



# On some aspects of the binary in the context of the ternary and the plural in Juri Lotman's semiotics of literature

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## Abstract

The paper raises the problem of binarisms in Juri Lotman's conceptual and text analytical system from a new perspective. The approach combines several focal aspects of examination. It consist of the parallel study of the application of the notion of binarism in cultural semiotic theory and its active role as a crucial methodological tool for literary text interpretation (the question is: how binary notions in scientific interpretive metatexts are related to the examined culture texts and traditions). Binary models are put into a context of ternary models as interpreted by J. Lotman and B. Uspensky in their 1977 article "The Role of Dual Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (until the End of the Eighteenth Century)." The theory expounded by the two scholars is compared with Lotman's overview of Russian literature of the classical period (1992) where he gives further details on the two models manifesting themselves in 19th-century authors' poetics. In the paper, the role of the neutral, inbetween semantic sphere is accorded special attention so as to clarify the real nature of Lotman's suggestion in indentifying the meaning-creative energy of this middle, mediatory semantic zone. Through the investigation, the coherence of Lotman's oeuvre is revealed, which refutes the possibility of interpreting the functionalisation of binary notions and their different uses within the framework of the structuralist or the poststructuralis paradigm. The universal cultural nature of thinking in oppositions is interpreted in concrete terms of the semiotic principles of meaning-engendering, explaining the issues of semantic difference (deviation), meaning-transformation (text-dynamics), the shift from binarism to plurality, and semiotic mediation. The paper ends with outlining future perspectives in the investigation of the problem of binarisms.

**Keywords** *Lotman* · Semiotics · Binarism · Ternary Model · Plural System · Meaning-Engendering · Mediation

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## The binary as related to the ternary system from the perspective of cultural models

In the present paper we discuss a seemingly evident point in the evaluation of Juri Lotman's scholarly work, which concerns the problem of conceptualising binary notions. Partly, binarism can be interpreted as the kernel component of a well-definable working methodology in constructing literary and general cultural semiotic theory. Partly, binarism is inseparable from the research object, the particular phenomena of culture within the scope of his scholarly interest, involving predominantly Russian<sup>1</sup> texts. This means that we encounter from the very beginning a dilemma: do binary notions stem from the specific nature of the cultural material to be interpreted, or do they reflect a particular mode of methodological thinking applicable (or not) within the framework of more extended fields of study beyond the investigation of Russian culture or presenting a semiotic approach?

We do not have to look hard to find approximate answers to these questions. Lotman and Uspensky (1977, cit. from Lotman and Uspensky 2020[1977]) dedicated an article to "The role of dual models in the dynamics of Russian culture (until the end of the eighteenth century)." There they state: "What interests us here is a specific feature of Russian culture in the era being discussed: its fundamental polarity, expressed in the dual nature of its structure. Basic cultural values (ideological, political, religious) in the system of the Russian Middle Ages are distributed across a field of values having two poles, divided by a sharp line, and devoid of a neutral axiological zone" (p. 95). This binarism contrasts with the Western ternary model characterised by a neutral sphere between the poles, which is, consequently, in an inbetween position. It serves as an intermediate neutral sphere, constituting the "structural reserve from which tomorrow's system develops." As opposed to this creative dynamic field, the dual value system represented by binary notions expresses and reinforces polarity even in the diachronic movement, in the history of change.<sup>2</sup> To take one illustrative thematisation from the authors, we can think of their statement: "The afterlife in Catholic, Western Christianity is divided into three spaces: Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. Correspondingly, earthly life is thought of as allowing three types of behavior: the unequivocally sinful, the unequivocally holy, and the neutral, which allows for redemption beyond the grave, following some purifying trial. Thus, in the actual life of the Middle Ages in the West, there is a potential for a wide range of neutral behavior, neutral social institutions that are neither 'holy', nor 'sinful', neither 'state', nor 'anti-state', neither good, nor bad." At the same time, according to the pronounced duality in the Russian Medieval cultural conceptualisation, we find the division of the

<sup>1</sup> The framework corpus is meant to be Slavic texts (Lotman et al., 2013).

