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Lotman's semiotic theory of culture or Laclau's political ontology?

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Abstract: The present article concentrates on the main discrepancies that should arise in the discussion between Lotman's semiotics of culture and Laclau's discursive theory of hegemony. Some significant – but still abstract – commonalities conceal fundamental disagreements which I would group around four topics. Firstly, Lotman's semiotic method is at odds with Laclau's ontological way of thinking. Secondly, although both Lotman and Laclau subscribe to the openness of signification, it is impossible to incorporate their accounts of this openness without loose ends. In order to substantiate this claim, I examine Lotman's concept of "boundary" and Laclau's concept of the "limit." Thirdly, we should avoid reading too much into Lotman and Laclau's agreement on the similar – but still formal – model of a self-signification. And finally, Laclau's valorization of social antagonism is in conflict with Lotman's appraisal of dialogue. Confronted with these discrepancies, we are enforced to decide whether to endorse Lotman's cultural semiotics or Laclau's political ontology.

Keywords: antagonism, dialogue, cultural semiotics, Laclau, Lotman, political ontology, reality, the real

What strikes the eye in contemporary discussions on the concept of the political is the interrelatedness of political theory and literature, rational argumentation, and the fictional language of literature. Fiction and rational argumentation are not mutually exclusive. The interpretations of the political bring together literary and rational elements. "[O]ver the course of time," Claude Lefort remarks in the preface to his *Writing: The Political Test*, "I have become better aware of the peculiar connection between literature and political philosophy, or the movement of thought and the movement of writing, when they are subjected to the test of the political" (Lefort 2000: xxxix). This view is not an exception. In the same manner, Ernesto Laclau, an eminent representative of the Essex School of discourse theory,

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deems it necessary to use tropes such as metaphor and metonymy to illuminate the discursive logic of hegemony. Another figure is an eminent member of the Tartu-Moscow School – Yuri Lotman – who, in referring to Roman Jakobson, emphasizes the literary element in the semiotic operation of language (Lotman 2001: 17). There is nothing odd about the fact that the hidden structure of socio-political circumstances is opened through the mediation of literary masterpieces.

In his later works, beginning with “On the Semiosphere,” Lotman proposed to study the semiotic totality of culture as a “semiosphere,” a single semiotic space. Neither a simple and isolated part nor the cumulative sum of all parts is Lotman’s starting point, but rather the living organism of culture, a dynamic and *organic* whole. In his *Universe of the Mind* (2001), Lotman outlines a semiotic framework with the help of which one can analyze a wide variety of themes in film theory, communication studies, literary theory, historiography, etc. Politics also belongs among those possible realms to which semiotic methods may be applied. Departing from the scientific study of a culture as the text, Lotman moves towards the investigation of politics as one text among many others. However, Laclau, I think, follows an opposite path; namely, he begins with the ontological texture of politics and, then, points towards the discursive construction of all being (including that of culture). The objective of the present article is to compare semiotic theory of culture and to show that Lotman and Laclau cannot reach agreement in fundamental questions (see, for instance, Monticelli 2008).

My investigation departs from “An Outline for a Semiotic Theory of Hegemony,” where Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel aim to bring Laclau and Lotman into dialogue (Selg and Ventsel 2010; see also Selg 2011; Ventsel 2009; Selg and Ventsel 2009, 2008). By comparing, juxtaposing, and analyzing central concepts, this article wants to demonstrate how Lotman and Laclau incorporate similar ideas into different theoretical frameworks. The form is different but the content is conceived to be the same. The hegemonic operation of naming, the exclusionary logic of a meaning process, and the internal heterogeneity of signifying structures are in different ways and disguises present in Lotman’s semiotics and Laclau/Mouffe’s discourse analysis. The parallels also emerge in theoretical concepts such as articulation/translation, an empty signifier/rhetorical translation. Selg and Ventsel begin their article with the following presupposition: “[T]he central categories of each theoretical school can be *substituted with each other* without losing any theoretical coherence or epistemological value of either of the approaches in question” (Selg and Ventsel 2010: 445; my emphasis). Thus, without anything significant being lost in the process of translation, the language of Laclau can be converted fully into the corresponding terminology of Lotman. In the end, the differences (e.g. the role of Lacan) are only epistemologically apparent and not worth considering.

In the present article, however, I express some doubts in regard to Selg and Ventsel's approach, which faces a grave danger in levelling everything to the indifferent same and, in doing so, downplaying some crucial discrepancies (Selg and Ventsel 2010: 461). By concentrating far too much on commonalities, it becomes almost impossible to notice fundamental divergences. Not everything can be reciprocally adapted from one theoretical framework to another without encountering the unsurpassable problems of translation. Rather than stressing the smooth and absolute translatability, I aim to pinpoint the *four* liminal zones where the process of translation encounters unsurmountable obstacles and where the conversion from one universe of thought to another is blocked. These four zones are the zones of irreconcilable tensions, of the nature from which our protagonist will probably diverge. In his *Culture and Explosion*, for instance, Lotman argues that a fruitful communication aims to transmit and say that which cannot be translated without problem from one language into another (Lotman 2009: 5). The translatable-untranslatable tensions are the fundamental precondition for any meaningful dialogue. Laclau, in contrast, conceives the same zones as the *antagonistic* limits of thoughtful engagement. What, however, is beyond doubt is that in these liminal zones we come unavoidably face to face with a decision – either to support Laclau's political ontology or Lotman's semiotics.

