On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture*

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There are many ways of defining culture. The difference in the semantic content of the concept *culture* in different historical epochs and among different scholars of our time will not discourage us if we remember that the meaning of the term is derivable from the type of culture: every historically given culture generates some special model of culture peculiar to itself. Therefore, a comparative study of the semantics of the term *culture* over the centuries provides worthwhile material for the construction of typologies.

At the same time, among the variety of definitions one can single out something common to them all that appears to answer to certain features we intuitively attribute to culture in any interpretation of the word. We will consider just two of them here. First, underlying all definitions is the notion that there are certain specific features of a culture. Though trivial, this assertion is not without meaning: from it arises the assertion that culture is never a universal set, but always a subset organized in a specific manner. Culture never encompasses *everything*, but forms instead a marked-off sphere. Culture is understood only as a section, a closed-off area against the background of nonculture. The nature of this opposition may vary: nonculture may appear as not belonging to a particular religion, not having access to some knowledge, or not sharing in some type of life and behavior. But culture will always need such an opposition. Indeed, culture stands out as the marked member of this opposition.

Second, the various ways of delimiting culture from nonculture essentially come down to one thing: against the background of nonculture, culture appears as a *system of signs*. In particular, whether we speak of such features of culture as “being man-made” (as opposed to “being natural”), “being conventional” (as opposed to “being spontaneous” and “being nonconventional”), or as the ability to condense human experience (in opposition to the primordial quality of nature)—in each case, we are dealing with different aspects of the semiotic essence of culture.

It is significant that a change of culture (in particular, during

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epochs of social cataclysms) is usually accompanied by a sharp increase in the degree of semiotic behavior (which may be expressed by the changing of names and designations), and even the fight against the old rituals may itself be ritualized. On the other hand, the introduction of new forms of behavior and the semiotic intensification of old forms can testify to a specific change in the type of culture. Thus, the activities of Peter the Great in Russia largely amount to a struggle with old rituals and symbols, which was expressed in the creation of new signs (for example, the absence of the beard became as mandatory as its presence had been earlier; wearing foreign styled clothes became as indispensable as the wearing of Russian clothes earlier, and so on);² but the Emperor Paul's activity, on the other hand, was expressed in the semiotic intensification of existing forms, in particular, by increasing their symbolic character. (Compare the increase at that time of genealogical symbolism, of the symbolism of parades, of ceremonial language and similar cases and, on the other hand, the fight against certain words which sounded like symbols of a different ideology. Compare also such symbolic acts as the admonition to the deceased, the challenging of princes to a duel, and so on.)

A key question is the relationship of culture to natural language. In the preceding publications of Tartu University (the semiotic series), cultural phenomena were defined as secondary modeling systems, a term which indicated their derivational nature in relation to natural language. Many studies, following the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, emphasized, and examined the influence of language on various manifestations of human culture. Recently Benveniste has emphasized that only natural languages can fulfill a metalinguistic role and that, by virtue of this, they hold a distinct place in the system of human communication.³ More questionable, however, is the author's proposal in the same article to consider only natural languages as strictly semiotic systems, defining all other cultural models as semantic, that is, not possessing their own systematic semiosis but borrowing it from the sphere of natural languages. Even though it is valuable to contrast primary and secondary modeling systems (without such a contrast it is impossible to single out the distinguishing characteristics of each), it would be appropriate to stress here that in their actual historical functioning, languages are inseparable from culture. No language (in the full sense of the word) can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have, at its center, the structure of natural language.
As a methodological abstraction, one may imagine language as an isolated phenomenon. However, in its actual functioning, language is molded into a more general system of culture and, together with it, constitutes a complex whole. The fundamental "task" of culture, as we will try to show, is in structurally organizing the world around man. Culture is the generator of structuredness, and in this way it creates a social sphere around man which, like the biosphere, makes life possible; that is, not organic life, but social life.

But in order for it to fulfill that role, culture must have within itself a structural "diecasting mechanism." It is this function that is performed by natural language. It is natural language that gives the members of a social group their intuitive sense of structuredness that with its transformation of the "open" world of realia into a "closed" world of names, forces people to treat as structures those phenomena whose structuredness, at best, is not apparent. Indeed, in many cases it turns out not to matter whether some meaning-forming principle is a structure, in a strict sense, or not. It is sufficient that the participants in an act of communication should regard it as a structure and use it as such for it to begin to display structurelike qualities. One can well understand how important it is that a system of culture has, at its center, so powerful a source of structuredness as language.

The presumption of structuredness, which has evolved as a result of language intercourse, exerts a powerful organizing force on the entire complex of the means of communication. Thus, the entire system for preserving and communicating human experience is constructed as a concentric system in the center of which are located the most obvious and logical structures, that is, the most structural ones. Nearer to the periphery are found formations whose structuredness is not evident or has not been proved, but which, being included in general sign-communicational situations, function as structures. Such quasi structures occupy a large place in human culture. Moreover, it is precisely the fact of their internal lack of orderedness, their incomplete organization, that ensures for human culture the greater inner capacity and the dynamism not known to more ordered systems.

We understand culture as the nonhereditary memory of the community, a memory expressing itself in a system of constraints and prescriptions. This formulation, if accepted, presupposes the following consequences. First of all, it follows that culture is, by definition, a social phenomenon. This fact does not exclude the possibility of an individual culture in the case where the individual sees himself as a representative of the community or in cases of autocommunication,
where one person fulfills, in time or space, the functions of various members of the community and in fact forms a group. However, the cases of individual cultures are, of necessity, historically secondary.

On the other hand, depending on the limits placed by the researcher on his material, culture may be treated as common to all mankind, or as the culture of a particular area, or of a particular time, or of a particular social group. Furthermore, insofar as culture is memory or, in other words, a record in the memory of what the community has experienced, it is, of necessity, connected to past historical experience. Consequently, at the moment of its appearance, culture cannot be recorded as such, for it is only perceived ex post facto. When people speak of the creation of a new culture, they are inevitably looking ahead; that is, they have in mind that which (they presume) will become a memory from the point of view of the reconstructable future (of course, the correctness of such an assumption will only be shown by the future itself).

