is necessary to research the specific criteria of inclusion and exclusion that comprise various binary systems of classification. As mentioned above, the internal viewpoint goes hand in hand with valuation, which is typical of a distinctive culture, historically specific, differing from the non-culture associated with it (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 2).

Semiotic analysis uncovers the interplay of relations between culture and non-culture, but as a metasystem perspective (with the semiotician acting as an outer observer) it also opens the possibility of overcoming the inexorability of those oppositions – a necessary prerequisite of cultural metareflexivity (Donati 2011: 117–119), which is now becoming imperative because of contemporary cultural heterogeneity. The semiotic space of culture observed from these two different viewpoints, internal and external, is based on the logic of relations between systems and their constitutive elements on a synchronic plane. This is even truer for the structurization of this semiotic space based on the principle of inclusion or exclusion. This semiotic space is, however, a historical reality, which undergoes changes in the course of human experiences and actions (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 2).

## **Historical memory and mythologization of the past**

Cultural semioticians, particularly Boris Uspenskij, have researched the rules behind cultural changes, creating a semiotic model of historical process, making it possible to link studies on memory, time, human communication and symbolization. Thus, one may ask how memory and time appear depending on the perspective from which we regard them – either internal or external in respect to the given culture. From the metasystemic and metatextual viewpoint, time is the time of cultural history. It can be regarded as identical with historical memory, and is presented as such in changing scientific discourse, in which the category of time has been problematized as the temporal succession from the past through the present to the future. In descriptions

supplied by cultural history, an important role was played by the transition from mythical (cyclic) time (Uspenskij also called it ‘cosmic time’) to historical time with its temporality that is open in regard to the future. From the internal viewpoint of culture, time is a category of its self-description as continuance or change. The question therefore arises whether semiotics of history includes only analysis of the diachrony of cultures in which self-description relies on the notion of historical time, or whether (referring to the external viewpoint) it broadens its analysis to include ahistorical cultures, in which mythical time predominates. At this point, it is necessary to re-emphasize the difference between the concepts of self-description and self-awareness of culture. The latter is, in a sense, relational in character, since it requires confrontation with another culture (another cultural system), and thus with texts that are heterogeneous in respect to it. The self-awareness of culture also means freedom of choice, which makes it possible to seek and find one’s own cultural identity by either pointing out similarities or assimilating differences to create a new whole (Lotman, Uspenskij 2013: 130).

In the light of the above, the aforementioned analogy of culture and the person, i.e. analogous treatment of cultural memory and the self-awareness, persistent identity and memory of an individual, becomes even clearer. Analytic elements of the semiotic model of culture, in which binary oppositions play an important role, serve as the basis for a typology of cultural orientation; thus, a given culture might orient itself towards the above-mentioned homogeneity, or, conversely, towards heterogeneity of cultural texts. Alternatively, if we focus on another criterion, a culture’s texts can either be oriented towards the sender (complex, esoteric messages) or towards the recipient (simple, easily understandable messages). The basic semiotic categories, expression and content, allow us to distinguish a type of culture oriented towards content, founded upon the opposition between order and lack of order (‘order – chaos’), and a type of culture oriented towards expression, where the fundamental opposition is ‘correct – incorrect’ (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 219).

Considering culture in general, with its memory-generating texts and the rules of their creation, semioticians from the Tartu-Moscow School have emphasized that culture is oriented towards the future (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 17), unlike those researchers who view the distinction ‘present – past’ as fundamental to historical consciousness (Le Goff 2007: 41–64). Semiotics of history does not automatically mean orientation towards the past, since it focuses on making history in the sense of the future course of events, in which one of the factors is a constantly renewed narrative about the past. Thus, it is necessary to explain the formula that a culture oriented towards the future experiences itself as the past. This statement essentially determines the field of research for semiotics of history. It is not only an echo of Karl Marx’s famous statement that appeared in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

(Marx 2005: 1), but of various uses of the past (Aarelaid-Tart 2014): the use of both historical and mythical past, or, in the words of Uspenskij, cosmic time.