Thus, in the following *four* sections, I pinpoint the *four* liminal zones where, in my opinion, Laclau disagrees with Lotman. *Firstly*, I think it is necessary to draw attention to the oppositional tension of *method* and *thinking*. Whereas Lotman establishes semiotics as a *universal* method for humanities, Laclau takes instead an ontological stance aimed at thinking discursive formations on the level of their *being* (e.g. Laclau 2014: 204). *Secondly*, although both Laclau and Lotman stress the openness of signifying structures, I think this agreement is only formal because the nature of openness is understood and conceptualized in incompatible ways. This case in point is confirmed when we examine the function of the “limit” in Laclau and that of the “boundary” in Lotman. *Thirdly*, both Lotman and Laclau seek to explain how the heterogeneous field of a semiotic space produces its own unity and systematicity, i.e. signifies itself as a totality. Again, on the formal level, in some respects, the answer may be similar, but in substance neither position is able to incorporate the other fully. *Finally*, but most importantly, while Lotman associates a “semioticity” with *dialogue*, Laclau understands “the discursive” in terms of *antagonism*. Antagonism and dialogue refer to the opposing ontological commitments that manifest in Lotman's intellectualism and Laclau's political practicisim. The opposition of antagonism and dialogue is not a trivial question of terminology.

1 Relation to a signifying structure: Lotman's scientific method or Laclau's ontological thinking?

Disagreements begin from one innocent but fundamental question: How should one *relate* to all different sorts of signifying structures? In all his writing, Lotman takes an explicitly *scientific* stance which, like all other disciplines of science, distinguishes the object of investigation from the method of analysis. Reality is thought to be made of sign systems to which the method of semiology is applied. Lotman, along with his disciples, endorses a scientific relation to a semiotic reality. Laclau, in contrast, adopts – though somewhat reluctantly – a *philosophical* stance that is interested in grasping a signifying structure, or discursive formation, at the level of its *being*. Despite his critique of essentialism and foundationalism or, broadly speaking, “the metaphysics of presence,” Laclau's political thinking is embedded within the horizon of the Occidental tradition of metaphysics. The following section explicates and substantiates this discrepancy.

The scientific relation and the philosophical relation to a semiotic reality rest on two receptions of Saussure's legacy. It is frequently said that there are two different Saussures: the one of the published *Courses in General Linguistics* and the one of the manuscripts. Let us start with *Courses*, where Saussure is primarily preoccupied with laying a solid basis on the science of language, i.e. on linguistics. Up to that time, linguistic facts had been made into the subject matter of other disciplines. But that what makes language into a specific object of study in its own right had been missed. Grammar, philology, and comparative philology, which were all concerned with some aspects of language, failed to lay the foundation for the exploration of language as a unique and specific object of a scientific investigation (Saussure 2011: 1–5). In seeking to establish and found a new science, Saussure analytically distinguishes “language” (*langue*) from “speaking” (*parole*), synchrony from diachrony, and linguistic and extra-linguistic. The science of linguistics is above all interested in the social and impersonal institution of language that is not subjected to the vims and moods of individuals (Saussure 2011: 14). In contrast to a heterogeneous and subjective *parole*, the main task of linguistics is to study language as a homogenous, structured, and coherent whole.

Many other disciplines – for instance, from psychology, anthropology, and history – encounter and deal with linguistic facts with their own method and without considering the specificity of these facts. To attain the scientific

character, the temptation to reduce language to other facts must be avoided. This is tantamount to saying that it is necessary to develop the appropriate method of research with which to study the facts of language purely from the perspective of linguistics. The scientific task is to investigate language as one particular region of reality. And it is only by connecting the problem of language with the principles of semiology that linguistics can assume a proper place among other sciences: “[I]f I have succeeded in assigning linguistics a place among sciences, it is because I have related it to semiology” (Saussure 2011: 16). Of course, there are other relevant semiological systems but, among them, language is one of the most fundamental. For Saussure, it is the linguistic differences, the lateral connection of signs that trigger the process of signification. This means that language is not self-identical substance, but rather the sort of “pure form” where interrelation of signs plays the primary role in the determination of linguistic value (Saussure 2011: 113, 122). The exemplary case is the sign in which the combination of a signifier and signifier or that of sound and thought generates a linguistic value.

By stressing the relevance of a scientific methodology, it is obvious that Lotman leans towards this reception of Saussure, and that is the case notwithstanding the fact that Saussure begins his reflections with the smallest – but fundamental – unit, i.e. with the sign while Lotman with the sign system. Despite all the disagreements, Lotman nevertheless conceives of semiology as a scientific discipline whose “object is the sphere of semiotic communication,” the role of signs in social interaction (Lotman 2001: 4). What is more, it is relevant to emphasize that “semiotics is a *method* of the humanities, which is relevant to various disciplines and which is defined not by the nature of its object but by the means of analyzing it” (Lotman 2001: 4; original emphasis). From this quotation, three relevant points follow. Firstly, in relation to all objects of investigation, semiotics is above all scientific method. Secondly, it is not so important exactly what sort of object is investigated, but rather *what method is used to conduct the research*. Finally, the method of semiotics is not restricted only to the discipline of linguistics; it may and should be extended to other areas of reality as well. Politics, for instance, can be studied with the methods of social and political science, but also with the method of semiotics as the specific realm of signs. Thus, the principles of semiotics are universally applicable: “Everything which the semiotic researcher turns his/her attention to becomes semioticized in his hands” (Lotman 2001: 5). Semiotics wants to be a universal method of humanities.

Before starting the research, it is necessary to possess in advance a rigorous methodological framework (e.g. concepts, models, typologies). A scientist must be acquainted with and have mastered all the methodological means of

investigation. One version of a similar attitude is discussed in the introduction and preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel criticizes a tendency to separate subject from object, thinking from being, a form from a content (Hegel 1986: 47). Where such a separation nevertheless occurs, thinking is turned into “an instrument of cognition” *external* to the being of an object. This instrument is a medium through which things appear. That is why the thing is not received “as it is in itself, but as it is through and in this medium” (Hegel 1977: 46, 1986: 68). A medium mediates our access to being, and it constitutes all our knowledge. In this way, thinking is reduced to a methodological reasoning without any relation to truth and being. In the same way, Hegel’s dialectical movement is degraded to a dialectical method, by means of which to approach social and historical process. Correspondingly, I think, the discipline of semiotics proposes and defends the methodological way of reasoning, the purpose of which is to establish itself as a distinctive medium among many others and to offer an alternative – and perhaps more universal – look at the world. Semiotics understands itself as a *technical tool*. To this, Lotman would reply that semiology does not impose itself externally on all possible areas of beings, but rather brings a method and the research object into dialogue (see, for instance, Torop 2009: xxxiii). Granting this, I think it changes little in the way in which Lotman relates to all sorts of sign systems. This attitude corresponds to the demand to have a critical relation to the instrument of cognition. It is important to accommodate reality and the instrument of cognition.

