Semiotics of history — historical cultural semiotics?*

PETER GRZYBEK

Whereas there has been an increasing number of studies on the history of semiotics, over the last few years, literature on the semiotics of history is still relatively scarce.[1] It is not due to this fact alone that Moscow semiotician Boris A. Uspenskij's treatise *Semiotik der Geschichte* deserves our attention — it provides us with deep insights into both the theoretical foundations of what a semiotics of history might look like, and concrete analyses as to the semiotics of Russian (cultural) history.

The volume under review is a collection of articles, all previously published in Russian, which are translated into German for the first time.[2] All in all, the result is a homogeneous book; the benevolent reader will overlook various redundant passages (partly word-for-word repetitions); s/he will also ignore that references can be found to Russian articles which, curiously enough, are included in the book itself; and s/he might perhaps even profit from seeing one and the same historical event interpreted from different perspectives in two (or even three) different chapters ...

Mainly, it is the first study — some readers will say, *only* the first study — which displays a general-theoretical character; the others are predominantly examples of what might be called 'applied semiotics of cultural history', i.e., in a sense, a historical discourse analysis of Russian culture, seen from a semiotic point of view. In this sense, then, the book is fully in line with the general orientation of Moscow-Tartu semiotics; we will come back to this point later, but let us first follow the order of the articles included.

The first study, 'History and semiotics (the perception of time as a semiotic problem)' (pp. 5–63), was first published in vols. 22/23 of the *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Tartu 1988/89). No reference is made to these published versions; instead, the article seems to be translated from

the original manuscript. Let us start with these theoretical introductory remarks, since they provide the methodological framework of the entire book.[3]

Theoretically speaking, Uspenskij (p. 5) distinguishes a 'semiotics of the sign' from a 'semiotics of language as a sign system'. The first approach, which he claims originated with Peirce and Morris, is labelled 'logical semiotics'; the second, allegedly going back to Saussure, he calls 'linguistic semiotics'. As to the first approach, according to Uspenskij, the scholar's attention concentrates on the isolated sign (which allows us to distinguish different types of signs, such as icons and symbols, for example); in the second case, as opposed to this, the focus is not the single sign, but language as a mechanism of information transfer, a mechanism which makes use of a given repertoire of elementary signs. In other words, whereas (still according to Uspenskij) for 'logical semiotics' the sign is regarded independently of the act of communication, it is precisely the act of communication which determines semioticity in the second approach.[4]

At first sight, it seems that with these methodological remarks, at least in part, the semiotic world (and, in fact, its history) is turned upside-down. Yes, it is true that Saussure pointed out the essential systemic character of language as a sign system, and that by introducing the concept of 'value' [*valeur*] he directed our attention to the fact that the meaning of a particular (linguistic) element can be evaluated only in relationship to (and in distinction from) the other elements of the given system of which it is itself a part. Also, it is true that Peirce arrived at a logical distinction of different sign types, and that this seeming concentration on the isolated sign was very much enhanced by Morris's simplifying presentation of Peircean semiotics.

But wasn't it Saussure (1916: 16) who transferred semiology as the 'science that studies the life of signs in society' to the field of social psychology and, in fact, eliminated it from linguistics? And wasn't it, after all, Saussure's (1916: 232) dictum that linguistics should be in charge of describing 'language studied in and for itself' — that is, as an abstract system, which can be compared to a chess-board and which has to be clearly kept apart from language in its quality as a means for communication? And was it not, ultimately, just this distinction between *langue* and *parole* which, some decades later, would result in Chomsky's (1980: 80) explicit denial of the fact that the essence of language is communication?

And is it not true, on the other hand, that, as Fisch (1978: 41) and others have pointed out, within Peircean semiotics, the notion of semiosis is much more important than the notion of 'sign', and that, if Peirce's

ideas on the *systemic* character of semiosis are rather scarce, this is not because of some primary interest in the isolated sign, but because of his focus on the *process* of sign generation?

More likely than not, the answers to these questions are more important for readers concerned with the history of semiotics than for those interested in the semiotics of history, Uspenskij included.[5] For the given context, it seems more important to point out what Uspenskij actually *wants* to say, and what ultimately turns out to be important to him.

As to Peircean ('logical') semiotics, it is indeed not so much the logical analysis of the isolated sign Uspenskij is interested in, but the process of semiosis, which he defines as the 'transformation of non-sign into sign', and consequently, of non-history into history. The other perspective, associated with Saussurean semiotics, implies the study of a given sign repertoire (the systemic relations between the elements of this repertoire included) on the one hand, and their syntagmatic realization (and their semantic/semiotic transformation) in a given (con-)text on the other.