Symbolism plays an especially important role both in mythological memory and in historical memory. This is true e.g. for the symbolism of heroes, who, from the viewpoint of semiotics of culture, appear in cultural texts that bear both a vision of the world and programmes of action that can generate new *res gestae*. Uspenskij's study (1985) about the cult of St. Nicholas in Ruthenia shows in full the richness of the analyses of symbolism carried out by this scholar and his contribution to the history of culture, especially the history of Slavic culture. His analysis of the contamination of Christian and pagan symbolism is based on the principle mentioned in the beginning: studying the reciprocal influence of cultural systems. At this point, we should note a certain convergence between Uspenskij's work and the work of the first researcher of cultural memory associated with the school of Emile Durkheim – Stefan Czarnowski (1879–1937), who studied the cult of St. Patrick in Ireland, showing the interplay of myth and history, as well as the cross-contamination between Celtic legends and Christian hagiography (Czarnowski 1919).

Considering the constitutive role of memory for culture in general and for specific historically shaped cultures, contrasting memory with history and collective memory with historical memory, as Maurice Halbwachs did (Halbwachs 1997; Ricœur 2000: 512–517), is questioned on the grounds of semiotics of culture, as long as the juxtaposition is not merely between two distinctive planes of consciousness – the internal plane and the external plane in regard to culture, or in other words, a juxtaposition of language and metalanguage, of cultural text and the metathesis of scientific historical knowledge. However, another binary opposition comes to the fore: the opposition between myth and history, based primarily on the above-mentioned differences in experiencing time and varying concepts of time. In Uspenskij's works, this opposition and differing cultural tendencies prove exceptionally important for the study of historical processes. Of particular significance is the phenomenon which Robert Bellah (1970) termed symbolic realism. Uspenskij calls it literal interpretation of cultural text. Leaving aside the question of semiotically reconstructing myths and the controversies surrounding the metaphorical and symbolic nature of myth, it should be noted that, like a number of anthropologists, Bronisław Malinowski among them, Uspenskij is an advocate of the literariness of myth, in which the word and its denotation are treated as identical, and the text is isomorphic to the world it describes (Portis Winner, Winner 1976: 119).

Uspenskij ascribed great importance to the presence and functioning of mythical consciousness in historical processes, in which the dissimilarity of semiosis becomes a source of symbolic conflicts when symbolic realism (i.e. a mythologizing literal interpretation of text) comes into play. Using basic semiotic categories, such as

'signifier – signified' or 'plane of expression – plane of content', Uspenskij shows the fundamental meaning of the concept of language present in culture, i.e. language as a means of expressing content, or, like proper names, identical with the denoted reality. An excellent example is the conflict between Old Believers and New Believers in the 16th-century Russian Orthodox Church. It simultaneously illustrates an important general rule in semiotics: in its functioning as a sign system, culture can be oriented towards expression or towards content. This means either any given symbolic expression of content, or ritually exerting an influence upon content (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 217).

Memory of real history and mythological memory are two different types of modelling cultural systems (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 18). This does not mean that they always function separately. Hence, it is worth noting Uspenskij's interest in the mythologization of the past in cultures that are now essentially based on historical memory. Bearing in mind the difference between two cognitive perspectives: internal and external in regard to the given culture, his research on the contamination of the cosmological (mythological) past and the historical past deserves a closer look. This leads us to the role of symbolic politics in history.

## History and symbolic politics

Like other cultural semioticians from the Tartu–Moscow School, Uspenskij usually employs the most general conceptual category, the sign (Greek *semeion*, Latin *signum*). However, he also uses the term 'symbol' (Greek *symbolōn*). It is neither my task nor aim here to define and organize the many meanings of the terms 'sign' and 'symbol' (Hałas 2013b: 976–979), nor yet to clarify them in relation to their uses in various broadly perceived semiotic traditions.<sup>11</sup> Symbolism does, indeed, occupy a very important place in the works of Uspenskij, as his semiotics of history shows. One of the works he co-authored, *Theses*, mentions the concept of the general symbol in the context of reflections concerning the general intention of the text (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 16). There is also discussion about a symbol capable of forming the entire code of a cultural text. This kind of symbol is termed an 'extrasystemic sign'. On the other hand, symbols remain in relations as elements of text that possess a common semantics, while each symbol simultaneously possesses its own semantics as well (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 16). This double semantics of symbolism seems to bring this concept, outlined on the grounds of cultural semiotics, closer to the perspective of Paul Ricoeur (1969: 225).