Selg and Ventsel taken implicitly the same stance as they propose to complement Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony “with the insights provided by the semiotics of culture of Yuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School” (Selg and Ventsel 2010: 444). In reading their interpretation, it becomes apparent that this type of a semiotic reading turns Laclau’s post-Marxism into the methodology of social sciences and humanities. In the introduction to their article, Selg and Ventsel explicitly state that their objective is “to develop a sort of *second range model* of hegemony that may be of service for designing empirical studies of concrete hegemonic formations and their different modalities” (Selg and Ventsel 2010: 444; my emphasis). This kind of approach is certainly not wrong, as many other authors have appropriated Laclau’s views with similar purposes in mind. Although this interpretation is perfectly viable and, from the scientific point of view, even necessary, I am nevertheless convinced that something crucial gets lost if this position is made absolute. What exactly is missed or ignored is the fact that Laclau really belongs to those thinkers who have been influenced by the manuscripts of Saussure.

Saussure’s legacy is not as univocal as *Courses* may induce us to think. From the pages of the manuscripts, it becomes rather apparent that Saussure’s

reflections on the problems of language have reached an impasse, with the impossibility of linguistics as a science. A pre-eminent scientist becomes a philosopher. In light of the manuscripts, Agamben observes that “the *Cours* cannot be considered ... as the foundation of semiology; if anything, the *Cours* puts semiology radically into question” (Agamben 1993: 153). One of the root causes of this uncanny impasse is the elementary but fundamental structure – the sign. Thought through to the end, the sign is nothing less than an *aporia* at the center of which stands the necessary but at the same time impossible union of a signifier and signified. The sign, so long as it is internally split, cannot be in accord with itself, as Saussure wants to maintain in *Courses* (Saussure 2011: 120). A signifier and a signified, or the sensible and supernatural, are unable to form a full, determined positivity. That is why the very relation of a signifier and a signified is never fully intelligible. This amounts to saying that it is impossible to say signification itself; or, as Derrida puts it, there is no “transcendental signified,” no immediate access to the pure being, or structurality, of structure (Derrida 2007: 354). The sign is never given as fully determined and intelligible positivity in its pure presence. The diacritical relation of signification is – at least directly – unsayable. Eventually, this most elementary unit must stumble at the impasse or the constitutive impossibility to realize itself as a full positivity.

But, for Laclau, it is still possible to experience signification (or structure) indirectly at the extreme point where the endless proliferation of linguistic differences is brought to a halt, or, to be more precise, where the normal process of signification is interrupted (Laclau 1996: 37). This, however, does not result in utter meaninglessness, in the total absence of any signification. On the contrary, when the signifier-signified link breaks down, then a structure can refer to itself and display itself beyond any content. This means that the self-signification becomes possible “only if the differential nature of the signifying units is subverted, only if the signifiers empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds and assume the role of representing the pure being of the system – or, rather, the system as pure Being” (Laclau 1996: 39). Those signs that have lost an attachment to a corresponding signified are named empty signifiers. The emptiness, however, does not refer to mere absence of meaning. In contrast to pure deprivation or negation, empty signifiers continue to signify and produce an abundance of meanings. The contradictory interpretations of concepts such as *mana* and democracy confirm this fact. Thus, the fullness coincides with the emptiness, or, stated differently, the emptiness and excess, under- and over-determination coincide and become undecidable. The extreme limit is thus the point where signification is still in force despite its breakdown. Through the suspension of its normal efficacy, signification can refer to itself and represent itself as such. Empty signifiers convey and represent the very

relation of a signifier and a signified, the very relation of signification or, as Laclau puts it, the being, or structurality, of structure.

But with what sort of experience exactly are we dealing here? What does it mean to experience signification or, in other words, language at its limits? Is it the experience of some meaning? To reply to these questions, I think it is first necessary to understand that we are confronted neither with the semiotic nor with the semantic, and neither with *langue* nor with *parole*, but rather with the traditional domain of ontology. To grasp the issue at hand, it is instructive to make a detour over Michel Foucault's concept of "statement" as it is introduced and elaborated in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. With the idea of the statement, Foucault points to "the sheer fact that a certain being – language – takes place. The statement is the signature that marks language in the pure fact of its existence" (Agamben 2009: 65). Foucault does not seek to determine the semantic value of the statement, but rather the rules for the co-existence of statements out of which discursive formations are built. The objective is to seize hold of discursive formations on the level of their very being. Therefore, we must experience "the event of language" as it takes place before anything meaningful is said; the ontological (i.e. the openness of language) exceeds and precedes the ontic (i.e. that which is said in this opening) (Agamben 1991: 25–26). By the same token, empty signifiers signify nothing less than the openness of signification or that of being before any determinate meaning. Yet, this experience of being is not an immediate experience of pure being in its pure presence and positivity. The structurality, or being, of all structures is rather given as that which is absent. Being – or, in other words, language – displays itself at the limits of objectivity, where signification is broken down but still in force.