<sup>2</sup> It can also be related to this model that "One of the most stable oppositions constitutive of Russian culture across the whole span from the baptism of Rus to the reforms of Peter the Great is that of 'ancient/modern'" (Lotman & Uspensky, 2020[1977], p. 96). Cf. Mandelker's summary: "Therefore, the opposition of Russia versus the West rests on the semioticians' effort to model the ways in which a culture transcribes its own history and applies an ethical evaluation to its past and future" (Mandelker, 2006, p. 64). Cf. Chernov in the context of the evaluation of the Lotmanian oeuvre on the method in literary criticism and history of grasping the meaning of certain phenomena in the light of contrasts (Chernov, 2005[1984], p. 11).

afterlife “into Heaven and Hell [...]”. Correspondingly, in earthly life, too, one’s conduct could be either sinful or holy. This extended to concepts beyond the church as well: thus one could regard secular power as divine or devilish, but never as neutral with regard to these concepts” (*ibid.*, p. 95).

Andreas Schönle, as editor, reminds the reader of the English translation of Lotman and Uspensky’s article demonstrating the dual construction of Russian cultural conceptualisation that it “had a profound impact on understandings of Russian culture and society, although it has also been criticised for its very binarism. Scholars have in particular worried that this kind of reduction to binaries can serve to perpetuate dual ideological or mythological models of Russian culture” (Schönle, 2020, p. 93). He references two major manifestations of criticism, Svetlana Boym’s (1994)<sup>3</sup> and Catriona Kelly’s (1998). Without further taking into consideration the critical orientation regarding the theory of cultural dualisms, it is worth remembering some other aspects. The most important of them is that Lotman (1992, cit. from 2005[1992]) includes both the binary and the ternary models in his interpretation of Russian literature in the classical period, which has crucial importance in relation to this question, since the whole period entitled as classical (ranging conventionally from Pushkin to Chekhov) has a very strong collective cultural memory of the Old Russian literature whose model in the article from 1977 is elaborated as characteristically dualistic. However, in his “Introductory remarks” (the subtitle of the article from 1992) Lotman makes a distinction between two conspicuous trends represented by Lermontov, Gogol and Dostoevsky, on the one hand, and Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chekhov, on the other. The criterion for differentiation lies in the peculiarity of the poetics of these writers to build binary or ternary value systems. The interpretation of the cultural—in this case let us narrow the concept to the *literary*—specification of binarism and ternarism is very similar to that appearing in the article from 1977. Nevertheless, Lotman begins his presentation by stating that Russian culture reflects upon itself (autoidentification) through two sharply divergent subsystems, decoding all of the segments of the world as positive or negative. This logic is already at work in Medieval culture and will be valid throughout Russian cultural history. The *positive vs. negative* conflict can be translated into many variants, not simply as the world of *sin (demon) vs. holiness (angel)*, but also as the *national vs. artificially imported*, or, metaphorically speaking, the *hot vs. cold* etc, but he also alludes to other possibilities of endowing the categories with variable content. Then he states that in parallel with this model, the ternary structure works actively in literature. In this model, between the world of negative values (the world of the bad) and that of positive values (the world of the good), there lies a sphere which lacks an unambiguous moral evaluation. This sphere is characterised by the attribute of its existence (“признаком существования”). It is justified by the fact of its reality. The centre of attention becomes the normal, ordinary, naturally given life (Pushkin’s, Tolstoy’s, Chekhov’s artistic worlds).

There are several points which make these definitions more sophisticated. In the binary model polarity takes part in generating a specific type of dynamics for the

<sup>3</sup> See Schönle’s summary (2020, p. 93): she “asked whether these dualities ‘describe Russian culture or perpetuate its cultural mythology’” (Boym, 1994, p. 30).

plot, including not only the conflict of the two poles, but the approach of the positive pole through the furthest negative point (“через предельную степень зла”; Lotman 2005, p. 596), which may satisfy not only the romantic attraction to amoral beauty, but also the requirement of achieving the final phase of trials. The dynamics of the plot in this case implies a double semantics and, as a result, the reevaluation of a type of negative extreme. Similarly, in the ternary model, we can also discern an interesting kind of redefinition when ordinary, normal life (the sphere inbetween) may prove to be characterised by vulgarity, functioning as a negative trait (e.g. Chekhov). Again, semantic dynamics is active in the direction not of conflict between the poles, but rather their resemanticization, the shift in the relationship between the two elements, changing equally the constellation within the dual or triple system. How the model works, consequently, can only be defined in terms of semantic dynamics, i.e., meaning-engendering processes. This also holds true for the description of the correlation between the two models within the framework of the examined classical period. Lotman treats the binary and ternary models as two opposed languages, as if two historical traditions, which coexist within a higher complex of unity. They both behave like components inseparable from the whole. He, in essence, gives here a semiospheric explanation, pointing to the function of the cooperative activity of the two models in ensuring the diversity of the whole system with its dynamics (the epoch paradigm). This whole can come to consciousness only through the translations to one sign system or to the other. In fact, the whole piece examines the classical period in terms of its dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