<sup>11</sup> Semiotics of culture has been compared e.g. with Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology, Charles S. Peirce's semiotics, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (Portis Winner, Winner 1976).

After reading *Theses*, one can come to the conclusion that while the sign is the basic element of a primary modelling system, such as the natural language, and the text is an element of a semiotic system, the symbol is a constitutive element of cultural text. Bearing in mind that the functioning of culture is not limited to one semiotic system, studying “the life of the text in a system of culture” (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 15) requires taking into account the complex relations in which the text remains. This can be achieved through its synchronic and diachronic description. “Herein both in synchronic and diachronic description preference is given to context-bound rules, where for each symbol x the context A – B is indicated, in which it is rewritten as text T” (Uspenskij *et al.* 1973: 26).

In its primary sense as *res gestae*, history has its subjects (both individual and collective) and grows out of human action. The human being regarded as a historical subject is not determinate. Obviously, this does not mean that humans are not subject to cultural determinants imposed by the legacy of the activities of past generations. To understand those determinants, Uspenskij found it especially important to study the existing set of cultural texts in the semiotic sense described above, i.e. not only texts where the vehicle is natural language (although written sources and patterns of oral communication are very important), but also texts based on other vehicles – other signifiers, including behaviourally embodied symbolism, visible in rituals, rites and ceremonies as elements of cultural tradition. As Uspenskij wrote in his work on the semantic of monarchic titles in Russia, texts exist in time and space; they are passed down from generation to generation as part of some cultural tradition or are borrowed from other traditions (Uspieński 2002: 48).

The semiotic study of culture oriented towards the semiotics of the historical process requires, among other things, researching how texts were perpetuated on the plane of expression and how new historical and cultural contexts affected the way texts functioned and were interpreted. It is especially important to give texts new meaning and value, turning them into vehicles for new programmes of behaviour for participants in social life: individual and collective subjects. In Uspenskij’s own words, “The revaluation of texts has an impact upon the historical process” (Uspieński 2002: 48). We may add that large-scale revaluations are typical of major social transformations throughout history. A relatively recent example: the revaluations associated with the collapse of communist ideology and systemic transformations (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 211–212; Hałas 2002: 81–100).

Among historical subjects, the subjects who determine relations of political power are the ones that play key roles. This explains why Uspenskij considered it so important to analyse the semantics of cultural texts, in which the meaning of symbolism of political power has been shaped and altered in new contexts. Transformations of the meanings of the monarch’s titles and the metamorphosis of anointing and coronation

rites in the Latin West and Eastern Orthodox traditions, along with the fact that both traditions differ strongly in terms of relations between the symbolisms of political power and religious authority, appear in his analysis as separate, distinct projects of symbolic politics. In each case, the interpretation of inherited or reconstructed texts (as was the case in Ruthenia) within a given tradition is associated with a future-oriented programme of management of the historical process. The case of Russian reconstruction and modification of the semantics of the Byzantine *basileus* and the anointing of the ruler in the symbolic politics of the new empire, which emerged in the 12th century, in the absence of actual transmission of the Byzantine tradition, as well as the contrast between Moscow and both traditions, Byzantine and Roman, reveal the rules governing the semiotic process of state construction based on theocratic ideology (Uspieński 2002: 38).

Power and domination – pragmatic and causative factors in history – were studied by Uspenskij from the perspective of cultural semiotics, primarily in the context of Russian history. Both his work on the semantics of monarchic titles in Russia cited above and the co-authored work *Tsar and God* (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012) should be considered world classics in the now-vast field of study of symbolic power and symbolic politics (Edelman 1985; Kertzer 1988) in different orders of power. To fully understand them, it is undoubtedly necessary to study the functioning of a monarchic state. Shils and Young (1953) have studied the symbolism of the British Empire's political power from this angle, whereas Uspenskij's works reveal the semiotic construction of the Russian Tsarate. Analyses of numerous texts (in the philological sense, i.e. written sources) containing the semantics of the sanctity of the Tsar's power constitute a textual study in the deeper, semiotic sense, and thus, in a way, a study of Tsarist rule as a cultural text. From the primary parallelism apparent in the symbolism of the monarch and the religious symbolism pertaining to God (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012: 3), and thus the vision of a mortal king and an immortal king, the cultural text undergoes a transformation.