Thus, a program (of behavior) appears as the opposite of a system of culture. The program is directed into the future from a point of view of its author; but culture is turned towards the past from the point of view of the realization of such behavior (of the program). It then follows that the difference between a program of behavior and a culture is a functional one: the same text can be one or the other, functioning variously in the general system of historical life of a particular community.

In general, the definition of culture as the memory of a community raises the question about the system of semiotic rules by which human life experience is changed into culture: these rules can, in their own turn, be treated as a program. The very existence of culture implies the construction of a system, of some rules for translating direct experience into text. In order for any historical event to be placed in a specific category, it must first of all be acknowledged as existing; that is, it must be identified with a specific element in the language of the organization which is committing it to memory. Then it has to be evaluated according to all the hierarchic ties of that language. This means that it will be recorded; that is, it will become an element of the text of memory, an element of culture. The implanting of a fact into the collective memory, then, is like a translation from one language into another—in this case, into the “language of culture.”

Culture, as a mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community, raises the specific problem of longevity. It has two aspects: (1) the longevity of the texts of the collective memory and (2) the longevity of the code of the collective memory. In certain cases these two aspects may not be directly related to one another. Thus, for example, superstitions can
be seen as elements of a text of an old culture whose code is lost; that is, as a case where the text outlives the code. For example:

Superstition! a fragment
Of ancient truth. The temple fell;
And posterity could never decipher
The language of its ruins.

[E. A. Baratynsky]

Every culture creates its own model of the length of its existence, of the continuity of its memory. This model corresponds to the concept a given culture has of the maximum span of time practically comprising its "eternity." Insofar as culture acknowledges itself as existing, only identifying itself with the constant norms of its memory, the continuity of memory and the continuity of existence are usually identified.

Characteristically, many cultures do not allow even the possibility of any kind of substantial change in the realization of the rules formulated by it—in other words, the possibility of any kind of reappraisal of its values. Hence, culture very often is not geared to knowledge about the future, the future being envisaged as time come to a stop, as a stretched out "now"; indeed, this is directly connected to the orientation towards the past, which also ensures the necessary stability, one of the conditions for the existence of culture.

The longevity of texts forms a hierarchy within the culture, one usually identified with the hierarchy of values. The texts considered most valuable are those of a maximum longevity from the point of view, and according to the standard, of the culture in question, or panchronic texts (although "shifted" cultural anomalies are also possible whereby the highest value is ascribed to the momentary). This may correspond to the hierarchy of materials upon which the texts are affixed and to the hierarchy of places and of the means of their preservation.

The longevity of the code is determined by the permanence of its basic structural principles and by its inner dynamism—its capacity for change while still preserving the memory of preceding states and, consequently, of the awareness of its own coherence.

Considering culture as the long-term memory of the community, we can distinguish three ways in which it is filled. First, a quantitative increase in the amount of knowledge—filling the various nodes of the culture's hierarchic system with various texts. Second, a redistribution in the structure of the nodes resulting in a change in the very notion of "a fact to be remembered," and the hierarchic appraisal of what has been recorded in the memory; a continuous reorganization of the coding system which, while remaining itself in its own consciousness
and conceiving itself to be continuous, tirelessly reforms separate codes, thus ensuring an increase in the value of the memory by creating "nonactual," yet potentially actualizable, reserves. Third, forgetting. The conversion of a chain of facts into a text is invariably accompanied by selection; that is, by fixing certain events which are translatable into elements of the text and forgetting others, marked as nonessential. In this sense every text furthers not only the remembering process, but forgetting as well. Yet since the selection of memorizable facts is realized every time according to particular semiotic norms of the given culture, one should beware of identifying the events of life with any text, no matter how "truthful" or "artless" or firsthand the text may appear. The text is not reality, but the material for its reconstruction. Therefore, a semiotic analysis of a document should always precede a historical one. Having established the rules for the reconstructing of reality from the text, the researcher will also be able to reckon from the document those elements which, from the point of view of its author, were not "facts" and thus were forgettable, but which might be evaluated quite differently by a historian, for whom, in the light of his own cultural code, they emerge as meaningful events.

However, forgetting takes place in another way as well: culture continually excludes certain texts. The history of the destruction of texts, of the purging of texts from the reserves of the collective memory, proceeds alongside the history of the creation of new texts. Every new movement in art revokes the authority of the texts by which preceding epochs oriented themselves, by transferring them into the category of nontexts, texts of a different level, or by physically destroying them. Culture by its very essence is against forgetting. It overcomes forgetting, turning it into one of the mechanisms of memory.

In the light of the above, one can assume definite limits to the capacity of the collective memory, which determines this exclusion of some texts by others. But on the other hand, because of their semantic incompatibility, the nonexistence of some texts becomes a necessary condition for the existence of others.

Despite their apparent similarity, there is a profound difference between forgetting as an element of memory and forgetting as a means of its destruction. In the latter case there takes place the disintegration of culture as a unified collective personality, a personality possessing continued self-consciousness and accumulated experience.

It is worth recalling that one of the sharpest forms of social struggle in the sphere of culture is the obligatory demand to forget certain aspects of historical experience. Epochs of historical regression (the
The semiotic study of culture does not only consider culture functioning as a system of signs. It is important to emphasize that the very relation of culture to the sign and to signification comprises one of its basic typological features.\(^5\)

First of all, it is relevant whether the relation between expression and content is regarded as the only possible one or as an arbitrary (accidental, conventional) one. In the first case the question, what this or that thing is called, is crucial, and correspondingly, an incorrect designation may come to be identified with a different content (see below). Compare the searches in the Middle Ages for the names of certain hypostases which incidentally became fixed in the Masonic ritual; one should interpret taboos against the uttering of certain names in a similar manner. In the second case the question of designation, and of expression in general, is not an important principle; one can say that expression here appears as an auxiliary and indeed more or less incidental factor with regard to content.

Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish between cultures directed mainly towards expression and those directed chiefly towards content. It is clear that the very fact of emphasis on expression, of strictly ritualized forms of behavior,\(^6\) is usually a consequence either of seeing a one-to-one correlation (rather than an arbitrary one) between the level of expression and the level of content, their inseparability in principle (as is characteristic, in particular, for the ideology of the Middle Ages), or of seeing the influence of expression upon content. (We may note in this respect that, in a sense, symbol and ritual can be regarded as opposite poles. While a symbol usually presupposes an external, relatively arbitrary expression of some content, ritual is capable of forming content and influencing it.) To a culture directed towards expression that is founded on the notion of correct designation and, in particular, correct naming, the entire world can appear as a sort of text consisting of various kinds of signs, where content is predetermined and it is only necessary to know the language; that is, to know the relation between the elements of expression and content. In other words, cognition of the world is
equivalent to philological analysis. But in typologically different cultural models, oriented directly towards content, some degree of freedom is assumed both in the choice of content and in its relation to expression.

Culture can be presented as an aggregate of texts; however, from the point of view of the researcher, it is more exact to consider culture as a mechanism creating an aggregate of texts and texts as the realization of culture. An essential feature for the typology of culture is its self-appraisal in this regard. While it is typical of some cultures to regard themselves as an aggregate of normative texts (take the Domostroy, for example), others model themselves as a system of rules that determine the creation of texts. (In other words, in the first case the rules are defined as the sum of precedents; in the second the precedent exists only where it is described by an appropriate rule.)

Cultures directed primarily towards expression have this conception of themselves as a correct text (or aggregate of texts) whereas cultures directed mainly towards content see themselves as a system of rules. Each type of culture generates its own particular ideal of Book and Manual, including the organization of those texts. Thus, with orientation towards rules, a manual has the appearance of a generative mechanism, while with orientation towards text, one gets the characteristic (question-answer) format of a catechism, and the anthology (book of quotations or selected texts) comes into being.

In contrasting text and rules, as applied to culture, it is also important to keep in mind that, in some cases, the same elements of a culture can serve both functions, that is, both as text and as rules. Thus, for example, taboos which are a component of the general system of a given culture can, on the one hand, be examined as elements (signs) of the text reflecting the moral experience of the community and, on the other hand, be regarded as an aggregate of magical rules prescribing specific behavior.

The opposition we have formulated between a system of rules and an aggregate of texts can be illustrated by taking literature which is a subsystem of the whole culture.

A clear example of a system explicitly oriented towards rules will be European Neo-Classicism. Although historically the theory of Neo-Classicism was created as a generalization from a particular artistic experience, the picture was somewhat different as seen from within the theory itself: the theoretical models were thought of as eternal and as preceding the actual act of creation. In art, only those texts considered "correct," that is, corresponding to the rules, were recognized as texts, i.e., having significance. It is especially interesting, in light of the above, to see what Boileau, for example, considers as poor works of art. The bad in art is whatever breaks the
rules. But even the violation of the rules can be described, in Boileau's opinion, as following certain "incorrect" rules. Therefore, "bad" texts can be classified; any unsatisfactory work of art serves as an example of some typical violation. It is no accident that, for Boileau, the "incorrect" world of art consists of the same elements as the correct but that the difference lies in the system for combining them, prohibited in "good" art.

Another characteristic of this type of culture is the fact that the creator of the rules stands higher in the hierarchy than the creator of the texts. Thus, for example, within the system of Neo-Classicism the critic commands markedly more respect than the writer.

As a contrasting example, one can point to the culture of European Realism of the nineteenth century. The artistic texts that formed part of it were fulfilling their social function directly and did not need an obligatory translation into a metalanguage of theory. The theorist constructed his apparatus following after art. In practice, for example, in Russia after Belinsky, criticism played a most active and independent role. But it is all the more evident that, in assessing his own role, Belinsky, for example, gave priority to Gogol, seeing himself as a mere interpreter.

Although the rules are, in both cases, a necessary minimal condition for the creation of culture, the degree to which they enter into its self-appraisal will vary. This can be compared to the teaching of language as a system of grammatical rules or as a set of usages.9

According to the distinction formulated above, culture can be opposed both to nonculture and to anticulture. Within the conditions of a culture chiefly oriented towards content and represented as a system of rules, the basic opposition is "organized—nonorganized" (and this opposition can be realized in particular cases as "cosmos—chaos," "ectropy—entropy," "culture—nature," and so on). But within the conditions of a culture oriented primarily towards expression and represented as an aggregate of normative texts, the basic opposition will be "correct—incorrect," i.e., wrong (precisely "incorrect" and not "noncorrect": this opposition may approximate, even coincide with, the opposition "true—false"). In the latter case, culture is opposed not to chaos (entropy) but to a system preceded by a negative sign. Generally, of course, when within a culture directed towards a one-to-one correspondence between expression and content and primarily oriented towards expression, the world appears as a text, and the question, what is this or that called, becomes of principal importance. An incorrect designation can be identified with a different content (but not with none!), that is, with different information and not with a distortion in the information. Thus, for
example, the Russian Church Slavonic word *aggel* [angel], written in accordance with the Greek spelling of the corresponding word, was to be read as *angel*; but as it was actually spelled [*angel*], the word was understood in Medieval Russia to signify the devil.\textsuperscript{10} Analogously, when, as a result of Patriarch Nikon's reforms, the spelling of Christ's name *Isus* was changed to *Iisus*, the new form was taken to be the name of a different being: not Christ but the Antichrist.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, the distortion of the word *Bog* [God] in the word *spasibo* [thank you] (from *spasi Bog* [save us God]) may, even now, be understood by the Old-Believers as the name of a pagan god, so that the very word *spasibo* is understood as an appeal to the Antichrist (in its place the words *spasi Gospodi* [save us Lord] are usually used by the "priestless" Old-Believers and *spasi Khristos* [save us Christ] by the Old-Believers with priests).\textsuperscript{12} The point to note here is that everything opposed to culture (in this case a religious culture) also has to have its own special expression, but one that is false (incorrect). In other words, anticulture is constructed here isomorphically to culture, in its own image: it too is understood as a sign system having its own expression. One can say that anticulture is perceived as culture with a negative sign, as a mirror image of culture (where the ties are not broken but are replaced by their opposites). In this kind of situation any other culture with different expressions and ties is seen, from the point of view of the given culture, as anticulture.