The message exposed by this article speaks of more than that kind of the conceptualisation of binarisms usually rendered in critical studies with an orientation to the reconstruction of Lotman’s methodology of reading culture and his mode of theory building, where binarisms are interpreted in terms of the structuralist principle of thinking in oppositional pairs. Further, we have to note that the two examined writings were born in the 70s and in the 90s, respectively; according to an approximate definition, the former belongs to the so-called structuralist period of Lotman while the “later” Lotman is always interpreted in the light of his conceptualisation of the semiosphere and the theory of explosion. As we might be convinced, the distinction between the binary and ternary models in literary history is based on the same principle of the interpretation of the *inbetween*, the intermediate position between the two poles when clarifying Old Russian culture and nineteenth-century Russian literature. The main criterion is the existence or the lack of this “between-pole” sphere, its presence or absence. The poles embody the structure of semantics, which, philosophically speaking, carries cultural values. In a literary work developing a complex semiotic system, however, as the central semantic structure of duality, we should keep in mind motifs and motif relationality. Semantic relationality, again, can be labelled as offering the dominant conceptual and methodological tool for grasping meaning in structural semiotics. Nevertheless, the poles are not static and rigid semantic entities in Lotman’s literary theoretical and empirical analytical universe.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. dynamism as linked to the phenomenon of cultural self-reflection; the contextualisation of a period as related to a former and later paradigm; the possibility of explosive and evolutionary developmental moments; the unforeseen vs. the predictable.

They are just points of reference in realising and interpreting the plot (or abstract semantic transformations).

The *middle* zone (inbetween) demonstrates that clearly. This is a semantic sphere, endowed with the attribute of *not being*, or to be more exact, *not being defined precisely*. The motifs there are “neither ‘holy’, nor ‘sinful’, neither ‘state’, nor ‘anti-state’, neither good, nor bad.” The question arises: what are they then? The between-pole semantic condition keeps as its point of reference the semantics of the poles, but only to the extent and so far as *deviation from* them is indicated, i.e. their *difference* can be grasped. Functionally, they introduce the code of difference, another type of difference than that existing between the poles. They initiate new meaning-engendering acts, but as a first step, as related to the framework semantics of the poles. The poles are, indeed, semantic frameworks, referenced points in the zone of the initiation of something different which is, however, not given, nor defined, nevertheless it should exist and its sense should be revealed (deciphered). The reference to the binary meaning poles in the form of double negation (neither good, nor bad), consequently, comprises a semantic meta-gesture, setting the enigma of *new semantic identification* (what is the object of definition if it is *neither this, nor that?*) and calling for interpretation, which will evolve gradually. The middle is, consequently, a semantic meta-zone (metalanguage regarding the interpretation of new meaning-engendering) which, at the same time, begins to develop a process of meaning innovation. That is why this sphere is prolific, as Lotman and Uspensky state, from a historic point of view constituting the “structural reserve from which tomorrow’s system develops.” From the point of view of the internal dynamics of the literary text, this sphere also behaves as a semantic reserve, from which the new meaning—first the statement on the difference, then the processual realisation (in the course of the text development)—stems. This is the sphere where the enigma of the identification is formulated, giving impetus for both innovative meaning-engendering and its interpretation.