In this sense, Laclau belongs among those whose thinking leans towards Saussure regarding the manuscripts. However, to illustrate the crux of the matter, I think it is instructive to look at how Laclau views the main trait of an order. Since Thomas Hobbes, modern political thought has considered the existence of an order as the pre-condition of a civil life and law. Without there being an order, it does not make any reasonable sense to speak of just and unjust. It is particularly impossible to escape this uncanny fact in the situation where the social fabric is disintegrating and where the pressing need for an order prevails over its exact content; in the face of the imminent danger of chaos, a particular content – *pace* all the imaginations of an ideal regime – becomes a secondary matter; any content becomes better than none (e.g. Laclau 1996: 44). Furthermore, Laclau is never tired of pointing out that when the socio-political normality is under attack and when it enters the state of dissolution, *an order manifests itself beyond any specific content*; an order becomes present as such. Thus, it is relevant to notice that "in a situation of radical disorder, 'order'" is not simply absent, but rather

“present as that which is absent” (Laclau 1996: 44). At its objective limits, where the normal functioning of an order is interrupted, we are faced with an *order that is nothing less than an empty signifier*. An order, stripped of all content, signifies an order on the level of its very being. For Laclau, there is an unbridgeable gap between the form of an order (i.e. an order as such) and its particular content, or, as Laclau claims following Heidegger, between being and beings (e.g. Laclau and Zac 1994). The “ontological difference,” understood in the sense of discourse analysis, points to a structural impasse due to which the ontological (i.e. an order as such) and the ontic (i.e. a concrete order) never coincide. *The necessity and impossibility of communitarian fullness reflects the necessity and impossibility of the sign as a fully determined positivity.*

To recap, whereas Lotman approaches sign systems methodologically, Laclau stays faithful to the main preoccupation of the Occidental tradition – to the thinking of being as it discloses itself in the limits of signification. Laclau thinks of the being of structure or the structure as being, while Lotman approaches sign systems with the ready-made method of semiotics. This fact emerges repeatedly in the following subsections.

2 The openness of a signifying structure: Lotman’s “boundary” or Laclau’s “limit”?

In Ventsel’s opinion, Laclau and Mouffe equate semiotics with structuralism (Ventsel 2015). Within the essentialist framework of structuralism, however, it is hard – if not altogether impossible – to explain, for example, how a culture as a signifying system changes over the course of time. In opposition to this, Ventsel maintains that both Lotman and Laclau endorse in unison the *openness* of all signifying structures. In admitting this, however, we must not refrain from exploring in detail the distinctive role which openness plays in discourse analysis and in semiotics. In the present subsection, I argue that Lotman considers the openness of semiosis in relation to an extra-semiotic reality, whereas Laclau considers the openness of signification in relation to “the real.” Or, stated differently: the first is interested in the boundary of reality and semiosphere – and the second in the limits of the real and discursive formation. The limits are subversively *internal* to signification; and boundary connects semiotic space with that which is *external* to semiosis. In addition, I draw attention to the fact that openness becomes in Lotman’s hands a *methodological* concern and in Laclau’s hands an *ontological* issue. To substantiate these claims, I investigate comparatively Laclau’s concept of “limit” and Lotman’s concept of “boundary.”

Let us begin with Lotman, who seeks to move beyond the static and enclosed models towards the dynamic models which reflect and explain the changes and transitions in cultural processes in a better way. He introduces the concept of boundary, by means of which to confront those models which are prone to give an abstract picture of a semiotic reality, “a speculative generalization of the dynamic structure” (Lotman 2009: 24; see also Monticelli 2008: 191–210). In this sense, boundary belongs to the set of methodological concepts that have a fundamental role in the activity of modelling. What matters in the end is not so much the truth, but rather scientific *usefulness* and *effectiveness* (e.g. Derrida 1973: 359). When concepts, understood as *tools*, lose instrumental usefulness, then they may be abandoned and exchanged for those with better explanatory power. And if it is productive and effective in one discipline, then it can be transferred, taken up, and developed in other areas of the scientific research. In line with this, for instance, Lotman introduces into semiotics the concept of a semiosphere, influenced by Vladimir Vernadsky’s biosphere that designates the interdisciplinary study of all organic life on Earth (Lotman 2001: 140). A biosphere surrounds the planet like a membrane, and it functions as a filter through which the living organisms interact with a surrounding environment. A filter is a boundary.

Thus, we have to examine the role which boundary plays in the semiotic methodology of culture. Lotman considers a cultural world as an intertwined web of texts underneath which is located “the kind of reality that is organized by a multiplicity of languages and has a hierarchical relationship with them” (Lotman 2009: 24). *Reality* is a sort of basis on which the semiotic activity of humans builds the layers of the cultural world. A wide variety of cultures, for example, have rendered meaningful such different natural asymmetries such as left/right, top/bottom, male/female, and living/dead (Lotman 2001: 133). Depending on the singular character of culture, all the above-mentioned oppositions acquire a corresponding value. The sense of death, for instance, varies from the Orient to the Occident. That is why, according to Lotman, there is no immediate, direct access to a reality beyond the play of interrelated signs. Ultimately, semiotization is in nature the processes of *alienation*. What, for instance, goes irreversibly lost when sex is rendered significant and problematic, is an immediate connection to a natural sexuality (Lotman 2009: 165). Freudianism, by seeking to uncover a spontaneous relation to sex, misses this irretrievable alienation; however, this does not imply that semiotics turns reality into Kant’s “thing in itself” that stays “forever beyond the limits of culture,” forever beyond the reach of human faculties (Lotman 2009: 24). An extra-semiotic reality rather intrudes into a semiotic space, proving in this way that “the world of semiosis is not fatally locked in on itself: it forms a complex

structure, which always 'plays' with the space external to it" (Lotman 2009: 24). This type of play signals the structural openness of a semiosis, the fact that the new and non-recognizable (e.g. some sort of new text, language) can be inscribed into the space of culture.