For Uspenskij, this distinction turns out to be particularly important, when one particular element which is part of a given system (in both its paradigmatic and syntagmatic embedding) is transferred to a different system, and thus becomes part of a different paradigm, in a different syntagma. The concrete interest behind the need to invoke such a distinction may thus be phrased in the form of two or three basic questions which indeed are brought up by Uspenskij several times in the subsequent chapters — questions such as: what happens if a particular, culturally conventionalized sign, a symbol, is transferred from one cultural context to an entirely different culture, which may either exist at the same period of time, or may even be from a historically more recent period? What consequences do such transfers have for a given culture, in general, and to what extent are such transfers characteristic of Russian culture in particular?

In this respect, we are thus facing a modern, cultural semiotic reading of the Russian formalist Jurij N. Tynjanov's (1927) famous distinction of the autofunction and the synfunction of a particular element — i.e., of the function a particular element has within a given system — and of the same element in another system. In Uspenskij's version, then, Tynjanov's distinction (which was initially applied to the systemic analysis of literary texts) receives both an explicitly historical dimension and a broader, cultural semiotic perspective.

The distinction of a 'semiotics of the sign' and a 'semiotic of language' is important to Uspenskij, then, because, as he phrases it (p. 8), 'a semiotic view at history must not be based upon a *semiotics of language* only, it must also be founded upon a *semiotics of the sign*'; and history

itself is semiotic by nature, because, as was said above, 'it presupposes a particular semiotization of reality, a transformation of a non-sign into a sign, of non-history into history'.

What is history, then?

For Uspenskij, the notion of 'history', like the concept of semiotics, has at least two meanings: it is either the totality of things passed [*res gestae*], or the narration about the past [*historia rerum gestarum*], a narrative text, in a sense (p. 13): 'In order for the past to become the object of historical study, it had to be understood exactly as past, i.e., as alienated from the present, and it had to be attributed to a different time level (to a different reality)'. The process of alienation from the present thus presupposes a semiotization of the past, which implies that 'the past is organized as a text which is read from a present-day perspective'. What sounds like a statement typical of Moscow-Tartu semiotics — the extremely broad usage of the word 'text', by no means referring to verbal texts only — is, in fact, completely in line with recent developments in the historical sciences. We find here an ongoing discussion on semiotics and history, i.e., on the semiotic nature of history. Uspenskij does not devote a single word to this whole discussion; still, his book integrates itself completely in it.

The historian Georg Schmid (1986: 10), in the introductory essay to his collection of articles *Die Zeichen der Historie*, has summarized the major tendency of this discussion quite adequately:

Within the historical sciences, a new materiality is beginning to take shape, which is not based upon the historical referents, but in the writing [*Schrift*] of history. ... This new materiality of history is one of the signs, as they are produced within a whole society.

In fact, there seems to be a growing body of agreement as to the semiotic foundations of history, in contemporary historiological discussions. Accordingly, the most relevant change has to be seen in the insight that whosoever is concerned with history is not confronted so much with facts, but instead with artefacts (cf. Schmid 1991) or, rather, mentifacts. In this sense, it is only one step from Haidu's (1982: 188) generally accepted observation that 'semiotics has no grip on events *per se*' to the claim that history is 'meaning imposed on time by means of language' (Partner 1986: 250). Ultimately, language and language-based texts would thus turn out to be the key to understanding history, a notion which is quite close to the more radical view that 'nothing historical can be non- or prelinguistic' (Partner 1986: 252).

Of course, there are more reserved and cautious standpoints — for

example, that of Boklund-Lagopolou and Lagopoulos (1986: 209f.), who warn us that we need to define more closely what texts can be interpreted to represent history: according to these authors, 'history cannot be explained only as text', since there are extratextual factors (the social and historical conditions within which semiotic texts are produced) which both underlie the narrative and determine the 'narrator's' point of view.

However, proponents of cultural semiotics, Uspenskij included, will not follow this way of thinking; for Uspenskij (p. 8), history is semiotic by nature, insofar as it presupposes a particular semiotization of reality — i.e., the transformation of non-sign into sign, of non-history into history. As to the semiotic status of history, this implies the conviction that in case such allegedly 'extratextual' factors are historically relevant, this will result in texts, which, in turn, can be submitted to semiotic analyses.

Williams (1985: 277) therefore seems to be quite right in emphasizing that 'it is through language, not first of all as a means of communication, but as a means of modeling the world, that history so defined is transmitted'. A precondition for a successful semiotics of history, then, is the reconstruction of a historically remote world model, to which we can gain access only by way of texts.