The three major aspects of the generative force of this intermediate zone can be identified as (1) the act of the initiation of new meaning (on the basis of deviation); (2) the indexical meta-communication (pointing at the meaning innovative act itself); (3) the enactment of the first step of a semantic developmental process (from the old to the new meaning, which must be created by converting a static state into a dynamic meaning transformation). The functional complexity of this zone makes it semiotically act as an open semantic reserve. Its role and sphere of mechanism may also be related to Lotman’s concept of translation which makes sense if we consider that any semiotic system is based, as its kernel structure, on a minimum of two non-identical components showing asymmetry, between which the translation can never lead to a total coincidence, otherwise the living force, the creative capacity of the semiosphere disappears. If we take a strictly binary relationship of motifs not as asymmetry, but as reverse symmetry (the equivalence through total negation), which means that these elements can be entirely converted one to the other through a shift of the index of the positive to the negative, then the role of the middle zone can be further defined as the installation of asymmetry (deconstructing the limitations to binarisms).

What do we have to say then about the strictly dual system deprived of the intermediate zone? We can make abstractions from Lotman’s interpretation of the plot version when reaching the furthest point of the negative value means that we arrive

at a crisis moment initiating a trajectory of approach to the positive value. In that case the ensuing dynamics can be considered as going to the utmost extreme of one of the poles, contributing to this extreme pole's self-exhaustion, functionally realising self-transformation. This operation reveals again, as in the ternary model, that binarisms in the literary work should necessarily be set in motion, as they are source points for initiating transformation.

We are returning to the formulation of the initial dilemma. Is the application of binarism part of the working methodology and theoretical stance of Lotman as a specific (or very general structural) trait? Or does it lie in the empirical material itself, the research object, in his literary semiotics? Both writings under scrutiny, taken from Lotman's two (his so called structuralist and post-structuralist oriented [Schönle 2006, p. 14; Emerson 2006]) research periods, reveal the function of binary semantic relationality in the context of the ternary model defined in terms of a semantic mechanism. The two texts overlap in postulating the functionality of binarisms in establishing a *semantic framework for the kind of relationality* without which, according to our semiotic knowledge (let us adhere to a Saussurean or Peircean or any other view), there is no semiosis. The framework proves to serve in fixing the static state, from which, through the semantic acts of differentiation, a dynamic process of meaning-transformation and meaning-innovation makes a start. The transformation process (be it based on the self-transformation of the poles or the mediatory role of the middle zone between them, in the ternary model) presupposes the change of both poles, i.e. it should be as a minimum doubly encoded. When in the ternary semantic model the "neither 'holy,' nor 'sinful,' neither 'state,' nor 'anti-state,' neither good, nor bad" is considered as valid, it is obviously referenced to both poles. When the negative value, going to the extreme in the processual development of plot event, submits itself to transformation, it is also related to the other pole (e.g. the most distant point of sinfulness as leading to redemption). Binarisms are inherent in the literary text itself, proving to be the structural-semantic operators of meaning transformations, i.e. semantic development, the essence of literary textual construction. They make it possible to attach transformations to two points of reference. Between the two fixed points emerges new meaning different from both of the poles. Binarity, consequently, is closely linked not only to converting statics to dynamics, but can also be understood in the context of the fixed and the unfixed, the defined and the undefined. And what is most important, semantically speaking, the content of binarisms is predisposed to be exceeded, overstepped, which means, at the same time, reaching more sophisticated, nuanced aspects of sense than the initial limited binary notions.

Interpreters, self-evidently, cannot ignore the binary structures in their research into the literary texts. All the more so, that as not one scholar have put forward the idea, thinking in opposites is a universal mode of conceptualising.<sup>5</sup> This entails that the literary semiotic analyses and the interpretations of the cultural conceptualisation of human existence as appearing in texts through semantic models, show an analogy with the meaning-engendering mechanisms in literature itself, including the reliance

<sup>5</sup> An outstanding article by Danesi (2009) reveals crucial highlight points of opposition theories beginning from ancient formulations, spanning to the present, and he gives also a survey of critical literature on the topic.

on the artistic statements of oppositions in terms of difference and deviation. Thinking in binary categories, consequently, is not the privilege of structuralism; it is part of a more multifunctional creative impulse for the emergence and the interpretation of meaning-creative processes based on equivalents (parallels and opposites, both underlining differences). It is additionally important that opposites can be organised also in ternary or four-part structures (Danesi, 2009, p. 22; see also the Greimasian model). Speaking of difference, it should be also underlined that the “classical” structuralist and postmodern conceptualisations in some aspects also show conspicuously similar traits (Monticelli, 2012). The witness to that can be Lotman’s oeuvre, in which his so called post-structuralist theorisation is deeply rooted in his structuralist theory.<sup>6</sup>

This can be linked to the concept of plurality. So we will turn in the second chapter of this article to the examination of the definition of binarities by Lotman in one context with pluralities. This brings a shift in focus from the issue of the modelling function of binarisms in cultural texts to that of their application in research methodology and scientific metalanguage.

