

# The Moscow–Tartu Semiotic School and Soviet Art History

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**Abstract:** Although the problems of art history did not form the core of the Moscow–Tartu semiotic school's interests, its members often turned to the material of visual art within the framework of general and specific studies of sign systems. In turn, Soviet art history in general did not show interest in semiotics. Meanwhile, the selection of problems and the approach to them in art history (mainly of the Moscow school) indicated that the reflections of art historians and philologists starting from a certain time (in the late 1960s and into the 1970s) began to develop in parallel veins. The present article provides an overview of the main problems of visual art in the works of representatives of the Moscow–Tartu school (Lotman, Uspenskij, Ivanov, Toporov and others), as well as of the adepts of semiotics from the side of art history (Paperny, Daniel, Zlydneva). In addition, the article shows how despite not accepting the semiotic mode of thinking, in their texts art historians approached the semiotic problematics of art raised by philologists (in particular, interest in the problem of the border-zone and marginalia, correlation between a word and an image in visual art, and the poetics of the historical avant-garde, etc.). This antinomic (non-)meeting of semiotics and art history in the realm of Soviet humanities in the 1970s can serve as the manifestation of the power of the unified scientific episteme of the era.

**Keywords:** Moscow–Tartu semiotic school, art history, border-zone, visual semiotics.

Although issues of art history were not at the centre of attention of the Moscow–Tartu semiotic school, the phenomenon of visibility was multifacetedly and considered within the framework of the study of the various sign systems (including natural language). As the field of interest of the school's participants expanded towards the end of the 1970s, the problematics of visual art increasingly penetrated research on semiotics. Briefly summarising the general outlook, we can identify two main strategies in the treatment of art by philologists and semioticians: firstly, the study of art by means of direct or indirect projection of the laws of natural language onto the universal foundations of the construction of artistic representation, and secondly structural-typological analysis of art in the context of culture as a whole. Both directions of research, often interrelated, were dominated by an approach to visibility that was in accordance with the principles of discrete systems, in connection with which the problems of syntactics – boundary (regular field, frame/framing, etc.), semantic-syntactic invariant, archaic stereotypes in the image – came to the fore. The linguistic 'pole' was represented by Yury Lekomtsev, who explored the possibilities of applying glossematics to the analysis of the structure of the visual sign, and to a certain extent by the works of Vyacheslav Ivanov, who was particularly interested in the neurophysiological aspect of the functioning of the visual image, a sub-species of the work of the hemispheres of the human brain and a related principle to the binary structure of the text (including visual text). Vladimir Toporov put forward the definition of the boundary as the main sign of the formation of the symbolic field of the image, seeing proto-art as a trigger for culture. General and specific problems of the boundary of art (mainly referring to icons) – internal and external frames of composition, the viewpoint of the viewer and the artist as narrator, etc. – were the main subject of Boris Uspenskij's studies, and they largely influenced the formation of the Canadian and Italian schools of visual semiotics. Finally, the interspecies, cross-genre mechanisms of the visual text as a sign system and the conditions of its existence in the *semiosphere* were the subject of scientific comprehension by Juri Lotman. He touched upon various art-related subjects with a wide interdisciplinary approach, for example on issues of the portrait, still life, and folk pictures in the context of culture. Thus, the philologists' view of works of fine art was headed by the issue of the boundary, which was defined by the approach to the image as a sign system of discrete type and was mainly regarded in the aspect of synchrony.

It is easy to trace the influence of the legacy of the Russian Formal School of the 1920s and the phenomenology of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKHN) (1921–1929) in philologists' interest in representationalism: for example, the outstanding linguist Roman Jakobson came out of the milieu of futurist poets, just as semiotics grew out of the artistic experimentation of the avant-garde. It is not by chance that already in the 1980s Viktor Grigoriev, who was one of the founders of the Moscow school of linguopoetics, actively participated in art history conferences and liked to begin a talk with an exhortation from Velimir Khlebnikov: "I want a word to boldly follow a painting".

The Soviet art history of the late 1960s and early 1980s, i.e. the time when the most fruitful stage of scientific activity took place in the semiotic school, did not generally demand the research studies of the latter and did not show any interest in semiotics. However, there were still significant overlaps between semioticians and art historians (especially Moscow art historians) that were important both in terms of general epistemological problems and in relation to the evolution of Soviet art history as a humanitarian discipline in the 1970s. Among the few direct adherents of the art history school who were largely influenced by Moscow–Tartu semiotics were (and still are) Sergei Daniel, Vladimir Paperny, and the author of these lines (Natalia Zlydneva).