What exactly is at stake in this play is the demarcation of a *very relation* that brings and holds together a non-semiotic reality and a semiotic space. To organize and manage its internal diversity, all cultures have to fix in some way the relational boundary of interiority and exteriority. In his *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman writes that a "boundary can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form" (Lotman 2001: 131). One such first-person form is a cultural totality which is disposed to individuate itself in respect to that which it is *not*. A cultural space stands inherently in opposition to the identity of an external "other" or that of an outsider who is constructed as being "hostile," "uncivilized," and "dangerous." Lotman, for instance, mentions how "the rational positivistic society of nineteenth-century Europe created images of the 'pre-logical savage' or of the irrational subconscious as anti-spheres lying beyond the rational space of culture" (Lotman 2001: 142). The positivistic world of rationality constructs itself and achieves consistency in opposition to a negative other, i.e. anti-culture. The semiotic space of culture is usually organized around the division between the positive "us" and the negative "them," "since the boundary is a necessary part of the semiosphere and there can be no 'us' if there is no 'them'" (Lotman 2001: 142). Furthermore, a boundary is a bilingual zone where unfamiliar texts and events may be appropriated and translated into "our" own languages. The internal, if it is not hermetically closed in on itself, aspires to *metabolize* the external: "The function of any boundary or filter," Lotman writes, "... is to control, filter and adapt the external into internal" (Lotman 2001: 140). As an example of this practice, Lotman brings the translation of literary texts. That which is part of a foreign tradition can become "ours" in the course of translation, but the inverse is also true: we may grow apart from that what was truly "our" own.

In one of his major later writings, *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman elaborates the concept of explosion with the aim of capturing how the semiotic space of culture transcends its internal boundaries and comes into contact with an extra-semiotic outside. Explosive moments break "a kind of window in the semiotic layer," in the ossified layers of a particular culture, through which "possibilities for a breakthrough into the space beyond the limits are created" (Lotman 2009: 24). An explosion opens up a semiotic "window," through which the semiosphere of culture is able to interact playfully with an extra-semiotic reality. Of all the different types of windows, a dream is an exemplary case in point for Lotman. The mysterious world of dreams is a channel, through which the

translatable and the untranslatable, the known and the unknown, establish and maintain a line of communication. The channel (or a filter) has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. Consider, for instance, Schiller, who took the dream as “the oppressed voice of the conscience of man,” the ancient Romans, who “regarded dreams as the predictions of the god,” or the Freudians, who understand the dream as “the voice of suppressed sexuality” (Lotman 2009: 145–146). Keeping in mind this plurality, we can get a glimpse of the fact that the dream is actually a *zero sign* which “must, of necessity, become filled with meaning” (Lotman 2009: 146). In regard to the enigmatic realm of dreams, all types of cultures feel the human urge of semiotization, the aim of which is to make sense of the relation of the cultural space and an elusive extra-semiotic reality. No given meaning, however, is final. This amounts to saying that a boundary, as a zero sign, always exceeds all its possible interpretations. And explosive events prove again and again the open-endedness of semiosis, the possibility to redraw boundaries.

Let us take such a contested category as a woman, the sense of which has varied – and will vary – a great deal, not only from one culture to another, but also within the world of every culture. No sign system is capable of giving an exhaustive and conclusive description of that which it precisely means to be a woman. In a semiosphere there is a plurality of languages, of which none is suitable for giving a perfect and detailed picture of reality. There is no direct and privileged access to a semiotic reality. No human semiotization, no matter how comprehensive and excellent, is particularly apt to grasp the extra-semiotic exhaustively. On the other hand, the linguistic plurality ensures that the boundaries of a semiosphere cannot be sutured in itself as a hermetically sealed capsule to which we are condemned. A polylingual space puts and keeps in motion the play of a semiotic space and reality to a halt. Of course, this does not mean that we live in a schizophrenic world of total indetermination. On the contrary, zero-signs obtain a temporal fixation, but none of these is able to render a semiotic reality completely intelligible. No codification of woman, for instance, achieves a degree of full transparency. Alternative semiotizations show vividly the impossibility of closing the gap between reality and the semiotic space. In this sense, Lotman conceived reality as the *external* boundary, upon which the human activity of semiosis is prone to stumble time and again. Reality induces and delimits semiosis.

Instead of speaking of reality, Laclau takes up and develops Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic notion of “the real.” The idea behind this terminological shift is not trivial, a purely conceptual matter without any far-reaching implications. *Reality is very far away from being the same thing as the real.* In discourse analysis, the real does not point to the *external* boundary, but rather to the

limits *internal* to signification or, simply put, to a void because of which no signifying structure is capable of coinciding with itself and producing itself as a fully transparent reality. A case in point is Laclau's syntagma "the impossibility of society" (Laclau 1990: 89). This is not a pessimistic proclamation, for instance, declaring a disorder to be an inevitable destiny of humanity. What exactly is impossible is "communitarian fullness," a pre-given intelligible totality beyond the differential play of signs. We never come across society as an ontic being among many others, as a solid substance like a piece of cloth lying around. This is tantamount to saying that in trying to represent itself the social field eventually stumbles upon its internal limits, upon the impossibility to be given as an ontic being in its pure presence. All efforts at politically signifying society pass through the structural impossibility. Society, if it is realized in the undecidable terrain of social differences, is always more or less than communitarian fullness.

Those internal limits are for Laclau primarily antagonistic. Social antagonisms show the impossibility of harmonious and self-sufficient collective identity. The antagonistic limit is in this sense the symptom of the real in the symbolic order of society (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 122). Contrary to common misperception, political conflicts do not render social order automatically obsolete. The inverse is actually true, so long as a collective identity can be constructed discursively only in relation to an antagonizing other. The social bond is by definition antagonistic (see the next section). Laclau adds that an antagonizing other is not pure negativity, in the same way as the social bond is unable to obtain the status of pure positivity. Positivity and negativity are not two fully determined objectivities, nor are we dealing here with their objective relation, but rather with the sort of connection where the *relata* subvert and contaminate *reciprocally* each other (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 129). This means that the social is subversively mediated and, in this way, brought into being by the negativity of an antagonistic other; and, inversely, this antagonistic other receives a concrete existence only via the discursive articulation of a social positivity. In this sense, it is only through their "reflexive determination" that the positive and the negative receive a real existence. The negativity-positivity relation is the limit type of relation which "escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125). The subversive relation that connects the real and social formation cannot be brought into language. This *unsayable* division of social formation corresponds to the limit internal to signification, to the constitutive split of the sign.