Such a claim — to establish a semiotics of history as the reconstruction of a historically remote world model — simply must be grist to a Moscow semiotician's mill: after all, Soviet semiotics has, for the most, been concerned with the reconstruction of the Old Slavic world model since the 1960s. According to Ivanov (1965: 87), for example, 'the basic function of every semiotic system is the modeling of the world'. This approach is described in detail in Ivanov and Toporov's (1965) book on *Slavic Linguistic Modeling Semiotic Systems*. Unfortunately, this book — which has been of utmost importance within Soviet semiotics — has never been translated into any language other than Russian. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to at least very briefly outline here its general methodological assumptions.

Ivanov and Toporov generally assume that the world model of a given society (culture) can best be described by way of semantic oppositions, which they claim to be universally valid. In very general terms, according to Ivanov and Toporov, the 'world' itself, the model of which shall be described, is the interrelationship between human being and his/her surrounding. Since the 'world' is already the result of information processing, a 'world model' cannot be the result of the processing of primary facts on the level of organic receptors (perception); rather, it is the result of a secondary processing, based on sign systems. 'World', in other words, is thus psychologically processed world, World Two in Popper's terms. This world model may be expressed in various forms of human behavior, or

rather, in the results of this behavior — that is, in texts. Texts, in this understanding, are not only verbal texts, but nonverbal texts in a broad (semiotic) understanding of this term, too: monuments of material culture, cave paintings, funeral ceremonies, etc. — all these cultural phenomena are labelled 'texts'. And all these texts do not exist independently of each other, but are coordinated with each other and form a homogeneous system which, at the same time, serves as a program for both individual and collective behavior.

At this point it becomes obvious how close a semiotics of history is to cultural semiotics in general, and how familiar this field must be for a representative of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics. It was the aim of these rather circuitous introductory remarks to pave the overall methodological way for Uspenskij's approach. Let the author speak for himself, again, to make the above interpretation convincing: 'The cultural semiotic method of considering history presupposes ... the reconstruction of that system of beliefs, which condition both the perception of the events in question and the reaction to them' (p. 6).

How then does Uspenskij realize his aim? As Williams (1985: 273ff.) correctly points out, a doctrine of signs that takes account of history must be founded on a sense of history as structured in human experience and consciousness prior to the possibility of any such analysis. Therefore, any attempt to approach the semiotics of history must begin by thematizing the time dimension of human semiosis — and this is exactly the way Uspenskij takes.

As was already indicated above, history is semiotic by nature, since it presupposes a particular semiotization of reality; according to Uspenskij (p. 8), this semiosis, in turn, implies two conditions: (1) it presupposes the placement of various events (belonging to the past) in a temporal succession (i.e., the introduction of the concept of *time*); and (2) it presupposes causal relationships between these events (i.e., the introduction of the concept of *causality*).

If the first condition is not fulfilled, this results in mythical, eternal time; if the fulfillment of the second condition is lacking, the presentation of history ends up in a simple chronological and genealogical ordering. Both factors are intertwined in the presentation of history: as opposed to *historical* descriptions, the determination of a cause which is effective outside of time is characteristic of *cosmological* descriptions (8f.).

Given this basic distinction of historical and cosmological descriptions, each associated with a corresponding type of time perception and of consciousness, different interpretations of the three categories of present, past, and future are obtained, which can be considered to have universal validity.

According to the historical consciousness, past events are organized in a causal order; present events are thus understood to be the consequence (result) of previous events, though not of the primary, original, initial state. Also, present events are evaluated from a future standpoint (that is, as it is assumed to be at present) — present events are thus evaluated on the basis of their possible consequences in/for the future (p. 18).

As opposed to this, the cosmological consciousness presupposes a relationship of both present and past events to some initial (primary, original) state which is supposed to last eternally. It is represented in some kind of ontological primary text [*Ur-Text*] we generally call a 'myth'. For the cosmological consciousness, present events are important not in their (possible) relation to the future, but in relation to the initial state; therefore, present events are evaluated not with respect to the future, but with regard to the past (pp. 19, 43).