Accordingly, earthly reality and heavenly reality became blended from the 18th century onwards into a power that was simultaneously secular and religious, typical of the regal absolutism of Peter the Great. The semiotic plan of conducted historical research encompasses not only the shaping of the Tsar's semantics as an emperor with divine attributes, but essentially also reaches the pragmatic dimension (that which we may term 'symbolic politics'), i.e. the expression and representation of the ruling power through various means and attributes, the initial forms of which were supplied by the Byzantine cultural tradition of the *basileus*, which later underwent far-reaching modification. An analysis conducted by Uspenskij and Zhivov shows the development of a new cultural language (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012: 14), in which the monarch's power is interpreted in new ways and gains the additional prerogatives of an

ecclesiastical authority. Thus, the issue is not just about sacred legitimization of power, so characteristic of Christian monarchies in the West, or about the dichotomy between the mortal ruler and the immortal dignity of power, analysed by Ernst H. Kantorowicz in his book *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), to which Uspenskij refers (2002: 24).

Uspenskij's semiotics of history is based on the semiosis of power, in which cultural models of power and conflicts of interpretation regarding cultural texts both play a fundamental role (as exemplified by the conflict of interpretation surrounding the meaning of priesthood and the Tsar's power in Russia in respect to the reconstructed and assimilated Byzantine schema). It is the symbolic politics characteristic of cultural reforms over the ages, from Aleksej Mihailovich to Peter the Great, that models the historical process oriented towards the future. This is achieved by shaping cultural memory; namely, the memory of the Eastern Roman Empire. This politics uses a symbolism that, after being separated from its traditional sense and placed in a new context, acquires a new propensity for generating meanings (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012: 17).

Earlier, we mentioned the difference between historical memory and mythological (cosmological) memory, as well as their mutual relations. In the light of Uspenskij's works, this issue is linked to the difference between orientation towards conventional interpretation of signs (arbitrariness of the association between the signifier and the signified) or towards non-conventional, i.e. literal interpretation (Uspenskij, Zhivov 2012: 18), a hallmark of symbolic realism. This difference in the structure of cultural orientations turns out to be the source of cultural conflicts as symbolic conflicts that generate agency in the historical process. The Tsar's sanctification in the symbolic politics of the ruling political power, expressed in the cult of the state, proves crucial in the light of the semiotics of Russian history. We may add that the cult of the state culminated after the Bolshevik revolution. Analysing the conflicts generated by this process, Uspenskij draws attention to "different types of semiosis which the conflicted parties set against each other". This is a general rule (Uspieński 2002: 41).

## Conclusion

This article argued that semiotics of history is firmly embedded within the programme of cultural semiotics. It is founded upon implications stemming from the basic ontological premise that culture can be regarded as the non-heritable memory of a society (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 213). Thus, one may say that cultural semiotics is based on the semiotics of memory. Consequently, cultural memory also constitutes the groundwork for semiotic research on history. It is the shaping of cultural memory – in other words, creating a record and the fixation of experienced events in time, which

spans the temporal succession of the past, present and future – that gives human existence a historical dimension (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 225–226).

Uspenskij describes the making of history as a complex communicative process. The semiotic model of history (Uspieński 1998: 53) contains the two dimensions described above: the performative dimension of communicative actions and influences in the present, oriented towards the future (history as *res gestae*), and the interpretative dimension of narration about bygone events, oriented towards the past. The latter can be regarded as a text in which events considered relevant get written down (*historia rerum gestarum*), and which is constantly being interpreted anew from the perspective of the present. Variable interpretation, modified understanding of past events, the memory of which is transmitted by cultural texts, is crucial in this model for making history as a course of events. Thus, when viewed from the perspective of the present, the past holds great significance for a culture oriented primarily towards the future; in other words, for cultural systems that model action programmes where guidance is needed. In this semiotic model, the movement of history, and thus an orientation towards the future, is mediated by reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present. This interpretation, which consists of an interplay of memory and forgetting, structurizes the future, which becomes the new present.