Just as the symbolic order of society is never in accord with itself as a fully determined and harmonious community, so too is social antagonism never entirely transparent and in a position to dissolve the social link completely

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 129). These two extremes indicate a third alternative: a concrete discursive order achieves its organization and consistency only in relation to the antagonistic limits or, better yet, to the real. When the antagonistic limits are re-articulated, then the social bond is simultaneously re-defined. Despite all imaginary efforts, the relation of the real and a discursive order cannot be fixed once and for all. The real indicates the openness of the social bond, the fact that no political force is capable of producing a literal representation. *What exactly is open is the very relation itself that unites the real and a social order*, the negative and the positive. This dialectical interplay resembles the play of reality and a semiotic space. While the discursive-hegemonic space of an order has to establish and maintain relation to the real, the semiosphere of culture has to establish and maintain relation with reality. This very relation is structurally open for our protagonist, a one can push the parallels even further. In the same way as Lotman thinks of a *zero sign* as the boundary of reality and a semiosphere, Laclau thinks about the relation of the real and a social formation with the help of an empty signifier. Technically, a zero sign is the same thing as an empty signifier, yet all the mentioned analogies remain formal, because one must not miss that Lotman's semiosis is triggered and kept in operation in relation to reality, and that Laclau's discursive formations are built around the unsymbolizable, the impossible object. The real points to the limits internal to signification, that is, to the antagonistic limits of a social formation; however, in contrast to the internal impasse, Lotman's semiosphere is animated by the external boundary with reality.

The discrepancies go even further when we recall that Lotman thinks of the boundary in the context of the modelling activity, while Laclau emphasizes the ontological dimension of the limits. In order to grasp the issue at hand, we need to go to the limits of objectivity, where the discursive systems of society establish and maintain itself relation to the real. The limit is the zone where the daily operation of a social order has broken down, but "in a situation of radical disorder," as Laclau notes, "order" is present "as that which is absent" (Laclau 1996: 44). A disorder is not the same thing as the complete absence of any order. Having been stripped of all its normal attributes, an order remains paradoxically present as that which is absent. *A zero-degree order precedes and exceeds its normal efficacy*. In this critical situation, an order conveys and represents itself as such beyond any particular content. Or, put differently: *an order signifies itself on the level of its being*, and as long as the limits of an order overlap with the limits of signification, an emptied order resembles "pure Being" (Laclau and Zac 1994: 30–31). Here, it is crucial to recall that the *being* of an order – or, broadly speaking, being as such – is not given directly in its pure presence, in the perfect fusion of signifier/signified, but rather as the impossible – i.e. unsayable – thing that is nothing less than an empty signifier,

the function of which is to convey the relational link of the real and a discursive space or that of negativity and positivity. It is the task of politics to determine this link, that is, to fill an emptied order with a concrete content.

The argument central to the current section may be explained with an example. Let us cast a brief glimpse at a political map, where state borders are in most cases clearly delineated. That which is outside and that which is to stay inside is spatially fixed. The territory of the modern state is geographically demarcated. This does not mean that all official borders are forever beyond semiotization; on the contrary, what is at stake for Lotman in those areas is how to interpret the spatial borders of a country. State borders exemplify in this sense the relation between the semiosphere of culture and its extra-semiotic, or extra-cultural, space. The boundary can take the share of a geographically fixed border between culture and anti-culture. In this sense, borders bring forth the territorial dimension of boundary. *The semiotic fluidity of borders proves the open-endedness of this very relation.* In the end, no self-description is capable of exhausting the possible interpretation (e.g. Lotman 1999: 353–366). Upon further inspection, one can detect a discord between actual reality and political self-consciousness, between the natural distribution of languages and the political map of nation states (Lotman 2009: 172). The limits, however, must not be confused with geographically demarcated borders. In discourse analysis, the limit must not be confused with the demarcated borders. Laclau and Mouffe object to seeing the limit as “a simple external datum – in which case terms such as ‘French social formation’ or ‘English social formation’ designate hardly more than ‘France’ or ‘England’” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 144). In contrast to the topological perspective, the limit is rather a “non-locus,” where society demonstrates the impossibility to constitute itself as a transparent totality. This does not mean, of course, that the limits are without any location. On the contrary, it is possible that the limits are materialized (e.g. the opposition of city/countryside). But this materialisation symptomatically indicates the internal failure in social self-signification. To sum up, *whereas Lotman conceives of the openness of semiosis in relation to reality, Laclau thinks of the openness of signification in relation to the real.*

3 The mechanism of self-signification: Lotman's scientist or Laclau's “organic intellectual”?

Neither Lotman nor Laclau agrees with one of the basic dogmas of Orthodox Marxism – the idea of economic reductionism, according to which it is not the consciousness of man that shapes reality, but rather the economic base that

determines the mode of a social, cultural, and political consciousness or, broadly speaking, the superstructure. At the root of this rejection is an assumption that there is no all-encompassing transcendent principle which organizes and grounds all the asymmetries characteristic to a semiotic field. There is no pre-given totality. Laclau and Lotman's guiding assumption is *pluralism* that characterizes in equal respect discursive formations and sign systems. This does not mean, of course, that there is no limit to the expansion of diversity and that we end up with the limitless extension of pure multiplicity. The fundamental issue is rather how to think about the moment of a self-signification. Here we are face to face with such problems as these: What mechanism captures the self-signification? In what way does Laclau think of the self-signification of society and Lotman the self-description of culture? How is a coherent and systematic totality produced out of asymmetries and heterogeneity?