Although the cosmological and historical models of time perception — which involve the notions of cyclic and linear time — are incompatible with each other, it is important to point out that they represent abstract models which, in our everyday experience, may well coexist. Any semiotics of history must therefore take account of these two models of time experience: a historical event may be, even simultaneously, related to historically former events in two manners — in a linear and in a cyclical form. And it is a matter of attitude, or orientation, which of these two types dominates the interpretation, be it on an individual or collective level (personality type vs. cultural type). With regard to cultural processes, for example, a historical interpretation may be replaced by a cosmological one. This is the case when events become important which seem to represent (or initiate) a new historical period, or epoch — a process which we would, by intuition, rather classify to be successive, and therefore close to a historical interpretation. If, in such cases, the historical interpretation gives place to the cosmological, this may result in some kind of sacralization of historical events and personalities, since the cosmological consciousness, by definition, is associated with religious connotations (p. 43).

As opposed to present and past, the interpretation of the future cannot be associated with temporal experience — instead, the future is accessible only by way of speculation, by way of modeling it on the basis of present and past experience. Still, as to the understanding of the future, too, there are two different perspectives, as there are for present and past. These two perspectives are determined by our perception and interpretation of present and past. Thus, for the historical consciousness, the future will be seen from the perspective of the present; in this case, the future is that time which does not (yet) exist, it must still come into being; and

if this is the case, it is, of course, not future, but present — future arises out of the present. For the cosmological consciousness, on the other hand, the future already exists; it is not the idea of evolution, or development, which determines the future, but rather the idea of predetermination (since any event can be interpreted as the reflection of some initial, original state).[6]

Up to this point, the foundations of a semiotics of history seem still to be free of ideology, void of any concrete content. How then can a meaning be attributed to a historical event? In other words: how is it possible to explain the gap between these general considerations on time perception and the basic semiotic processes involved in it (as claimed by Williams — see above), and cultural semiotics in general?

Uspenskij does not state this explicitly, but it seems that it is due to one overall important factor that a cultural dimension is attributed to historical events: it is the distinction between profane and sacred time. From the perspective of a cosmological (mythical) consciousness, linear time — which is dominated by the idea of evolution and of the linear succession of events — is understood as *profane*. Contrary to this understanding, from the perspective of a historical consciousness, cyclical time — which involves the repetition of something former, but not the creation of something new — is interpreted as *sacred* time, and it may be related to archaic perception.

In Uspenskij's approach, the distinction of sacred and profane thus turns out to be central to any semiotic interpretation of historical events; it goes without saying that we cannot, by this opposition alone, understand the semiotic dimension of history. A second way, still related to general principles of time perception, and by which historical events obtain their cultural interpretation, is the association of time and space — be it that time itself is conceived in spatial categories or that time and space are associated by way of an analogy. Space itself may not only be subdivided into concrete geographical concepts (such as 'left–right', 'in front–back'), but also associated with abstract cultural values which, in turn, are interrelated with each other (i.e., values such as 'sacred–profane', 'progressive–conservative', 'male–female', 'clean–unclean', 'round–square', etc.).

History, then, becomes ideological, as soon as the perception of temporal events is correlated with a particular set of semantic oppositions. A semiotics of history, then, is a historically oriented semiotics of culture; it is, as was intended, the reconstruction of a historical world model.

What is worth noting here is the particular role attributed to the opposition of sacred and profane. In the way Uspenskij introduces these concepts, it seems to be just this opposition which sets the stage for any

historically oriented cultural analysis. And in fact, this opposition provides the overall prism through which Uspenskij, in all the studies included in this book, analyzes major historical events in the time course of Russian culture. These analyses are so convincing, and are supported by such a formidable amount of documentary evidence, that one hardly asks oneself if this prism is the only possible perspective, or if this prism ultimately narrows the view on Russian culture as a whole and grasps only part of it.

This crucial question is different from the more general doubts as to the capacity of structuralist semiotics to account for history (cf. Finlay-Pelinski 1982); rather, this question aims at the thematic focus imposed upon the cultural discursive analysis, even when accepting such an approach.

Examples of this strategy are, among others, a semiotic analysis of the concept of 'Moscow as the Third Rome', the naming of the Russian Tsar, the cultural changes in general under the reign of Peter the Great, etc. These analyses represent the largest part of the book; let us take a closer look at two of these examples, which demonstrate Uspenskij's approach from two different perspectives. The first example, an analysis of the theocratical concept of Moscow as the Third Rome, illustrates the relevance of the general ruminations on time perception as a precondition of historical interpretations; the second example, an analysis of the sacralization of the Russian Tsar in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, will serve to demonstrate why Uspenskij needs the abovementioned distinction of two kinds of semiotics.

The idea of 'Moscow as the Third Rome' came up around the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Uspenskij convincingly shows how both cosmological and historical (in his sense) interpretations have been interwoven in the origin and development of this concept. According to him, Moscow's new role was determined both by the immediately preceding past (i.e., by laws of historical progress) and by events of a faraway past, as a reflection of which Moscow's role has to be seen.