## **Binarism in the context of plurality—the language of culture texts and the metalanguage of their interpretation**

### **Creative dynamics in terms of openness and multiplication**

Lotman’s whole oeuvre investigates cultural creativity grasped and described from a wide range of points of view and in its richest manifestation forms. One of the crucial aspects of the unity that his scholarship constitutes can be characterised by the trait we mentioned, closely linked to the concentration on the phenomenon of cultural dynamics as the research object, inseparable from the question of human and cultural creativity.<sup>7</sup> Żyłko (2015, p. 40) suggests that Lotman’s twofold orientation regarding “the universal mechanism in creating meaning (a bipolar structure immersed in a wider semiotic universe!),” and at the same time his intellectual openness of all kinds of “new intellectual impulses, coming from different areas of modern science,” among them philosophy, can be related to the clarification of his methodological persistent position: he “enriched the structural method, made it more flexible, so that it can encompass as many phenomena of the human world as possible. This is why he gradually abandons rigorous dichotomies in favour of more developed relationships (ternary and more complex structures [...].” Nevertheless, he remained a “methodological monist,” the result of which Żyłko identifies as a hybrid of structural semiotics (the connection of structuralism with semiotics). From this methodological stance stems the difficulty of description, resulting in a sharp conflict between cultural dynamism and the static nature of the description.

<sup>6</sup> On the internal coherence and interconnectedness of the whole Lotmanian scientific oeuvre, see: Kroó 2022.

<sup>7</sup> “The question of human creativity was one of the constant antinomies holding his interest: how to combine in one (uniform) language of concepts and terms the expression of systemic limitations and individual discoveries?” (Żyłko, 2015, p. 31).

The large scope of the potential leading to the emergence of new meanings in various literary and cultural links, as revealed by Lotman, shows, on the one hand, the context-bound nature of open semantics (openness being a criterion of the creative nature of meaning-engendering, as based on the continually renewing possibility of semantic *transgression*, i.e. *going beyond a particular border*), while, on the other, proves its possible unexpectedness. The interpreter can rely on the selection of context-bound meaning, based on *fixed relationality* (cf. the free choice, out of various possibilities, of a context) within which meaning-emergence is grasped (in terms of relationality); at the same time, methodologically, unexpectedness has to be treated via its describability in its relation to the expected meaning (the role of the reader here is crucial, in terms of reader's expectations, cf. reception aesthetics: Pilshikov et al., 2018, p. 18). This also makes Lotman say that the interpretation of meaning-engendering processes cannot avoid working with various descriptions (of text layer, the relationship between literary expectations of various types and their transcending, etc.), which requirement arises of necessity from the nature of the unrestrictable and unforeseen number of semantic interactions between texts and contexts.

A similar methodological consideration is put forward regarding the multiplication of the description of synchronic states, in the sum total of their interrelationships approaching textual and literary historical processes (Żyłko, 2015, p. 7; cf. Pilshikov et al., 2018, pp. 35–36, 45). This is called the aspectual examination (“аспектное рассмотрение”) of the text (Lotman, 1972: 8, cf. “an inspection of the text's various aspects,” Lotman, 1976[1972], pp. 7–8)<sup>8</sup>. The structural analysis of the text taking a literary work from its beginning to its “end” proves to be just the initial stage, the first step of the interpretation (1976[1972], pp. 8–9). However, the important question remains concerning the literary theoretical or methodological tools which describe the unexpected beyond the domain of the expected. These might be contextualised within the problematics of explosiveness. The production of an open-ended series of descriptions follows from the inability of metatexts to provide interpretations which exhaustively model the texts. Co-existing in culture in multiple forms of interaction, they contribute to the transformation of the literary work by the recipient as the final open agent creating meaning (Lotman, 2005[1967], p. 764).