The theses formulated by Vyacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Toporov in 1977 concerning the possibility of studying fine art using the methods of the structural-typological approach to the semantics of the artistic image can be considered a programmatic attitude for this group of scholars (institutionally and biographically very disparate, however). These scholars saw the advantage of this approach "in the fact that ... elements of the semantic network of relations are mapped to elements of the syntactic (formal) structure. This gives sufficient rigor to the semantic description, since its results are controlled by the data of the syntactic description" (Ivanov, Toporov 1977: 105). This "rigor" was based on the modelling advantages of natural language over other sign systems, which inevitably entailed limitations of interpretative possibilities and recognition of the incomplete 'translatability' of the so-called continuous texts, i.e. images, by methods of structural analysis. As a leading principle this circumstance determined a binary description of the semantics of the Stalinist Empire in architecture, which was proposed in Vladimir Paperny's book *Culture-2*, which is still relevant today (Paperny 1979). Pairs of oppositions are considered in this work as a reflection of the ideologemes of the totalitarian epoch.

A more flexible system of semantic-syntactic correspondences was pushed forward by Sergei Daniel. In his fundamental work on composition in painting, which was based on the classical tradition (painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), he showed the dynamics of the correlation between the visual organisation of the canvas and the deep meanings of the artwork in various epochs (Daniel 1986). Daniel's research implements the principles of semiotic analysis of a pictorial work taking into account the dichotomy of universal laws of art as a language with corresponding categories and the particular features of visuality as a system of continuous type. According to Daniel, scrutinising paintings means to reply to the series of questions “who, what, how, for whom”, that is, to summarise the data of semantics, syntactics and pragmatics of the image. Daniel considered the regular field of the image to be the basis of the universality of pictorial composition, thus emphasising the category of boundary in visual ‘text’. Paying tribute to structural analytics, which revealed the ‘physiology’ of a composition, Daniel pointed out the significance of comprehending an image as a complex system of “higher mental activity”. This entailed the need to complement synchronic analysis with diachronic, that is, to regard a piece of art as a living being in its evolution.

I in my studies focused on the issue of the applicability of language categories to the artistic image (mainly referring to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian art) and receives additional substantiation: in the aspect of text structure analysis, the problems of the ‘language’ and ‘speech’ of painting, visual narrative, the referential system (as applied to portraits), border visual-verbal complexes in the poetics of the historical avant-garde are considered. Regarding the painting as a communication system, I examine the bordering visual-verbal complexes in context of Russian avant-garde poetics (Zlydneva 2013). My studies, which focused mainly on the problems of semantic-syntactic image complexes in the context of culture, and in particular archaic stereotypes of iconography, also went into the field of image pragmatics.

The circle of adherents of semiotics among art historians cannot be fully outlined in this short list, but it is representative enough to characterise the main directions in which the ideas of the Moscow–Tartu school were introduced into art history.<sup>1</sup>

Although the main bulk of art historians did not accept semiotics and were even unaware of its existence, the air of the times in the 1960s demanded renewal. This came on the wave of the Khrushchev thaw, the outraged dis-

putes between ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’, but at the same time was caused by the immanent evolution of Russian art history. It is important to get a closer look at the latter. The fact is that since the mid-1960s a wave of revalorisation of the Viennese and German schools of formal art history had emerged. The phenomenon of cyclical replacement of visual forms (the so-called ‘close’ and ‘distant’ vision) as a manifestation of self-development of the Kunstwollen of the epoch according to Alois Riegl, the formal method of Heinrich Wölfflin with his discrete description of binary oppositions in relation to the dynamics of pictorial form, the concepts of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ space in Adolf Hildebrandt’s architectural theory, formed the basis of the introductory university course for art historians titled *Description and Analysis of Works of Art*, developed in the 1960s at the Moscow State University. The interest of art historians in formalism should to some extent be considered the result of the post-war generation’s assimilation of the experience of the immanent science of art of the 1920s, which was close to the attitudes in the philological milieu of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language and the Moscow Linguistic Circle.

A significant impact on the development of the post-war art criticism can also be seen in the heritage of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences, the phenomenology and early semiotics of Gustav Shpet, as well as the works by Alexandre Gabrichevsky and Nikolay Tarabukin, whose intellectual heirs in the 1960s and 1970s happened to become the leading professors at the Moscow State University: Alexey Fedorov-Davydov, Viktor Lazarev, Mikhail Ilyin. The background of Boris Vipper also provides interest for the prehistory of the (non)meeting of semiotics and art historians. In his book, written on the basis of a course of lectures and titled *Introduction to the Historical Study of Art*, Vipper, considering the specifics of various types of art in their historical evolution, and when describing style, operates with binary oppositions close to the spirit of German formalism, recalling in many respects the heritage of the GAKHN – space/mass, modulus/proportion, as well as rhythm/meter, etc. – that opposes him (Vipper 1970).

If there was no direct encounter between art historians and linguists of structural-semiotic orientation, there was sympathetic interest on the part of the former. This is how, for example, Mikhail Alpatov treated the early semiotics of art. A contemporary researcher even calls Alpatov a Russian Roland Barthes (Rykov 2021: 142) and points out that Alpatov used the method of “close reading”, which was “directly associated with the subjectivisation of the

process of art perception and problematisation in the spirit of the phenomenological tradition and structuralism” (my translation – N.Z.) (Rykov 2017: 170). Always an opponent of Alpatov, Viktor Lazarev, who strongly denied the usefulness of the structuralist approach to art, in his *History of Byzantine Painting*, published as early as in the 1940s, adhered to principles that were essentially close to those of the structuralists. In the representation of art work he followed strict factography and formal analysis, avoiding psychologism and subjective valorisation (although this did not prevent him from qualitatively distinguishing between the metropolitan and provincial schools of painting, according to him, the main opposition typical of the Byzantine tradition).

