

*Studia Semiotyczne — English Supplement*

Volume XIV-XV

Editor-in-Chief of *Studia Semiotyczne*:

Jerzy Pelc

Assistant Editors of

*Studia Semiotyczne — English Supplement*:

Katarzyna Kuś

Krystyna Komorowska

Witold Wachowski

Warsaw • 2015 (1986)

**Jacek Juliusz Jadacki**  
**WORDS AND IMAGES**

Originally published as "Słowa i obrazy," *Studia Semiotyczne* 14–15 (1986), 327–333. Translated by Julita Mastelarz.

---

*Cuomua uo u npoe uomemuu* by Juri Lotman, a semiotician from Doprát, has recently been translated into the Polish language.<sup>1</sup> Professor Lotman is a well-known and respected personality not only in his homeland, but also in other countries, including Poland. It might therefore be useful to identify and discuss the elements of the mentioned work which I personally consider objectionable. Perhaps it will inspire the relatively numerous advocates of Lotman's approach to SEMIOTICS to reflect on whether or not they are propagating it simply because they fail to see its shortcomings. Furthermore, Lotman's book is an EXEMPLIFICATION of an entire trend in contemporary SEMIOTICS which my scholarly conscience forbids me from accepting, in spite of my unfeigned APPRECIATION for its CORYPHEI. For this reason alone I submit the present article to *Studia Semiotyczne*, which TRADITIONALLY refrains from publishing REVIEWS *sensu scticto*. My analysis of Lotman's views disregards the POETIC RHETORIC of their phrasing, especially the entire DIALECTIC BACKDROP of his *Semiotics* (DIALECTIC "contradictions," "opposites" and "tensions"). I shall take the liberty to treat them as *signum tyrannidis*.

The aspect that I find questionable in Lotman's work are the many significant generalisations, which may be considered erroneous, dubitable or ambiguous. It must be added that in the present analysis 'ambiguous' and 'polysemantic' are not regarded as equivalent. A polysemantic expression is not ambiguous if the CONTEXT determines which one of the many meanings

---

<sup>1</sup>Juri Lotman, *Semiotyka filmu*, translated from the Russian language by J. Faryno and M. Miczka, Warsaw: PWN 1983.

should be taken into consideration in the given case. It must also be emphasised that, not being admittedly flawed, polysemantic expressions are also undesirable. Their use may lead to a misunderstanding regarding the degree of generality of the statements in which they appear.

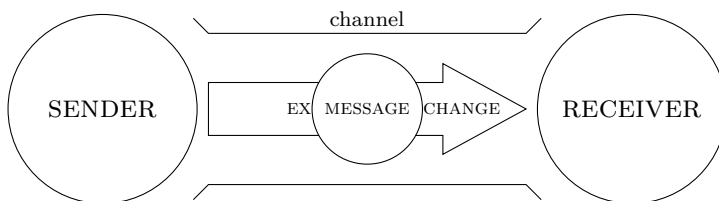
\* \*  
\*

In the following section I shall attempt to summarise the views (definitions, divisions and statements) presented by Lotman in his book.

LO1. COMMUNICATION is the exchange of information (THE TRANSFER OF MESSAGES).

LO2. A message is the medium of an information (THE BASIS OF INFORMATION)

Diagram 1:



LP1. There are two types of messages:

- (a) stimuli (IMPULSES) and
- (b) signs (SYMBOLS).

Thus, communication may be divided into pre-symbolic (PRE-SEMIOTIC), i.e. the exchange of stimuli, and symbolic (SEMIOTIC), i.e. the exchange of signs.

LT1. The parties (PARTICIPANTS) engaging in pre-symbolic communication, i.e. the sender (ADDRESSOR) and the receiver (ADDRESSEE), are non-autonomous entities (HETERONOMOUS INDIVIDUALS), i.e. instruments (ORGANS), whereas the participants of symbolic communication are independent (AUTONOMOUS) entities, i.e. individuals (ORGANISMS).

LT2. Pre-symbolic exchange consists in migration (TRANSLOCATION) of stimuli, while symbolic exchange consists in rendering (TRANSLATION) of symbols, i.e. encoding (CODIFYING) and reading (DECODIFYING) the message. The transfer of stimuli is always EFFECTIVE; the translation of symbols may not be so.