Openness, as a source for creative meaning potentiality, qualifies literary-cultural communication, including all of the participants engendering literary meaning: the elements of texts and contexts; their realised and non-realised variants; real and potential readers—including literary critics and the creators of new artistic metatexts—throughout historical time. All of these factors of communication remain interpretable within relationality, the various forms of which with their rich ramifications and contexts ensure the plurality of the aspects of the interpretation and their metatextual formulation. This plurality is inseparable from the plural semantic universe in which the numerous contexts and the forms of interconnection require not a single but multiple (a series of interconnected) descriptions.

<sup>8</sup> See already in 1967 (cit. from Lotman, 2005[1967]), p. 759 the idea that each complex structure is composed of substructures to be examined individually. Hence the veracity of the analysis of the “levels” (“идея анализа по уровням”). Already in this early article, the aspectual- or level-oriented analysis is linked to the problem of the “synchronous cuts” (“синхронные срезы,” *ibid.*), on which the historic perspective of diachronic description can be based.



In this light, the so called structuralist method of the division into binarisms proves to be an operational tool for reaching parallel systems of interpretation, including the possibility of open-ended multiplication. Semantic units, text-layers, “chains-systems” (subsystems), which are arranged into a hierarchical structure, can first be compared separately, to arrive at their description and specification through the enlargement of new perspectives, since “a graduated system of semantic borders is created on the basis of a hierarchy of binary oppositions (in addition individual orderings arise which are sufficiently independent of the base),” so “possibilities arise for the individual shifting of proscribed borders” (cf. Lotman, 1977[1970], p. 238); see also: “the mutual superimposition of these binary segmentations creates bundles of differentiation” (*ibid.*, 251). Meaning-engendering was never meant to be restricted by Lotman to binarisms as such, the plurality of the binary structures and their dynamism cannot be ignored, which involves also hierarchisation processes.<sup>9</sup> Within the conceptualisation of the semiosphere, we should also remember the idea of the “nuclear structures (frequently multiple),” (2005[1984], p. 213). This thought unambiguously links the methodology and theory of the “structuralist” Lotman with those in his conceptualisation of the semiosphere and explosion ensuring one of the aspects of unexpected plurality. These aspects create a harmonious whole in the Lotmanian oeuvre.

### Further aspects of binarism regarding the openness of meaning-creation

Thinking in binarisms, consequently, can be considered as an instrumental aspect of methodology, similarly to that which Lotman regards as distinguishing the “phonological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, micro-syntactic (phrasal) and macro-syntactic (supra-phrasal)” levels in the literary text. He declares: “This is no doubt necessary, and without a preliminary description of these levels it is impossible to construct a precise model of the artistic text. But we must understand that this marking of levels makes sense only as a preliminary and heuristic operation” (Lotman, 1977[1970], p. 279), in the same way as the isolation of structural levels—cf.: “It may now be possible to suggest that, in reality, clear and functionally mono-semantic systems do not exist in isolation. Their articulation is conditioned by heuristic necessity. Neither, taken individually, is in fact, effective. They function only by being immersed in a specific semiotic continuum, which is filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of hierarchical levels.” (Lotman, 2005[1984], p. 206; cf. Kliger, 2010, p. 264). The method of heuristic fixation and the awareness of the open dynamism of semantic functioning outline such a double code of the literary text reading, which is, again, analogous to the nature of the literary material itself. This is characteristic of the reading methodology of semiotic systems in general (cf. Lotman, 1987, pp. 14–15).

<sup>9</sup>S. A. Kibal'nik (2011), criticising systematically and very interestingly the aspects of Lotman's stress on contradictions in his interpretation of *Evgeny Onegin*, underlines that kind of plurality / diversity in the semantic modelling which would also fit into Lotman's crucial position suggesting that we can come across a complex of correlations of not diametrically opposite elements (see, e.g., p. 173).

At the same time, as has already been mentioned, Lotman insists that an artistically active organization must necessarily have two “directionally opposed structures” and, consequently, every level of the artistic text (1975[1971], p. 201) requires “as a minimum” two systemic descriptions. One of the structures ensures stability (e.g., in the plot, the social, spatial, moral, etc. situation), whereas another order is established by the violation of the first. The *event* arises at the intersection of the two directions. These are, however, hierarchised, proving to be only partial structures “entering into a more complex unit of a higher level” (*ibid.*) We are in an open-ended system of stratifications—typical also of the hero as a semantic construct—in a process of divisions into particular structures (semantic orders), transforming themselves into larger ones. The kernel semantic generator is the point of intersection, a dynamic transgressive force (strengthening meaning-individualisation with *the intersection of the greatest variety of systems*—1977[1970], p. 72), motivating syntagmatic and hierarchical evolution (1975[1971], p. 202).