The cosmological interpretation of these events came into being in the second half of the fifteenth century; the crucial assumptions underlying it are Byzantine in origin. Based on the idea that the world was created in the year 5508 B.T., and that it would endure 7 millenia altogether, the end of the world was expected to take place in 1492 $(7000 - 5508 = 1492)$. Thus, the importance of this date originates in the idea of the end of a cosmic cycle; consequently, Moscow as the Third Rome was conceived of as the final earthly empire, preceding the heavenly empire soon to arrive.[7]

As far as a historical (in Uspenskij's understanding of this term)

interpretation of the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome is concerned, it is associated with different events from the more recent contemporary history. For this interpretation, the decline of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, and the end of the Tatars' Rulership in 1480, are of central importance. In Russia, both events were mutually interrelated: whereas in Constantinople, Islam triumphs over the Orthodox church, just the opposite is the case in Russia, where Orthodox Christendom overcomes Islam. In this context, the fall of Constantinople is interpreted as a consequence of Byzantine acceptance of the Union of Florence/Ferrara in 1438–39 — i.e., as a divine punishment for having betrayed Orthodoxy. Thus, Russia's taking over Byzantine's former position is a logical consequence of these historical events.

Turning back to an analysis of Uspenskij's method in approaching history from a semiotic point of view, this example can, in fact, serve as an amplification of how the two kinds of time perception, or rather interpretation, which were initially described in a relatively abstract manner, are relevant for the concrete interpretation of historical events. Let us analyze a second example in order to understand why Uspenskij needs the distinction of what he terms a 'semiotics of the sign' and a 'semiotics of language as a sign system'.

According to Uspenskij, the existence of the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome can be understood as a precondition for the increasing process of the Russian monarch's sacralization (p. 146).[8] This tendency can be demonstrated by way of an analysis of the naming of the Tsar: here, a single sign (the title 'Tsar'), which was previously reserved to denote the Byzantine Emperor and his religious and political role, is transferred from one cultural system (Byzantine) into another cultural system (Russia), where it is integrated into a different cultural context, and where it receives a very different cultural meaning. Initially, in Old Russia, the title 'Tsar' had clear religious connotations and referred exclusively to the religious tradition. The word 'Tsar' was conceived to be sacred, given by God, not by man; as a divine title, it was juxtaposed to all other kinds of titles, and it was used to denote God himself; this results in the fact that God himself could be titled 'Tsar'. In a similar way, the name 'God' was also used to denote the Tsar. In none of these cases, however, did these equivalences imply an identity between Tsar and God. Additionally, the title 'Tsar' was used to denote the Byzantine Emperor, representing, from the Russian point of view, both a religious and a political center. In Byzance, however, the name 'Tsar' [Basileus] referred primarily to the political tradition and heritage of the Roman Emperors [Imperator].

Therefore, within Russian culture, the onset of the process of the

Russian Tsar's sacralization can be associated with the times of Vasilij II. Temnyj (1415–1462), whose reign coincided with the fall of Constantinople. From his time onward, Russian Emperors were labelled 'Tsar' in a relatively constant manner; Ivan IV. Groznyj (1530–1584), for example, was explicitly crowned a 'Tsar'. Mainly, however, it was under Aleksej Michajlovič's (1629–1676) Tsardom (1645ff.) that the Russian Tsar, based on the former Byzantine model, took over all functions which were previously alloted to the Byzantine Emperor. According to Uspenskij (p. 152ff.), we are concerned here with more than just a change of names: we are concerned with significant cultural changes which were to express themselves in almost all cultural spheres. For Russian culture as a whole, this change, which Uspenskij terms the 'byzantinization of Russian culture' (pp. 153, 182), meant that the entire semiotic (not only verbal) behavior in Russia could no longer be homogeneous.

Interestingly enough, the process of the Russian monarch's sacralization did not come to an end with the increasing orientation towards West European cultural models in eighteenth-century Russia, under Peter I. On the contrary, around this time, the Russian Tsar became the head of the Russian Orthodox church, a process which was interpreted as his approximation toward God.