LO. An utterance (A TEXT) is a collection (A COMPLEX) of signs.

LO4. A language (A CODE) is a SYSTEM of signs.

LO5. A sign is the medium of MEANING .

LP2. There are two types of signs:

- (a) images (ICONIC SIGNS)
- (b) words (VERBAL SIGNS).

Thus, utterances may be divided into representational (CINEMATIC), i.e. (e.g.) collections of images, and ordinary (NATURAL) utterances, i.e. collections of words. Similarly, language may be representational (consisting of a system of images) or ordinary (consisting of a system of words).

LT3. The main differences between images and words consist in:

- (a) the level of PERCEIVABILITY of the medium: the former are less transparent than the latter;
- (b) the strength of the connection between the medium and the meaning: in the case of images it is based on similarity, in the case of words – only on (arbitrary) assigning.

LT4. Images also differ from words in terms of content. The former type of symbols is:

- (a) more adequate, more understandable and more readable, but
- (b) less susceptible to separation (ABSTRACTION), TEMPORALISATION and ordering (NARRATIVISATION).

LT5. Images and words also differ with regard to the manner of enriching the meaning; in the case of images, a meaning may be enriched by means of aggregation; in the case of words – by adding new elements.

LT6. Both representational and ordinary utterances are separable (DISCRETE) and composed of similar components (SYNTACTIC SEGMENTS).

(a) The primary component of representational utterances: a take (A FRAME) corresponds to a word (A LEXEME) in the latter type of communication.

(b) Both types have similar secondary components: sentences (PHRASES), stories (EPISODES) and storylines (PLOT).

LT7. Representational and ordinary utterances differ with regard to the type of meaning they encode. The former are multi-layered, i.e. their original (PRIMARY) meaning is a sign in itself, a medium of a METAPHORICAL meaning (the so-called supra-meaning), other symbols of concepts that are impossible to signify; the latter are single-layered.

LT8. A command of a given language implies the knowledge of:

(a) its LEXIS

(b) its SYNTAX

and

(c) the correlation between the sign and the signified (SEMANTICS).

LT9. Representational language differs from the ordinary language with regard to its lexis: the lexis of the former type is heterogeneous (POLYPHONIC) – it comprises not only (purely) graphic signs, but also verbal and aural (MUSICAL) ones; the latter type is homogenous (HOMOPHONIC) and consists only of words.

LT10. Representational language is open, undefined; ordinary language is finite and defined.

LT11. Sign-based communication may only be successful if the participants are using the same language and if the utterances constructed in these languages are monosemantic.

LT12. If the collective is polyglotic (MULTILINGUAL) and each of the languages used is polysemantic, miscommunication may still be avoided due to the existence of supra-language (META-CODE).

LP3. There are three types of supra-language (in Polish: *nadjęzyk*):

(a) the language of lore (MYTHICAL),

- (b) the language of creation (ARTISTIC),
- (c) the language of science (LOGICAL).

LT13. The role of supra-language is currently played by representational language.

\*   \*  
\*   \*

I am of the opinion that only two of the generalisations presented in Lotman's book and summarised in the preceding section may be accepted without question – namely statements LT8 and LT11. My reservations regarding the remaining statements are as follows:

J1. LO1 is too broad. In fact, only an exchange of words may be regarded as communication.

This issue shall be discussed in more detail below (cf. J13).

J2. The phrasing of LO2 is ambiguous. The *definiens* contains the word *information*, which may signify three things:

- (a) a note (INFORMATION *sensu stricto*)
- (b) news (INNOVATION)
- (c) a surprise (REVELATION).

The same ambiguity applies to the term *message* (a message *sensu stricto*, a report or a surprise) and to the term *communication*; (a communication *sensu stricto*, reporting or surprising).

J3. It is not specified whether LP1 presents an exhaustive division of messages.

J4. Contrarily to LT1, communication may take place not only between organs (of a single individual), but also between individuals.

J5. Contrarily to LT2, the transfer of stimuli may also not be effective: the stimuli may not be received or interpreted (e.g. due to some damage to the channel).