This is the source of the natural tendency to interpret all "incorrect" cultures, those opposed to the given ("correct") one, as a unified system. Thus, in "The Song of Roland" [*La Chanson de Roland*], Marsiliun turns out to be a pagan, an atheist, a Mohammedan, and a worshipper of Apollo all at the same time:

\begin{verbatim}
Li reis Marsilie la tient, ki Deu nen aimet.
Mahumet sert e Apollin recleimet: . . .\textsuperscript{13}
\end{verbatim}

In the Muscovite "Tale of the Defeat of Mamay," Mamay is described as follows: "Being a Hellene by his faith, a worshipper of idols, an iconoclast, and a wicked punisher of Christians."\textsuperscript{14} Examples of this kind would not be difficult to multiply.

Also significant in this regard was the antipathy in pre-Petrine Russia to foreign languages, which were viewed as means for expressing alien cultures. Note particularly the special works against Latin and Latinate forms which were identified with Catholic thought and, more widely, with Catholic culture.\textsuperscript{15} Typically, when Patriarch Makariy of Antioch arrived in Moscow in the middle of the seventeenth century, he was especially warned of "talking in Turkish." "God forbid," as Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich put it, "that such a holy man should sully his lips and tongue with that impure
language.”\textsuperscript{16} In these words we hear the conviction, so typical for that time, that it is impossible to use alien means of expression and yet stay within one’s own ideology (in particular, one could not speak in such an “un-Orthodox” language as Turkish, seen as the means of expression for Mohammedanism, or Latin, seen as the means of expression for Catholicism, and still remain pure in relation to Orthodoxy).

Equally revealing, on the other hand, is the attempt to see all “Orthodox” languages as one language. Thus, during that same period Russian scribes could speak of a single “Helleno-Slavic” language (a grammar of it was even published)\textsuperscript{17} and could describe the Slavic languages according to the exact patterns of Greek grammar, seeking in it, indeed, an expression of those grammatical categories which exist only in Greek.

Correspondingly, a culture chiefly directed towards content, one opposed to entropy (chaos), where the main opposition will be “organized–nonorganized,” always conceives itself as an active principle which must expand and sees nonculture as the sphere for its potential expansion. On the other hand, in a culture directed mainly towards expression, where the basic opposition is between “correct” and “incorrect,” there may be no attempt whatsoever to expand (on the contrary, the culture may strive to limit itself to its own boundaries, to separate itself from all that is opposed to it). Nonculture is here identified with anticulture and therefore, according to its very essence, cannot be a potential area for the expansion of culture.

Examples of how an orientation towards expression and a high degree of ritualization bring with them the tendency to shut oneself off might be Medieval China or the idea “Moscow, the Third Rome.” These cases are marked by an urge towards preservation rather than expansion of their system, esoterism, and a lack of missionary zeal.

In one type of culture, knowledge spreads by its expansion into areas not yet known to it, but in the opposite type of culture, the spread of knowledge is possible only as a triumph over falsehood. Naturally, the concept of science, in the modern sense of the word, is connected with culture of the first type. In the second type of culture, science is not opposed so markedly to art, religion, and so on. It is interesting that the opposition of science and art, which is so typical of our time and which sometimes rises to antagonistic levels, only became possible within the conditions of the new, post-Renaissance European culture which had freed itself from the outlook of the Middle Ages and which stood to a great degree in opposition to that outlook (let us remember that the very concept “fine arts,” as opposed to science, only appears in the eighteenth century).\textsuperscript{18}
This brings to mind the distinction between the Manichaeistic and Augustinian concepts of the devil in Norbert Wiener's brilliant interpretation. According to the Manichaeistic concept, the devil is an essence having evil intentions, that is, consciously and with purpose turning his power against man; but according to the Augustinian concept, the devil is a blind force, an entropy, which is only objectively directed against man because of man's weakness and ignorance. If one accepts a broad enough sense of the term devil as that which is opposed to culture (once again, in the broad sense of the word), then it is evident that the difference between the Manichaeistic and the Augustinian approach corresponds to the difference between the two types of cultures which we spoke of earlier.

The opposition "organized—nonorganized" can appear within the very mechanism of culture as well. As we have already stated, the hierarchic structure of culture is constructed as a combination of highly organized systems and of those allowing various degrees of disorganization to the point where, in order to reveal their structure, they must continually be contrasted with the former. If the nuclear structure of a culture mechanism is an ideal semiotic system with structural links realized at all levels (or more correctly, the nearest approximation of such an ideal possible in particular historic situations), then the formations around it are constructed so as to break the various links of such a structure and to require continual comparison with the nucleus of the culture.

This kind of "incompleteness," the incomplete regulatedness of culture as a unified semiotic system, is not a shortcoming but a condition for its normal functioning. The point is that the very function of the cultural assimilation of the world implies assigning to the world a systematic quality. In some cases, as for example in the scientific cognition of the world, the point will be to reveal the system concealed in the object; in others—for example, in education, missionary work, or propaganda—it will be to impart to an unorganized object certain principles of organization. But in order to fulfill this role, culture, and especially its central coding mechanism, must possess certain qualities. Among these, two are essential for our present purposes:

First, it should have a high degree of modeling potential, that is, either the ability to describe as wide a range of objects as possible, which would include as many as yet unknown objects as possible, this being the optimal requirement for cognitive models, or it should have the capability to declare those objects which it cannot be used to describe as nonexistent.
Second, its systematic nature should be acknowledged by the community using it as an instrument for assigning system to what is amorphous. Therefore, the tendency of sign systems to become automatized represents an ever present inner foe of culture against which it continually struggles.

The conflict between the continual attempt to take the systematic to its limits and the continual opposition to the automatization produced thereby within the structure is organically present in every living culture.