On a first reading of Lotman, I stumbled upon terms such as “meta-language,” “meta-structure,” and “the meta-level of self-description.” The prefix “meta-” refers to that which goes beyond, transcends, or comes after. Metaphysics, which inquires the *being* of all beings, comes after all other science disciplines (including physics) dealing with one ontic region of being. In studying being as such, metaphysics is traditionally the science of all sciences. Similarly, meta-language is a higher-order language used to describe and speak of ordinary languages. That is why Lotman's choice of words leaves an impression as if semiotics aims at getting a *bird's eye view* of cultural processes and events. This first impression is deceitful. In fact, a semiotician is not an impassionate spectator situated high above his/her research object. True, culture can be turned into an independent object, out of which a semiotician is abstracted as “an isolated and unique intellectual substance” (Lotman 1999: 14). This, Lotman maintains, is possible only in extreme cases. In reality, a semiotician, when s/he is doing research, is always inescapably embedded in a concrete culture. Without being already immersed in semiosis, it would be possible neither to speak nor to think (Lotman 2001: 273), but this does not at all mean that it is impossible to keep a proper distance from the subject matter of investigation and that objectivity remains an unachievable illusion. Objectivity is in the eyes of Lotman the ideal of science that is attainable only through the object-subject dialogue.

In place of a scientist who constructs and employs models with which to seize hold of reality, Laclau places a thinker who strives to conceptualize that which is at stake in a concrete situation and to modify the prevailing constellation of power relations. So, then, to avoid misunderstanding, it must be emphasized that a thinker is not a *pure* spirit, a *detached* intellect who generates abstractions and grand theories to explain everything, but neither is a thinker

someone who strives to discover the universal, necessary, and eternal Truth. In the preface of *Emancipation*, Laclau suggests that his essays may be considered as “circumstantial interventions, taking place around a concrete event” (Laclau 1996: viii). No matter how simple and aesthetically beautiful a theory is, it still must be re-activated and brought to bear upon in a concrete situation. The absolute and timeless truth, which the “great intellectuals” of the past were after, is substituted with recognition that “the only thing that is absolute is the present, not theory” (Laclau 1990: 205). No thinking, even if it declares to be objective and so to speak floating above its object, is able to emancipate itself completely from the constraints of the present. The primacy of the present, however, does not mean the futility and poverty of all socio-political thinking. Quite the reverse is actually true: the function of theory is to give an orientation to making sense of the present. As long as there is no immediate access to reality, it is the task of a theoretical reasoning to illuminate and mediate a concrete conjuncture in which we are enforced to act, think, and struggle.

Thus, Lotman conceives of himself as a scientist and Laclau as a thinker. Here, instead of reading too much into this discrepancy, I would draw attention to the fact that for both there is no transcendent point from which the entire discursive field is perceptible as an intelligible whole. There is no privileged subject like Marx's proletariat who could grasp with an instance all the complexities, that is, reality as it is in itself. There is no immediate access to sign systems and discursive formations as a whole. This amounts to saying that *self-signification take place on the very plane that is criss-crossed by different sorts of asymmetries and differences*. To trigger the process of a self-description or self-signification, it is necessary that a particularity seeks to assume the hazardous task of representing the entire diversity characteristic to the semiotic field. The following lines from Lotman illustrate the case in point:

Whether we have in mind language, politics, or culture, the mechanism is the same: one part of the semiosphere ... in the process of self-description creates its own grammar ... Then it strives to extend these norms over the whole semiosphere. A partial grammar of one cultural dialect becomes the metalanguage of description for culture as such. (Lotman 2001: 128)

Thus, no matter the domain under scrutiny, the mechanism of self-description is always one and the same. In elucidating this general model, Lotman points out how the specific dialect of Florence influenced the development of Italian language and how “the legal norms of Rome became the laws of the whole Roman Empire” (Lotman 2001: 128). In all cases, the underlying process is the same: one part of the semiosphere codifies not only its own form of life, but also gives the universal rules for the description of an entire culture. A partial dialect occupies the status of a

dominant meta-language; a limited sub-culture, or one realm of society, plays a decisive role in the emergence of cultural self-consciousness. Remaining on the abstract level, one can very easily find analogous pages from Laclau. Consider, for instance, the following lines from the preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: “[A] particular social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it. Such a form of ‘hegemonic universality’ is the only one that a political community can reach” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: x; original emphasis). For the reason that universality does not have a substantial body of its own, one political struggle among many others has to incarnate the idea of absent communitarian fullness. A particularity (or part) mediates a universality (or whole) and turns it into a hegemonic – i.e. contaminated – universality. Thus, on the abstract level, Laclau and Lotman subscribe to the similar mechanism of self-signification. This agreement remains, nevertheless, formal. Discrepancies, as we will see, emerge quickly when their respective positions are examined in detail.

I begin with Lotman, according to whom numerous internal boundaries, hierarchical levels, unevenly developed planes, and asymmetrical languages penetrate a semiotic space. At first sight, it looks as if there is no limit to the proliferation of semiotic diversity, but if that were the case, then we would have to accept pure multi-dimensional multiplicity which lacks a coherent systematicity. A semiosphere, if it does not want to fall apart, must generate some sort of unity (Lotman 2001: 128). Of all the internal asymmetries, on which not only different sorts of languages but also a semiotic space is built, the *center-periphery asymmetry* is the most fundamental one (Lotman 2001: 124–130). This asymmetry springs from the inherent need of a semiotic field to achieve a higher degree organization and to describe itself as an individuated whole. This need finds its satisfaction when one single part of the semiosphere extends its norms, values, practices, and rules to all other languages. A dialect is elevated to the status of metalanguage with which a semiotic field of culture creates a self-portrait. By doing so, this single part assumes the position of a center from which to influence all the aspects of culture and to describe the totality of a semiotic space. A center designs the entire semiotic field according to its own face and draws all other subcultures into its sphere of influence, but the further one moves from the center, the weaker its impact grows. Having reached a boundary, the self-description is in sharp contrast to an everyday reality, to a linguistic diversity, to prescribed norms (Lotman 2001: 129). The language of a center and that of a periphery are asymmetric.