In Uspenskij's model of semiotics of history, the traditions of structuralist semiotics and pragmatic semiotics are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, he emphasized that it is necessary to take both varieties of semiotics into account (Uspieński 1998: 19–20). This article draws particular attention to the presence of pragmatic motifs in Uspenskij's works. One example is the role he ascribed to the carriers and users of semiotic systems: the creators and recipients of cultural texts, who interpret them in contexts of action. To highlight the subjectivity and agency of participants in historical processes, one has to take reflexivity into account, both when reconstructing the meaning of the past and when shaping the symbolic politics of memory. Uspenskij's model of semiotics of history necessitates taking into account the viewpoint of participants in the historical process. In the semiotic perspective according to Uspenskij, the historical process manifests itself as a communicative process, in which the continuous flow of new semantic messages elicits meaningful responses from social recipients (Uspieński 1998: 21). As demonstrated, perception of the past influences the future course of history (Uspieński 1998: 28). This is not a model of an overrationalized history-making process, since it takes into account the symbolic character of cultural texts, as well as the possibility of contaminating historical memory and mythological memory. The movement of history as a course of events, *res gestae*, is oriented towards the future. However, although the course of history is determined in the present, the past is constantly being reconstructed and reinterpreted anew from the perspective of that very same present.

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## **Ориентированность на будущее культуры и память о прошлом в создании истории**

В статье описан семиотический подход, разработанный Борисом Успенским для изучения исторического процесса. Семиотика истории Успенского неразрывно связана с программой семиотики культуры Тартуско-московской школы и коренится в фундаментальных предпосылках этой программы, которую он помог сформировать. Эти основы включают в себя комплексную онтологию культуры, которая охватывает три уровня: память культуры, тексты культуры и семиотические системы, которые моделируют образ мира и программы действия. Аналитическая модель семиотики истории Успенского подчеркивает pragматический аспект процесса исторической коммуникации – деятельность (*agency*) ее участников в качестве носителей культуры и пользователей знаков. В статье представлена роль рефлексии в историческом процессе, связанная с реконструкцией смысла прошлого и формированием будущего. Создание истории означает постоянное обновление повествования о прошлых событиях, которое определяет будущий ход истории в настоящем. Успенский представляет находящиеся в оппозиции культурные тенденции в качестве символичных конфликтов. Роль символизма и символической политики в процессах делания истории показывается в рамках модели семиотики истории, которая позволяет соединить изучение памяти культуры, времени, коммуникативной деятельности и символизма.

### **Kultuuri tulevikkusuunitletus ja mineviku mäletamine ajalooloomes**

Artiklis kirjeldatakse Boriss Uspenski poolt välja töötatud semiootilist lähenemist ajalooprotsessi uurimisele. Uspenski ajaloosemiootika on sisimas seotud Tartu-Moskva koolkonna kultuurisemiootika programmiga ning võrsub selle programmi fundamentaalsestest alustest, mida Uspenski aitas kujundada. Need alused sisaldavad kompleksset kultuuriontoloogiat, mis hõlmab kolme tasandit: kultuurimälu, kultuuritekstide kogum ja semiootilised süsteemid, mis mõlemad modelleerivad maailma kuvandit ning tegevusprogramme. Uspenski analüütiline ajaloosemiootika mudel röhutab ajaloolise kommunikatsiooni protsessi pragmaatilist aspekti: selles osalejate agentsust kultuurikandjate ning märgikasutajatena. Artiklis tutvustatakse reflektiivsuse rolli ajaloolises protsessis, mida seostatakse mineviku tähenduse rekonstrueerimisega ning tuleviku ettesuunatud kujundamisega. Teha ajalugu tähendab pidevalt uuendada minevikusündmusi puudutavat narratiivi, mis määrab olevikus ära ajaloo tulevikukäigu. Uspenski esitab ajalooprotsessis ette tulevaid vastandlikke kultuurisuundumusi, mis on seotud erinevat tüüpi semioosiga, sümboolsete konfliktidena. Artiklis näidatakse sümbolismi ja sümboolse poliitika rolli ajalootegemiseprotsessides ajaloosemiootika mudelis. See mudel võimaldab ühendada kultuurimälu, aja, kommunikatiivse tegevuse ja sümbolismi urimist.