In thoroughly analyzing the further developments under Peter the Great, Uspenskij argues convincingly in favor of the notion that the Russian culture of that time was constructed not so much on Western models, but on inverted models of the old culture. Thus, by analyzing the then-existing cultural model, Uspenskij shows that Peter's reforms may be interpreted not only as a simple orientation toward Western enlightenment, but as the continuation of a much older, intrinsically antecedent tradition — 'not as a cultural revolution, but as an anti-text, as negative-behavior within the culture's own framework' (p. 70). From this point of view, interpreted as an instance of 'anti-behavior', Peter the Great, paradoxically enough, did not transgress traditional norms; on the contrary, in a very deliberate and conscious way, he made use of the juxtaposition of 'correct' and 'incorrect' behavior, which is a very characteristic trait of Russian culture as a whole.

This reconstruction of the importance of 'correct' vs. 'incorrect' behavior may well serve as a starting point for some final, summarizing ruminations, and as one instance of an evaluation of Uspenskij's methodology in general.

The cultural semiotic method of historical analysis, as Uspenskij understands it, presupposes an 'appeal to the intrinsic perspective of the participators in the historical process' (p. 6): what is important to *them* is

recognized and acknowledged to be meaningful for the present-day observer as well. Thus, in a way, Uspenskij shares Norman Denzin's (1985: 345) opinion that, when dealing with semiotics of history, 'it is not possible to be an objective observer in an objective space'. Given the impossibility of taking an objective perspective, only an intrinsic or an extrinsic point of view, or an oscillation between them, remains as a possibility. Moscow linguist and semiotician V. M. Živov devoted a separate analysis to the problem in his 1979 study of 'The intrinsic and extrinsic position in the study of modeling systems'; in it, he pointed out some basic differences between these two strategies. From an extrinsic point of view, a cultural text is regarded as a system all elements of which are considered to be interrelated and meaningful (in analogy to Saussure's notion of value [valeur]). As opposed to this, an intrinsic perspective, which is essentially axiological, is always selective; therefore, it is always, in one way or another, oriented toward a particular norm, according to which phenomena are classified as 'correct' or 'incorrect'.

In a way, Živov's general remarks thus seem to confirm Uspenskij's claims: by analyzing the 'reforms' of Peter the Great from an intrinsic (participant's) point of view, he succeeds in reconstructing the then-up-to-date norms and arrives at different results than previous researchers did. As was indicated above, this kind of approach presupposes the reconstruction of that system of ideas which conditions the perception of particular events and the reaction to them. However, the reconstruction of this historically remote world model can be achieved only by way of an analysis of those texts which, in one way or another, have survived to the present. These texts have not only been submitted to a particular cultural selection during the process of their tradition, they have also been selected by the researcher himself, who cannot avoid looking at them from his own subjective (selective) perspective. Norman Denzin's remarks turn out to be true, then, when he claims that the researcher cannot abstract from his/her own position; according to him,

The analyst is part of the history he or she writes. The semiotician is grafted into every situation that exists historically for him, whether in the narrative texts he analyzes or in the centuries he dips into. ... It is not possible to stand outside of this flow of meaning and impartially analyze that meaning. ... (1985: 345)

As mentioned above, it is worthwhile keeping in mind, therefore, that the picture of Old Russian culture presented to us is only one possible alternative, determined (at least in part) by the author's own perspective (which need not be his alone). This perspective determines what Georg Simmel, as early as 1916 (p. 23), would have called the 'drawing of an

ideal line' [*Hindurchlegen einer ideellen Linie*] through the atoms of reality. The 'ideal line' chosen by Uspenskij, then, would be characterized by the semantic opposition 'sacred–profane'. Without a doubt, Uspenskij would admit and even emphasize that this line is only one of many other possible lines.[9] And there is, quite naturally, nothing bad about it: as I.I. Revzin (1971: 344), in a particular analysis of 'The subjective position of the researcher in semiotics', emphasized, 'the researcher's subjective position ... inevitably tinges the objective result of his work'. Still, it is important to keep in mind that it is just this perspective which characterizes almost all the analyses included in the book. And it is particularly important to be aware of this point, since Ivanov and Toporov, in their analyses of the Old Slavic world model, emphasized that it is the (more neutral) juxtaposition of what is 'positive' or 'negative' for a given society that is central to any world model; according to them, this pair represents the basic cultural opposition, which is then expressed by a number of more specific oppositions being either in a synonymic relation to it, or representing a more concrete symbolization of it.

When the juxtaposition 'sacred–profane' is rendered central to an analysis of Russian culture, then, this could mean either that it is more or less Uspenskij's individual interest to analyze the importance of this topic in the history of culture, or that it was indeed just this opposition that dominated historical cultural developments in Russia. If the latter option should turn out to be true, one would quite naturally have to ask oneself what this would mean for periods in Russian history in which religion started to be replaced by other kinds of ideologies, whether under quasi-sacred dictators or not.