J6. The statements LO3 and LO4 are overly broad. Only a collection of words may be regarded as an utterance; only a system of words may be considered a language.

J7. The statement LO5 is ambiguous. The *definiens* contains the word *meaning*, which may signify three things:

- (a) the meaning *sensu stricto*, especially the content (CONNOTATION) or the actual (REAL) or imagined (INTENTIONAL) equivalent (DESIGNATION),
- (b) the purport (IDEA),
- (c) the internal significance (STRUCTURAL FUNCTION).

The statement that “everything we perceive while watching a movie, everything that moves and impresses us, has meaning” is only true if the term ‘meaning’ is understood in the sense specified in (b) and (c). The same ambiguity appears in the terms *sign* (a symbol, a manifestation or a factor), *utterance* (a remark, a phrase or a product) and *language* (speech; verbalisation or the material; one thing may be here the predicative of the other).

J8. It is not specified how meaning *sensu stricto* (cf. LO5) relates to message *sensu stricto* (cf. LO2). The matter is further complicated by the statement that “signs cannot be devoid of meaning; they cannot not carry any information,” whereas “not every message can be the medium of information.”

J9. It is not specified whether the division of signs *sensu stricto* (cf. LT9 – aural signs) is exhaustive.

J10. Contrarily to LT3:

- (a) The transparency of the medium – be it visual or verbal – is a relative property dependent on the attitude of the user of the signs, not on the type of the sign.
- (b) The differences in the strength of the semantic connection between the medium and the meaning do not pertain to the relation between the sign and the supra-meaning (or the meaning and supra-meaning).

J11. Contrarily to LT4:

(a) As in the previous case, the differences in adequacy, understandability and readability do not pertain to the relation between the sign (meaning) and supra-meaning. Incidentally, we can maintain that “a word may be true as well as false” only if we metaphorically understand ‘truthfulness’.

(b) Abstract phenomena may only serve as the supra-meaning of images.

J12. LT5 is ambiguous, as it is impossible to identify the difference between condensing and adding new elements.

J13. The similarities between the segments comprising representational and ordinary utterances (mentioned in LT6) is purely superficial.

(a) In the case of representational utterances, segments are syntactically uniform. Thus, a take is either considered a kind of a name and therefore all other segments are names as well, or a take is a unit that constitutes a quasi-sentence, in which case representational utterances would not contain names at all. In addition, there are no reliable criteria for isolating the takes in a representational utterance.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the statement that it is sufficient to “substitute items with words that signify them, and the sentence will work by itself” is far from accurate.

(b) The units of representational utterances do not at least include the equivalents of interrogatory, imperative and negative sentences in ordinary communication. This makes it impossible to communicate with pictures about some subjective states. In particular, the creator is not able to convey doubt (ignorance), demands (wishes) or objections (disagreement) by means of an image.

J14. Contrarily to LT4:

(a) Single-layer and multi-layer utterances may appear both in representational and ordinary communication.

(b) It would be very difficult to identify a supra-meaning that could not be described in words. For example, the primary meaning of the image of a sinking knife in Roman Polański’s *Knife in the Water* is: SINKING KNIFE (“an excerpt from the Polish reality of the 1960s”). However, the sinking of the knife also carries a supra-meaning – it signifies the act of assuming everyone to be guilty of every crime. The sinking of the knife may be made into the meaning of an ordinary phrase ‘the sinking of the knife’; thus, the