This brings us to a problem of primary importance: why is human culture a dynamic system? Why are the semiotic systems that form human culture, with the exception of certain obviously local or secondary artificial languages, subject to an obligatory law of evolution? The fact that artificial languages exist convincingly bears witness to the possibility of the existence and successful functioning, within specific limits, of nondeveloping systems. Why then can there exist a unified, nondeveloping language of road signals, while natural language necessarily has a history without which its (real, not theoretical) synchronic functioning is impossible? After all, the existence of diachrony itself is not only not among the minimum conditions necessary for the appearance of semiotic systems but presents the researcher with a theoretical riddle and a practical problem.

The dynamism of the semiotic components of culture is evidently connected with the dynamism of the social life of human society. However, this connection is by itself fairly complicated because we can still ask: "But why must human society be dynamic?" Man is included in a more mobile world than all the rest of nature, and in a very basic way he regards the very notion of movement differently. All organic creatures strive to stabilize their surroundings, all their changeability is a striving for self-preservation without change in a world that is liable to change and contrary to their interests; for man the changeability of his surroundings is a normal condition of living; for him the norm is life within changing conditions, a change in the way of life. It is no accident that from the point of view of nature man appears as a destroyer. But it is precisely culture, in the broad sense, that distinguishes human society from nonhuman societies. Thus it follows that dynamism is not an outer quality of culture imposed on it by the arbitrariness of external causes but is inseparable from it.

It is another matter that the dynamism of culture is not always acknowledged by its members. As has already been stated, the striving to perpetuate every contemporary (synchronic) condition is typical
for many cultures, and the possibility of any substantial change of the rules in force may not be allowed for at all (along with a typical prohibition against their being understood as relative). This is understandable where we are concerned not with observers but with participants, with those within the particular culture: one can only speak of the dynamism of culture from the perspective of an investigator (observer) and not from that of a participant.

On the other hand, the process of gradual change of a culture may not be perceived as continuous, and so the various stages of the process can be taken for different cultures contrasting with one another. (It is exactly in this fashion that language continually changes, but the continuity of this process is not perceived directly by the users of the language themselves since linguistic changes do not occur within a single generation but through the transmission of the language from one generation to the next. In this way, the users of the language tend to see language change as a discrete process; language for them is not an uninterrupted continuum but breaks down into separate strata, the differences between which then acquire *stylistic* meaning.)

The question whether dynamism, the constant need for self-regeneration, is an inner quality of culture or merely the result of the disturbing influence of the material conditions of man's existence on the system of his ideals cannot be resolved simply. Doubtless both processes are relevant.

On the one hand, changes in a culture system are connected with the accumulation of information by the human community and with the inclusion of science into culture as a relatively autonomous system with its own initiatives. Science is enriched not only by positive knowledge but also by developing modeling complexes. The pursuit of inner unification, which is one of the basic tendencies of culture (as we will see below), causes a constant transfer of purely scientific models into the general field of ideas and attempts to ascribe to them the features of the culture as a whole. Therefore, cognition with its initiating tendency and dynamic character will naturally influence the form of the model of the culture.

On the other hand, not everything within the dynamics of semiotic systems can be explained in this manner. It would be difficult to interpret the dynamics of the phonological or grammatical side of language in this way. Whereas the necessity for change in the lexical system can be explained by the need for a different concept of the world to be reflected in the language, phonological change is an immanent law of the system itself. Or, to take another revealing example, the system of *fashion* can be studied in connection with
various external social processes: from the laws of industrial manufacture to social-aesthetic ideals. However, at the same time, fashion is clearly a synchronically closed system with the specific quality that it undergoes change. Fashion is different from a norm in that it regulates a system by directing it not towards permanence but towards change. In so doing, fashion always tries to become the norm, but these concepts are by their very nature in opposition, for hardly does fashion achieve a relative stability approximating the condition of a norm than it quickly seeks to abandon it. The motives for the change in fashion, as a rule, remain incomprehensible to the community regulated by its rules. This nonmotivation of fashion forces one to assume that we are dealing here with pure change; and it is precisely the nonmotivation of change (compare Nekrasov's "fickle fashion" [izmenchivaja moda]) that defines the specific social function of fashion. It was no accident that made the forgotten eighteenth-century writer N. Strakhov, the author of A Correspondence of Fashion, Containing Letters from Sleeveless Modes, Meditations by Inanimate Costumes, Conversations among Speechless Bonnets, the Sentiments of Furnishings, Carriages, Notebooks, Buttons and Ancient Shirt-Fronts, Caftans, Housecoats, Jackets, etc.: A Moral and Critical Composition wherein Are Revealed in Their True Light the Manners, Way of Life and Diverse Comical and Imposing Scenes of a Fashionable Age, choose Impermanence as his leading Fashion correspondent, while among the "Rules of Fashion" in his book we read: "We hereby decree that no color of cloth should remain in use for more than one year."21 It is quite obvious that the change in the color of cloth is not dictated by any urge to approximate some general ideal of truth, goodness, beauty, or appropriateness. One color is exchanged for another simply because the one was old and the other new. We are dealing here with a tendency at its purest, one which in a more disguised form appears widely in human culture.

Thus, for example, in Russia in the beginning of the eighteenth century a change took place in the entire system of the cultural life of the ruling social stratum, a change which allowed people of that epoch to call themselves with a certain pride "new." Kantemir wrote of the positive hero of his epoch:

Wise is he that lets not fall Peter's decrees
By which we have become at once a people new.22

In this, as in thousands of other cases, one could point out many interesting reasons for the transformations, dictated by some correlation with other structural orders. However, what is equally
clear is that the need for novelty, for systematic change, is an equally perceptible stimulus for change. Wherein lie the roots of this need? The question could be posed more generally as: “Why does mankind, as distinct from all other creatures of the world, have a history?” One can assume here that mankind lived through a long prehistoric period in which duration of time played no part, for there was no development and only at a specific moment did there occur that break which gave birth to a dynamic structure and initiated the history of mankind.