This issue is important, then, not only as far as Uspenskij's book under review is concerned — it is also relevant as to the cultural status of Moscow-Tartu semiotics in general. As was pointed out by Lotman et al. in the *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Culture* (1973), not only the study of the texts, but of the meta-texts (instructions, rules, prescriptions, self-descriptions, etc.) of a given culture as well, may be extremely useful for the semiotic study of this culture, since these texts display a systematic myth the culture creates about itself. If one applies this idea to the Moscow/Tartu school itself, then the latter's focus on 'culture' since the 1970s, and on the history of culture, in the given case, provides us an additional dimension, which not only allows it to study semiotic mechanisms of culture in general, but which also, by way of an analysis of the metasemiotic texts produced by this school, provides insights into Soviet (Russian) culture as a whole. This assumption seems to be justified, because semiotics is not only an instrument for cultural studies; it is also rendered one of its possible objects — the (meta-)texts produced by a

given culture (or a cultural sub-group) become part of this culture, too. Thus, insofar as these scholarly texts, on the one hand, are cultural meta-texts, and, on the other hand, can be considered to be ordinary texts of this culture, the totality of these meta-texts forms some kind of (alternative?) model of the culture in question. They gain a status, which is not only modeling culture, but also generating culture — they create a myth of this culture in its own right. One cannot but agree with one major claim mentioned in the 1973 *Theses* — namely, to render contemporary structural-semiotic studies, as a phenomenon of Slavic culture, themselves a research object. ...[10]

Notes

1. Little has changed, therefore, since Fledelius's (1981) corresponding observations, about a decade ago.
2. It is more than strange that the translator(s) are not mentioned by name anywhere in the book, although the quality of the translation, without a doubt, is flawless. By the way, the interested reader may find translations of almost all of these articles into English, French, and/or Italian, in addition to the German translations in this book.
3. The second article, 'Historia sub specie semioticae' (pp. 65–71), is translated from the Russian 1976 version published in *Kul'turnoe nasledie Drevnej Rusi* (Moscow, 1976: 286–292); it also goes back to an earlier article to which no reference is made, and which was published in 1974. The remaining four studies were all published between 1982 and 1987, partly co-authored by Jurij M. Lotman or Viktor M. Živov: 'Tsar and pretender: Samozvančestvo or royal imposture in Russia as a culturo-historical phenomenon' (pp. 73–111), 'Echoes of the notion "Moscow as the Third Rome" in Peter the Great's ideology' (pp. 113–129), 'Tsar and God: Semiotic aspects of the monarch's sacralization in Russia' (pp. 131–265), and 'Anti-behavior in the culture of the Old Rus' (pp. 267–280).
4. It should be noted here that this interpretation is shared by other members of the Moscow-Tartu school, too, such as for example Ju. M. Lotman (1984: 5), who claims that Peirce's and Morris's semiotics 'start from the notion of the sign as a primary element of any semiotic system', and that 'the isolated sign is at the basis of any analysis' oriented toward this method.
5. For a detailed analysis of the interpretation of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics in Soviet semiotics, see Grzybek 1989: 230ff., 301ff.
6. According to Uspenskij (p. 24), it is the cosmological consciousness where time and space become associated — in principle, it is the same to say that future (or past) exists but we don't know anything about it, or that it is in some other place. From a present-day perspective, the association of time and space is almost universal.
7. Just *how* important this date was in Russian (Orthodox) thinking can be seen in the fact that the Russian Orthodox calendar was reformed precisely in 1492; according to this reform, which was based on the Byzantine Orthodox model, the beginning of the New Year was fixed on September 1st instead of March 1st, a change which can be interpreted as an indication of the increasing Byzantine impact on Russian culture (Uspenskij, p. 59). Historically speaking, quite interesting parallels as to the impor-

tance of this date can be seen in Columbus's discovery of America in the same year. Columbus, who firmly believed in the approaching end of the world, and who understood himself to be God's messenger, termed the continent he discovered a 'new world' [*mundus novus*], a term which, for Columbus, involved a definitely apocalyptic meaning, since he was convinced that he was sent to this new heaven and new earth, created by God.
8. This interpretation is the more interesting since, according to Uspenskij (p. 145), the monarch's sacralization had a very different shape in Western Europe.
9. At the very beginning of the book under review, Uspenskij (p. 6) himself points out that there will always be various opinions and different ways to explain historical events. Each of these explanations is based on a particular model of the historical process, the totality of which reflects the variety and complexity of the historical process as such.
10. Cf. Gasparov's (1989) treatment of the Moscow-Tartu School as a semiotic phenomenon, and the subsequent discussion of this issue by the members of the school themselves in vol. 4 of *Znak,log* (1992).