In the bulk of the capital’s middle and younger generation of art historians in the 1970s, points of contact with the circle of Russian semiotics that emerged sporadically and manifested themselves in the tendency to investigate cultural marginalia and frontier art forms in genre, stylistic, structural and poetic terms. Interest in the poetics of the borderland was expressed in studies of historical and typological primitivism, i.e. art that lies apart from the ‘school’ tradition (monographs by Larisa Tatanaeva on Sarmatian portraiture, Kseniya Bohemskaya on modern primitivism, as well as a seminal collection of works by various authors (Primitiv 1983)). The poetics of self-taught artists corresponds to the pattern of a discrete text, that is, the ‘carpet’ composition of pieces by “naive” artists is decentred and flat, the plot is invariant and mythological. These features make the sort of visual poetics transparent to the quantitative description. Its position on the margins of the artistic process actualises the centre/periphery problematic, which is essential for comprehension of the semiosphere structure (to use Lotman’s term).

We should also mention the emerging interest in transitional types of stylistic formation such as Mannerism, Baroque and Romanticism in European art (see studies by Andrey K. Zolotov on the painting of French Mannerism, Valeriy Prokofiev and Valeriy Turchin on Romanticism, etc.). These styles have one feature in common: they emphasise dynamism of form and shape a counter-phase to the normative tradition (be it Renaissance, classicism or academism); that is, they stress a borderline of their position on the historical axis. Finally, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the first steps in the ‘discovery’ of the Russian avant-garde, which had been ostracised since the official legitimisation of socialist realism. In Russian art experimentation of the 1910s the image met the word. The problems of the structure of language, the dualism of

the relationship between the signified and the signifier determined experiments in the field of objectless form, which developed in parallel with the experiment in 'zaum' poetry, often outstripping the latter. It was in close interaction with literature that avant-garde painting found its researchers in the person of Dmitry Sarabianov, Gleb Pospelov and Mikhail Allenov, later joined by the next generation of scholars including Ekaterina Bobrinskaya and Nina Guryanova. Russian art history broadened its horizons, putting art in the context of cultural perception. Here we should mention the contribution by Grigory Sternin, who proposed and developed a new problematics of studying Russian art in the shape of the "artistic life", which coincides with the pragmatic turn of semiotics in the 1970s (Sternin 1970). Among those who energetically push the boundaries of traditional art history we should also name Alexey Lidov, a representative of the 1980s generation. In his series of works on hierotopics, i.e., the problem of the existence of the image within the pragmatics of Byzantine painting, Lidov essentially converges with the semiotic school, considering the sacred space (of a temple) a kind of text, that is, a single organism generating meanings in its dynamic ('organic') development.

Overall, art studies of the 1970s revealed an obvious tendency towards a structural-semantic study of the forms and meanings of an image, with interest in the issues of the borderline vivid proof of this. In the absence or sometimes conscious rejection of semiotics by Soviet art historians, the main path of art science developed in the same direction as the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics, although the latter reached incomparably higher levels of reflection. The approach of art historians to domestic semiotics was indirect, very cautious, and veiled. The traditional hermetic nature of Soviet art history, which to some extent deliberately placed itself in the niche of professional connoisseurship, allowing it to be relatively free from the ideology imposed by the authorities, had an impact. Another reason for pushing away from semiotics at the time of the school's highest achievements was the art historians' rejection of positivism of any kind: extra-artistic intrusions fraught with vulgar sociology – from which they managed to distance themselves during the Khrushchev thaw – were still fresh in the minds of the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1970s, and distrust of new research methods rationalised the relative independence of the scholars' position. What brought them together, however, was the common rejection by both structuralists and art historians of official Soviet ideology and propaganda, as well as the suffocating climate of stagnation. But no less importantly, there

were obvious coincidences in the orientation of interests and in the general principles of analytical thinking: to all appearances, the epistemic mechanisms of the epoch came into play, dictating a unified direction for any scientific strategy relating to disciplines and schools that on the surface were far apart.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this article we deliberately omit consideration of the contribution to the semiotics of the Tartu circle, such as professor Yuri Tsivian (currently Chicago University) and Jan Levchenko (formerly Higher School of Economy, Moscow), since their studies concern cinema rather than visual art, as well as professor Virve Sarapik (Estonian Art Academy) and docent Elena Grigorieva (Tartu University), two remarkable semioticians in the field of art history whose work should be considered within the Estonian scientific tradition proper.

<sup>2</sup> On the relations between the the Moscow–Tartu semiotic school and Soviet art history see also Zlydneva 2019.

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