At present the most likely answer to this question appears to be as follows: at a certain moment, the moment, in fact, from which we can begin to speak of culture, man linked his existence to a continually expanding nonhereditary memory; he became a receiver of information (during the prehistoric period he was merely a carrier of constant and genetically given information). But this required the continual actualization of a coding system which had to be constantly present in the consciousness of both the addressee and the addressee as a deautomatized system. The latter made it possible for a particular mechanism to emerge which, on the one hand, would exhibit particular homeostatic functions to such a degree as to preserve the unity of the memory, to remain the same, and on the other, would continually renew itself, deautomatizing itself at every phase and thereby maximizing its ability to absorb information. The necessity for continual self-renewal, to become different and yet remain the same, constitutes one of the chief working mechanisms of culture.

The reciprocal tension between these tendencies justifies the static and the dynamic model of culture, the models being defined by the initial axioms of description.

Alongside this opposition within the system of culture of the old and the new, the unchangeable and the mobile, there is yet another basic opposition, the antithesis of unity and multiplicity. We have already noted that the heterogeneity of the inner organization is a law for the existence of culture. The presence of differently organized structures, and various degrees of organization, is an essential condition for the functioning of the mechanism of culture. We cannot name a single culture in history in which all levels and subsystems were organized on a strictly uniform structural base and synchronized in their historical dynamism. As a result of this need for structural variety, every culture singles out special spheres, differently organized, which are valued very highly in an axiological sense although they are outside the general system of organization. Such were the monastery in the medieval world, poetry within the concepts of Romanticism, the
world of gypsies, the backstage in the culture of St. Petersburg during the nineteenth century, and many other examples of little islands of "different" organization in the general body of culture, whose aim was to increase the structural variety and to overcome the entropy of structural automatization. Such were the temporary visits by a member of any cultural group into a different social structure—officials entering an artistic environment, landowners coming into Moscow for the winter, townspeople going into the country for the summer, Russian nobles in Paris or Karlsbad. And this, as M. M. Bakhtin has shown, was the function of the carnival in the highly normative life of the Middle Ages.  

And yet culture requires unity. In order to fulfill its social function, culture has to appear as a structure subject to unified constructive principles. This unity comes about in the following manner: at a specific stage in the development of culture, there comes a moment when it becomes conscious of itself, when it creates a model of itself. The model defines the unified, the artificially schematized image, that is raised to the level of a structural unity. When imposed onto the reality of this or that culture, it exerts a powerful regulating influence, preordaining the construction of culture, introducing order, and eliminating contradiction. The error of many literary histories is that the self-interpreting models of cultures such as "the concept of Classicism in the works of seventeenth/eighteenth-century theoreticians" or "the concept of Romanticism in the works of the Romantics," which form a special stratum in the system of a culture's evolution, are studied on the same level as the facts of particular writers' works; this is a logical error.

The assertions "everything is different and cannot be described by a single general schema" and "everything is the same and we have to deal with never-ending variations of an invariant model" continually reappear in various guises in the history of culture, from Ecclesiastes and the dialecticians of antiquity to our own day. And this is no accident; they describe various aspects of a single cultural mechanism, and in their reciprocal tension they are part of the essence of culture.

These appear to us to be the basic features of that complicated semiotic system which we define as culture. Its function is to serve as a memory; its basic feature is self-accumulation. At the dawn of European civilization Heraclitus wrote: "Essential to the psyche is the self-generating logos." He grasped the basic characteristic of culture.

Some of our observations may be generalized as follows: structure, in nonsemiotic systems (those outside the complex "society-communi-
cation-culture"), presupposes some constructive principle of inter-
connection between elements. It is precisely the realization of this
principle that allows one to speak of the given phenomenon as
structural. Therefore, once a phenomenon exists, it has no alterna-
tive within the limits of its qualitative definition. A phenomenon may
have structure, that is, be itself, or not have structure and not be
itself. There are no other possibilities. Hence the fact that structure
in nonsemiotic systems can only bear a fixed quantity of information.

The semiotic mechanism of culture created by mankind is
constructed according to a different principle: opposed and
reciprocally alternating structural principles are essential. Their
relation to one another, the disposition of particular elements in the
structural field which emerges here, creates that structural
regulatedness which allows the system to preserve information. It is
crucial here, however, that it is not actually any specific alternatives
whose number is finite and constant for the given system that are
given, but the very principle of alternation itself, and that all the actual
oppositions of the given structure are merely interpretations of this
principle on a certain level. As a result, any pair of elements, of local
regularities, of particular or general structures, or even of whole
semiotic systems acquires the significance of being alternatives and
forms a structural field which may be filled with information. Hence
the system with its ever-increasing information potential.

This snowballing of culture does not exclude the fact that its
separate components, sometimes very essential ones, appear
stabilized. Thus, for example, the dynamics of natural languages is
much slower than the development of other semiotic systems so that
compared with any one of them, languages appear as synchronically
stabilized systems. Yet culture is able to "squeeze out" information
even from this by creating the structural pair "static—dynamic."

The snowballing of culture gave mankind an advantage over all
other living beings that exist in conditions where the volume of
information is stable. However, this process has a darker side as well:
culture devours resources just as greedily as industry and just as
readily destroys its environment. The pace of its development is by no
means always dictated by man’s real needs; there comes into play the
inner logic of accelerating change in the working mechanisms of
information. In many fields (scientific information, art, information
for the masses) crises come about which may bring whole spheres won
over by culture to the brink of expulsion from the system of the social
memory.

"The self-generating logos" has always been valued positively. Now
it is evident that a mechanism has unavoidably come into being which,
by its complexity and rate of growth, can smother that very logos.
ON THE SEMIOTIC MECHANISM OF CULTURE

Culture doubtlessly still has many reserves. But for them to be utilized, we need a much clearer notion of its inner workings than we have available at present.

As already noted, language carries out a specific communicative function within which it may be studied as an isolated functioning system, but in the system of culture, language has another role: it provides the collective with a presumption of communicability.