References

Boklund-Lagopoulou, Karin and Lagopoulos, Alexandros-Ph. (1986). Introduction: Semiotics and history. *Semiotica* 59 (3/4), 209–214.

Chomsky, Noam (1980). *Rules and Representations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Denzin, Norman K. (1985). Towards an interpretation of semiotics and history. *Semiotica* 54 (3/4), 335–350.

Finlay-Pelinski, Marike (1982). Semiotics or history: From content analysis to contextualized discursive praxis. *Semiotica* 40 (3/4), 229–266.

Fisch, Max H. (1978). Peirce's general theory of signs. In *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, T. A. Sebeok (ed.), 31–70. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fledelius, Karsten (1981). Zur Semiotik der Geschichte. In *Semiotik und Massmedien*, Günter Bentele (ed.), 362–370. Munich: Ölschäger.

Fleischer, Michael (1989). *Die sowjetische Semiotik: Theoretische Grundlagen der Moskauer und Tartuer Schule*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag.

Gasparov, B. M. (1989). Tartuskaja škola 1960-ch godov kak semiotičeskij fenomen. *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 23, 7–21.

Grzybek, Peter (1989). *Studien zum Zeichenbegriff der sowjetischen Semiotik (Moskauer und Tartuer Schule)*. Bochum: Brockmeyer.

Haidu, Peter (1982). Semiotics and history. *Semiotica* 40 (3/4), 187–228.

Ivanov, V. V. (1965). Rol' semiotiki v kibernetičeskom issledovanii čeloveka i kollektiva. In *Logičeskaja struktura naučnogo znanija*, 75–90. Moscow: Nauka.

Ivanov, V. V. and Toporov, V. N. (1965). *Slavjanskie jazykovye semiotičeskie modelirujuščie sistemy*. Moscow.

Lagopoulos, Alexandros-Ph. (1986). Semiotics and history: A Marxist approach. *Semiotica* 59 (3/4), 215–244.

Lotman, Ju. M. (1984). O semiosfere. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* 17, 5–23.

Lotman, Ju. M., Uspenskij, B. A., Ivanov, V. V., Toporov, V. N. and Pjatigorskij, A. M. (1973). Tezisy k semiotičeskomu izučeniju kul'tury (v primenenii k slavjanskim kul'turam). In *Semiotyka i struktura tekstu*, 9–32. Warsaw.

Partner, Nancy F. (1986). Daughters of earth/sons of heaven: Signs and things in history. *Semiotica* 59 (3/4), 245–260.

Revzin, I. I. (1971). Sub"ektivnaja pozicija issledovatelja v semiotike. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* 5, 334–344.

Saussure, Ferdinand de (1916). *Cours de linguistique générale.* Paris: Payot.

Schmid, Georg (1986). Präsentation. In *Die Zeichen der Historie: Beiträge zu einer semiologischen Geschichtswissenschaft,* G. Schmid (ed.), 7–28. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau.

—(1991). Semiologie und Historiologie. In *Theoretische und praktische Relevanz der Semiotik,* J. Bernard, W. Enninger, A. Eschbach, and G. Withalm (eds.), 227–242. Vienna: OGS/ISSS.

Simmel, Georg (1916). *Das Problem der historischen Zeit* (= Philosophie Vorträge 12). Berlin: von Reuther and Reichard.

Tynjanov, Ju. N. (1927). O literaturnoj évoljucii. In *Arxaisty i novatory,* 30–47. Moscow: Academia.

Williams, Brooke (1985). What has history to do with semiotics? *Semiotica* 54 (3/4), 267–333.

Živov, V. M. (1979). O vnutrennej i vnešnej pozicii pri izučenii modelirujuščich sistem. *Vtoričnye modelirujuščie sistemy,* 6–13.

Peter Grzybek (b. 1957) is Editor of the Journal *Znak₀log,* which was founded in 1989. His principal research interests include Slavic semiotics, cultural semiotics, psycho- and neuro-semiotics, and semiotics of folklore. Among his publications are *Semiotische Studien zum Sprichwort — Simple Forms Reconsidered I* (ed., 1984), *Semiotische Studien zum Rätsel — Simple Forms Reconsidered II* (ed., 1987), and *Studien zum Zeichenbegriff der sowjetischen Semiotik (Moskauer und Tartuer Schule)* (1989).