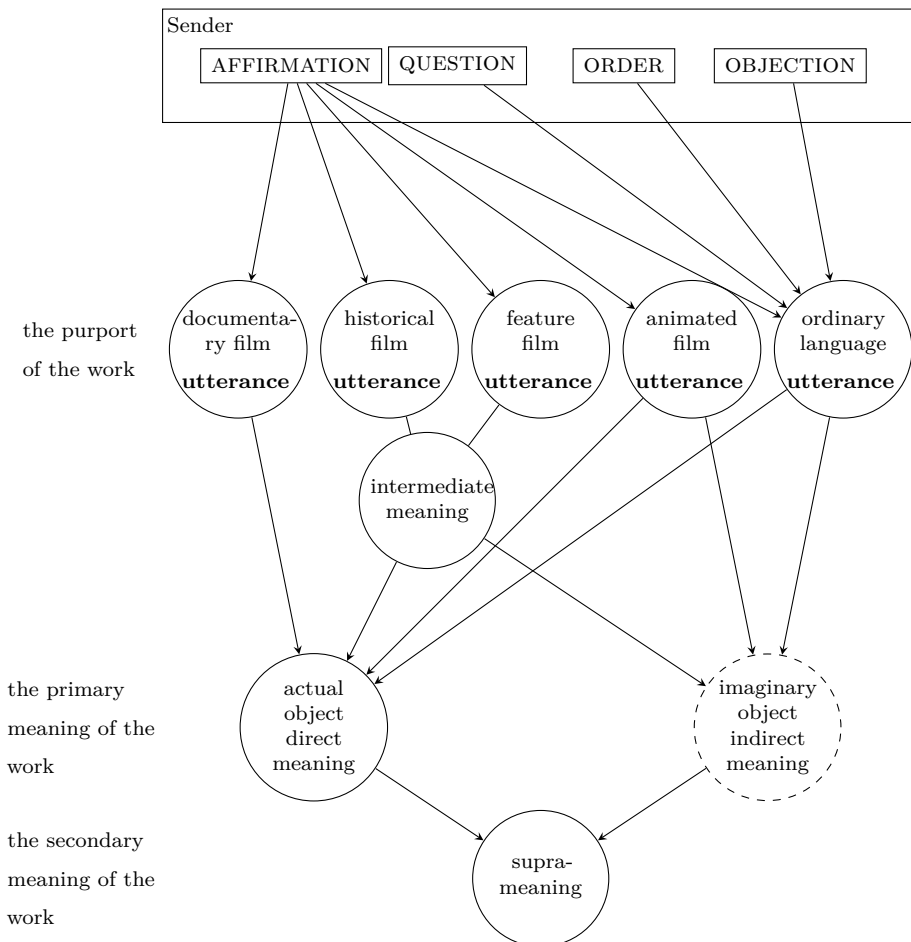
---

<sup>2</sup>This observation was made by professor Jerzy Pelc.



act of assuming everyone to be guilty of every crime becomes the supra-meaning of *the sinking of the knife*. Significantly, however, the signs of at least some representational utterances (in THEATRICAL PLAYS, HISTORICAL MOVIES and FEATURE FILMS) require meaning = an intermediate meaning: the primary meaning of the images are the equivalents (e.g. ACTORS) who are, in turn, carriers of the direct meaning (e.g. HISTORICAL FIGURES). Such intermediate meanings are not found in ordinary utterances (see: diagram 2).

Diagram 2:



J15. Contrarily to LT9, the lexis of ordinary language is equally heterogeneous as that of representational language: it contains not only words, but also images that may be provided to help describe words that are not fully

identifiable (OCCASIONAL) and sounds (the nuances of pronunciation may influence the meaning of the words).

J16. The statement LT10 is ambiguous. Openness or finiteness may be the feature of:

- (a) the lexis
- (b) the syntax

or

- (c) the semantic assignments of the language.

J17. The division presented in LP3 and the statements LT12 and LT13 are ambiguous. The term *supra-language* may signify three different things:

- (a) supra-language *sensu stricto* = the language in which all other languages may be described;
- (b) arch-code = the language into which all other languages may be translated;
- (c) inter-code = the language known by all (most) members of a given community.

J18. In order to fulfil the role specified in LT11, a supra-language needs to be unambiguous.

J19. Representational language cannot act as supra-language for the following reasons:

- (a) As noted above (cf. J13b), not all utterances (e.g. ordinary) may be translated into this language.
- (b) The language itself is ambiguous.

\*     \*

\*

The critical remarks listed above were presented in the hope that finding a solution for the problems I have identified will make it possible to AMEND the views advocated by Lotman. As opposed to him, I am of the opinion that when it comes to science (and to the Polish reality in general) it is more worthwhile to refurbish old houses than to build new ones. These should be erected only after no stone remains from the old buildings.