Language structure is abstracted from the material of languages; it becomes independent and is transferred to an ever-increasing range of phenomena which begin to behave in the system of human communication as language and thus become elements of culture. Any reality drawn into the sphere of culture begins to function as a sign. But if it already has a sign character (for any quasi sign of this kind is, in a social sense, undoubtedly a reality), then it becomes a sign of a sign. The presumption of language, applied to amorphous material, changes it into language and a language system and generates metalingual phenomena. Thus the twentieth century has produced not only metalanguages of science, but a metaliterature and metapainting (painting about painting) as well, and apparently is creating a metaculture, an all-encompassing metalingual system of a secondary order. Just as scientific metalanguage is not concerned with solving factual problems of a particular science, but has its own aims, so contemporary "metanovels," "metapaintings," and "metacinematography" stand logically on a different hierarchic level than the corresponding first-order phenomena and pursue different ends. Looked at together, they do indeed seem as strange as a logical problem in engineering.

The possibility of self-reduplication of metalanguage formations on an unlimited number of levels, along with the introduction of ever-new objects into the sphere of communication, forms culture's reserve in information.

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(Translated by George Mihaychuk)

NOTES


2 Compare the special Edicts of Peter on the forms of clothing made mandatory. Thus, in 1700, it was ordered to wear clothes of a Hungarian pattern; in 1701, of a German pattern; in 1702, on celebration days, French caftans. See Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov [The complete collection of laws], statutes 1741, 1898, and 1999, according to which, in 1714, any Petersburg merchant who sold Russian clothes of a nondecreed pattern was ordered to be whipped and sentenced to hard labor; and, in 1715, it was decreed to sentence anyone dealing in nails for the shoeing of boots and shoes to hard labor (statutes 2874 and 2929). Compare, on the other hand, the protests against foreign clothing both during the pre-Petrine period and among the Old-Believers who were the carriers of pre-Petrine culture. The Old-Believers, even up to our times, keep the eighteenth-century pattern of clothing and wear it for church services; their funeral clothing appears even more archaic (see the article by N. P. Grinkova on clothing in Bukhtarminskie staroobryadtsy [The Old-Believers of Bukhtarma] [Leningrad, 1930]). It is not difficult to see that the very nature of the relation to the sign and the general level of the semiotic aspect of culture prior to Peter and during his reign, in the given case, remain one and the same.


4 Thus, for example, the structuredness of history constitutes the initial axiom of our approach; otherwise there is no possibility of accumulating historical knowledge. However, this idea cannot be proved or disproved by evidence, as world history is incomplete and we are submerged in it.

5 Compare the remarks on the connection between cultural evolution and the change in relation to the sign in Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses, une archéologie du savoir (Paris, 1966).

6 This feature becomes readily apparent in the paradoxical situation where adherence to specific restrictions and requirements comes into conflict with the content which, in fact, produced them. “We kiss thy shackles as those of a saint, but we cannot be helpful to thee,” wrote the head of the Russian Church, Metropolitan Makariy, sending his blessings to Maksim Grek, who was languishing in captivity (quoted by A. I. Ivanov, Literaturnoe nasledie Maksima Greka [The literary heritage of Maksim the Greek] [Leningrad, 1969], p. 170). Even the holiness of Maksim Grek, admitted by Makariy, and his respect for him cannot bring him to ease the lot of the prisoner; the signs are not subordinate to him. (It makes sense to assume that the head of the Russian Church, Makariy, had in mind not his helplessness in the face of some conditions brought in from outside, but the inner impossibility of transgressing the decision of the sobor [church]. His disagreement with the content of the decision did not lower, in his eyes, the authority of the decision as such.)

7 Compare the concept found in various cultures, but most of all in the Middle Ages, of a book as a symbol of the world (or as a model of the world). See E. R. Curtius, “Das Buch als Symbol,” in Europaische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter, 2nd ed. (Bern, 1954); D. Chizhevsky, “Das Buch als Symbol des Kosmos,” in Aus zwei Welten: Beiträge zur Geschichte der slavisch-wettischen literarischen Beziehungen (s-Gravenhage, 1956); P. N. Berkov, “Kniga v poezii Simeona Polotskogo” [The book in the poetry of Simeon Polotsky], in Literatura i obschestvennaya myst drevney Rus [The literature and social thought of Old Rus’]. Trudy otdela drevnerusskoy literatury Instituta russkoy literatury AN SSSR [Papers of the department of Old Russian Literature of the Institute of Russian Literature AN SSSR], XXIV (Leningrad, 1969); Yu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky, “Introduzione,” in Ricerche Semiotiche (Turin, 1973), pp. xiv-xv. Compare also the role of the alphabet in the conceptions of the architectonics of the universe in F. Dornseiff, “Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie,” Etoxenia, 7 (1922), 33 (see in
particular, the remarks on the coincidence of the seven Ionic vowels with the seven planets).

Characteristically, in connection with the above, the Skoptsy sectarian called the Virgin Mary “the living book”; perhaps one can see here the genetic tie with the widespread identification among the Orthodox retaining its Byzantine roots, of “Wisdom,” that is, of Sophia with the Virgin Mary (see on the question of this identification Uspensky, *Iz istorii russkikh kanonicheskikh imen* [From the history of Russian canonical names] [Moscow, 1969], pp. 48-49).

8 [Sixteenth-century Russian book of religious, social, and domestic precepts. Tr.]

9 In connection with this opposition there are various modes of “teaching” culture which we will not consider in detail here since they are the subject of another article (Lotman, “Problema obuchenia kulture kak e c tipologicheskaia kharakteristika” [The problem of teaching a culture as its typological characteristics], *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* [Papers on sign systems], V [Tartu, 1971]).