Here again we can see the extension of duality towards plurality: the intersecting elements optimally represent a kind of multiplication. The simultaneous perspectives of “the fulfillment and the non-fulfillment of a certain normative system of poetic organization” (1976[1972], p. 140), within a hierarchical framework is functionalised not as a simple dualism of ideas, but also as processual alternation sequences—an unbroken (continuous) period which is later interrupted (becomes discontinuous) and a new syntagmatic sequence emerges. The meaning-engendering energy arising out of the tension between the twofold descriptive model, emerges from multiple semantic interaction between the continuous and discontinuous; the different systemic orders; the hierarchical levels. Lotman, emphasises that it is only on the lower levels (phonologic, meter-rhythmic, rhyme, etc.) that “a binary opposition of possible descriptions actually prevails” since at a higher level (image, genre, etc.) we arrive at “intricately constructed paradigms of description.” Each of them can supply “a specific projection of the text” (Lotman, 1975[1971], p. 202). Levels and modes of reception according to the logic of binarism, furnish complementary descriptive models, i.e., together ensure the creation of complexity. Norm and violation (the presentation of each element of the text “simultaneously both as the fulfillment and the non-fulfillment of a certain normative system of poetic organization” (1976[1972], p. 140), consequently, interact resulting in semantic tension. Semantic tension is of the same nature as that when asymmetry reveals itself in the lack of total translatability, creating meaning-engendering energy,<sup>10</sup> an “additional shaping activity” (1975[1971], p. 204; cf. “дополнительную моделирующую активность” [1971, p. 287]). This kind of complementary activity (energy) is called by Lotman “supplementary freedom” (this is nothing other than openness, potentiality, perspective), based on the deautomatization of the conformity to the accepted semiotic conditionality (“условность”), in other words: “the deviation from an invariant system

<sup>10</sup> Vö. Lotman calls attention to the fact that “the elaboration of the notion of *structural tension* is one of the chiefest achievements of Czech structuralism. This brought in the concept of structure the energetic moment.” He reminds of Mukařovský’s linking the quality of energy to the problem of the aesthetic norm and mentions Tynyanov as working in a similar direction when investigating into the dynamism of the correlation of the structural series and the notion of the dominant, he was interested in the energetic indicators of the text. (Lotman, 2018[1970], p. 371; cf. comments in Pilshikov et al., 2018, pp. 56–57).

of relationships” (1975[1971], p. 204).<sup>11</sup> This is also the working mechanism of the poetics of the fantastic. When this principle is related to the concept of the semiosphere, the whole issue is recontextualised—implying a solid Tynyanovian background—in terms of the nonconformity in the periphery to the principles of fixed grammars (auto)communicated by the centre. This nonconformity, i.e. deviation–difference, results in pushing semiospheric dynamics towards innovation.

## Points to conclude and to open future perspectives for the investigation into Lotmanian binary notions

Without exhausting all of the aspects of possible approaches to the issue of binarisms and, in a broader sense, dual semantic definitions, we have to confine our presentation by stopping at some kind of conclusion. Binarisms, as parts of cultural texts, strongly activating meaning-creative processes, will obviously figure, as natural components of conceptual thinking, aiming to grasp the artistic message of a literary work, in literary criticism.

The parallel activity of dual structures in cultural texts and their notional definition when describing their functioning in scientific metatexts (Szabó, 2003, p. 132)—be they the discrete or the continuous; the norm or its violation, including the non-realised presence, as a “minus device” (1977[1970], p. 51); the own or the alien; the text-internal or text-external; the culturally marked or the everyday; the linear or the cyclical plots; etc.—is essential to set frontiers between the opposites within and between the indicated pairs so as to create awareness of the borderline of their simultaneous separation and combination (cf. 2005[1985], p. 211–212). Frontiers represent links (connectors), which embodying fixed axes of mutual projection, function as the most active zone of translation. The final functional binarism, in this light, can be inferred in Lotman’s system as decoding *simultaneity* in terms of *successivity* (and vice versa), which at the same time elucidates how all of the binary notions are potentially initiators of new meaning, triggering meaning-engendering mechanisms through sharpening the sense of combination and separation, i.e., setting difference (deviation) within the framework of a particular semantic conditionality (“условность,” Lotman & Uspensky, 1997[1970]) to be “overcome.”