12 There is a legend on this theme, apparently not recorded anywhere, where it is said that the phrase *spasi, Ba!* (going back to the pronunciation of the word *spasibo* with *akanye*, i.e., change of unstressed *o* into *a* [save us *Bâ*]) was shouted by the pagans in Kiev to the pagan idol, floating down the Dnieper, which had been overthrown by St. Vladimir. The very tendency to identify the pagan god with the Antichrist (Satan), that is, incorporating it into the system of Christian ideology, is very characteristic for the type of culture being examined. See, for example, the identification of the pagan Volos-Veles with the demon, who, in other cases, could be identified with St. Vlasiy (Vyach. Vs. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, “K rekonstruktsii obraza Velesa-Volosa kak protivnika gromoverzhtsa” [Towards a reconstruction of the image of Veles-Volos as an opponent of the thunderer], in *Tezisy dokladov IV Letney shkoly po vtorichnym modeliruyushchim sistemam* [Theses of papers at the fourth summer school on secondary modeling systems] [Tartu, 1970], p. 48); also compare the remark further in this paper about an analogous concept of Apollo. It is characteristic that the eighteenth-century Old-Believers’ authority, Feodosiy Vasil’ev, called the devil “wicked leader, unholy lamb,” explaining with reference to St. Hyppolitus: “In everything the deceiver wishes to resemble Christ, the Son of God: Christ the lion, the lion Anti-Christ; there appeared Christ the lamb, there appears too the Anti-Christ as a lamb” (see P. S. Smirnov, “Perepis’ raskol’nikh deyateley nach. XVIII v.” [The correspondence of the leaders of the schism in the beginning of the eighteenth century], *Khristianskoye chtenie* [Christian readings], No. 1 [1909], pp. 48-55).

Inasmuch as in a culture of the kind existing in the Middle Ages there is a given sum of correct texts and a notion of the mirror-image correspondence of the correct and the incorrect, the negative texts may be constructed from the sacral ones as a result of applying systems of antithetical exchanges to them. A striking example of this is the exchange in the Russian admonition of the correct designation *rab bozhi?* [servant of God] for a “black” one, *par bozhiv*, where *par* is the result of a backward (mirrored) reading [char] which is the actual pronunciation of the word *rab* (with the change of a voiced consonant into a corresponding voiceless one in the final position). See A. M. Astakhova, “Zaogovornoe iskusstvo na reke Pinege” [Admonitional art on the river Pineg], in *Krest’ yanskoe iskusstvo SSSR* [Peasant art of the USSR]. II (Leningrad, 1928), 50-52, 68.

13 “La Chanson de Roland.” in Henri Clouard and Robert Leggewie, eds., *Anthologie de la litterature francaise* (New York, 1960), I, 10: “King Marsiliun holds it, who does not love God; he serves Mahomet and confesses Apollin.”
For a number of texts the identification of Apollo with the devil can be explained, besides the general considerations just given, by the identification of the pagan god with the reference to Satan in Revelation 9:11 as “Apollion.”


15 See V. V. Vinogradov, *Ocherki po istorii russkogo literaturnogo yazyka XVII-XIX vv.* [Essays on the history of the Russian literary language of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries] (Moscow, 1938), p. 9; Uspeensky, “Vliyanie yazyka na religioznoe soznanie” [The influence of language on religious consciousness], in *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, IV (Tartu, 1969), 164-65. See also the texts edited by M. Smentsovsky, *Bra'ya Likhudy* [The Likhud brothers] (St. Petersburg, 1899) (appendices); N. F. Kanterev, “O greko-latinskikh shkolakh v Moskve v XVII veke do otkrytiya Slavyno-greko-latinskoy Akademii” [On the Greco-Latin schools in Moscow in the seventeenth century up to the opening of the Slavo-Greco-Latin Academy], in *Godichnyy akt v Moskovskoy Dukhovnoy Akademii l-go oktyabrya 1889 goda* [Yearly act of the Moscow Religious Academy of the first of October 1889] (Moscow, 1889). Even Patriarch Nikon in his polemic with the (Orthodox) Metropolitan Paisiy of Gaza is able to exclaim in answer to the latter’s reply in Latin: “O cunning slave, from thine own lips I judge thee not to be an Orthodox since you have addressed us basely in the Latin tongue” (N. Gibbenet, *Isotoricheskoe issledovanie dela patriarkha Nikona* [A historical investigation concerning the case of Patriarch Nikon], Pt. 2 [St. Petersburg, 1884], p. 61).

16 See Pavel Alepysky, *Puteshestvie Antiohiyskogo patriarkha Makariya v Rossiyu v polovine XVII v.* [The journey to Russia of Patriarch Makariy of Antioch in the middle of the seventeenth century], tr. from Arabic by G. Murkos (Moscow, 1898), pp. 20-21.

17 See *Адеклоротис Grammatika dobroglagolivago ellino-slovenskago yazyka* [A grammar of well-spoken Helleno-Slavic] (L’vov, 1591).

18 See in this regard the observations on the influence of Galileo’s aesthetic views on his scholarship in Erwin Panofsky, “Galile: nauka i iskusstvo (esteticheskie vzglyady i nauchnaya mys')” [Galileo: science and art (esthetic opinions and scientific thought)], in *U istokov klassicheskoy nauki* [Among the sources of classical science] (Moscow, 1968), pp. 26-28. Compare Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts* (Hague, 1954), and the remarks on the meaning of artistic form for Galileo in accounting for his scientific conclusions in L. Olyshki, *Geschichte der neusprachlichen wissenschaftlichen Literatur*, Vol. III of *Galilei und seine Zeit* (Halle, 1927), where Olyshki writes: “By means of adapting expression to content, the latter acquires an obligatory and thus artistic form. Poetry and science are for Galileo the spheres which give shape to the world. The problem of content and the problem of form coincide for him.”


21 *Perepiska Mody, . . .* (Moscow, 1791), p. 235.

22 *Satiry i drugie stikhovorcheskie sochineniya knyazya Antiokha Kantemira* [Satires and other verse compositions of Prince Antiokh Kantemir] (St. Petersburg, 1762), p. 32.

23 See M. M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Frantsiya Rable i narodnaya kultura srednevekov'ya i Renessansa* [The works of François Rabelais and the folk culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance] (Moscow, 1965).

24 Heraclitus, fragments cited according to *Antichnye filosofy*. *Svidetel'stva, fragmenty, teksty* [Philosophers of antiquity: certificates, fragments, texts], compiled by A. A. Avitis’yan (Kiev, 1955), p. 27.