Returning to the initial problem-posing of binary semantic models through their comparison with ternary models, for further clarification we should concentrate on the analogy implied in the two sorts of meaning-engendering mechanisms, which, in spite of their difference regarding the presence or absence of the intermediate zone in the semantic structure, show how semantic referencing and double encoding work in a way which is able to *regulate and transform a given semantic conditionality* and, at the same time, to open its *metatextualisation*. We can suspect that these aspects, covered in detail in the first chapter of the present paper, represent the strongest elements

<sup>11</sup> See Mandelker on the projection of the problem onto the concept of estrangement: “for Lotman the ability to achieve an estranged perspective represents the possibility for an unpredictable, innovative, and, most importantly, free action that enables and empowers the individual” (Mandelker, 2006, p. 60). See also Bethea (2006, p. 61) on the “dissimilar similar.”

of the semantic force (activity, energy) which ensures the framework for semiosis when talking about semantic-compositional units which are part of a plural system.

And finally, we return to the beginning of our paper, the question of Lotman's, differentiating Gogol's, Lermontov's and Dostoevsky's poetics (stating their binary modelling character) from those created by Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chekhov (with a ternary semantic model). We cannot ignore the curious "anomaly" in that system of differentiation, that, characterising the inbetween zone, in the ternary model, Lotman defines the semantically neutral third semantic sphere (in a way interpretable as devoid of value-markedness) in terms of the double negation of the marked poles, being "neither this, nor that" ("there is a potential for a wide range of neutral behavior, neutral social institutions that are neither 'holy,' nor 'sinful,' neither 'state,' nor 'anti-state,' neither good, nor bad"). This "neutrality" conspicuously resembles that kind of semantic pattern which was identified by Andrey Bely in his famous book *Gogol's Artistry* (English transl.: 2009). He calls the *neither this, nor that* logic of semantic identification (in fact non-identification, where unmarkedness is related to the two poles, and it is precisely through the statement on the lack of a concrete definition that the inbetween zone is markedly defined) the "figure of fiction" ("фигура фикции" [Bely 1934, p. 80], see "ни то, ни сё" [*ibid.*, p. 77]). The "figure of fiction" is described by Bely as the basic artistic device of *Dead Souls*. In this context, then, we should state that Gogol's poetics in his major work corresponds to those criteria set up by Lotman which belong to the ternary and not the binary model.

However, this question can by no means be considered as a formal dilemma regarding the classification of a poetic phenomenon under one well outlined category or the other. What this anomaly might direct our attention to, is the extent to which the whole problem of binarism (broadly speaking: duality, double coding, etc.) must be related to the issue of mediation. The examination of the forms of semantic mediation between the poles offers the opportunity to study not only the nature of binarisms themselves, but mainly and most importantly, that of the semiotic mechanisms of transformative meaning-formations in semantic processes: their initial phase of contrast and the very rich poetic range for creating new meanings which cannot be interpreted any longer in terms of binarism. The semiotic-poetic mode of the elaboration of the mediary forms seems to be responsible for distancing semantics from binarisms, developing complex and nuanced semantic systems. The inbetween zone proves its importance not as a neutral zone, but as the field of transformation, and links to previous and later phases of semantic definition. The study of semiotic mediation is a logical step forward towards conceptualising the role of binarism in literary thinking. Saying that it is a universal way of thinking, proves definitely too broad. Saying that it is a characteristically structuralist device, is too narrow. Saying that they are binarisms through which we can find the differential criterion for the characterisation of structuralism and post-structuralism, is not precise.<sup>12</sup> Binarisms represent the extreme formulation of the first step to creative semantic definition, requiring the first operation of installing the attribute of semantic difference to be

<sup>12</sup> Rich illuminating material on the philosophical context of Lotman's semiotics of transgression, see, Faritov, 2007.

developed into complex patterns and systems of mediation through which meaning-creation can be completed in a rich variety of forms.

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