The metalanguage of a self-description emerges through the process of simplification and abstraction. To organize and structure a much wider space of culture, a dialect must go through the process of its idealization. This is the only way an idiosyncratic dialect can evolve out of the meta-language of a

center, the set of grammatical rules governing semiotic interaction (Lotman 2001: 129). To arrest the proliferation of polylingual divergences, it is necessary to establish universal standards, idealized norms. And yet, no center is able to bring about full homogeneity where there is no trace of heterogeneous elements and asymmetries. Despite all the strenuous efforts, it is impossible to create such a self-image that represents in detail all the characteristics of subcultures and cultural layers. That is why the real picture is always more convoluted than the idealized description of meta-language initially suggests:

[W]hile on the meta-level the picture is one of semiotic unity, on the level of the semiotic reality which is described by the meta-level, all kinds of other tendencies flourish. While the picture of the upper level is painted in a smooth uniform color, the lower level is bright with colours and many interesting boundaries. (Lotman 2001: 130)

Thus, Lotman analytically distinguishes *two* levels. Firstly, the “meta-level” gives a simple, idealized picture of a semiotic field; and secondly, the level of the semiotic reality is more complex than the meta-picture suggests. A concrete “meta-language,” used in the self-signification, leaves out and marginalizes all that is in contradiction and deviates from the prescribed universal norms. In this way, “whole layers of cultural phenomena, which from the point of view of the given meta-language are marginal, will have no relation to the idealized portrait of that culture. They will be declared ‘non-existent’” (Lotman 2001: 129). That is why a center *fails* in realizing an ideal self-portrait. The signs of incompleteness are vividly visible at the peripheral spaces (e.g. suburbs, cellars) where “less-valued social groups,” such as the poor and the homeless, are pushed and abandoned (Lotman 2001: 140). An imperfect self-description is constructed around the center-periphery asymmetry.

Furthermore, I would emphasize that Lotman presents the general model of semiotic self-description, the aim of which is to capture and explain reality. A semiotician, even though s/he is inevitably situated within a semiotic field, deems it necessary to maintain a scientific *distance* and to capture a reality with ready-made and tested models. Laclau, in contrast, strives to participate *actively* in the construction of a social totality. Thinking is a *political practice*, an “articulatory practice.” A thinker is, to use Gramsci’s concept, an “organic intellectual” who “welds into an organic whole activities such as the channelling and representation of workers’ demands, the forms of negotiation with employer organizations and with the state, the cultural activities of the unions, etc.” (Laclau 1990: 195). Laclau extends this Marxist idea to include all political efforts at articulating the social bond. All this takes place in the differential field of the social, where, for instance, the demands of socialists, feminists, liberals, and nationalists are linked with one another differentially. That which is able to unite most of the

particularities is the presence of a common enemy (e.g. a repressive regime). An antagonizing force is a radical negativity, against which unfulfilled demands, or social groups, are prone to unite despite all of their scissions. In this negative way, social fragments are unified and bound together into “the chain of equivalences” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 127). The equivalential relation that brings into being the collective identity is in nature an antagonistic relation. This means that “the equivalences exist only through the act of subverting the differential character” of identities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 128). This subversion institutes a popular identity, but for the discursive construction of society to be complete, it is also necessary for one *part* of society to transcend its own particularity and represent the chain of equivalences. A part embodies the field of the social. A hegemonic self-signification results in a figural representation.

The preceding discussion points to significant parallels. As one subculture describes the entire semiosphere, so does one political force signify social formation. The semiotic/discursive space of culture is structurally split. While Lotman’s semiosphere is split into the center and the periphery, Laclau’s social formation is divided into the hegemonic core and heterogeneous remnants (Lotman 1999: 22). From this line of reasoning, one is too hastily inclined to infer that Laclau’s part-whole relation is in the end the same thing as Lotman’s center-periphery asymmetry. Everything seems to boil down to one single proposition: *all signifying systems are structurally divided*. In reality, however, this affinity conceals more than it discloses. The antagonistic divide refers to the impossibility of the symbolic order to actualize itself as a full positivity, whereas Lotman’s center-periphery asymmetry is just as *any other* internal asymmetry. Simply put, the antagonistic split is *unique*.

To explain the theoretical discord, let us examine in detail a hegemonic order and a cultural self-description. The chain of equivalences simplifies all the social demands present at the historical moment. A hegemonic part condenses and abridges all sorts of other unfulfilled demands. The Russian Revolution, for instance, expressed all the pleas at the time in one single slogan: “bread, peace, and land” (Laclau 2005: 97). There is nothing special in this process of simplification. The meta-language of semiosphere is born on the basis of one idealized and simplified dialect. A self-description, as a hegemonic self-signification, is in essence an abstraction. Now we are again left face to face with a signification parallel. Furthermore, in Lotman’s works, the role of metalanguage resembles the function of zero sign that, as we saw above, connects reality and semiotic space. Namely, it is only with the help of the metalanguage of self-description that a culture is able to establish and maintain relation to an extra-semiotic reality. Again, this seems to overlap with Laclau’s position, so long as social formation can be articulated performatively only with the help of an empty

signifier. A hegemonic order establishes and maintains itself in relation to the real. From this, one can conclude quickly that Laclau and Lotman are basically expressing the same thing, insofar as a zero sign and empty signifier are commonly conceived as synonyms. This conclusion is valid, when one ignores and forgets that reality is not actually the same thing as the real. The abstract analogy should not be overestimated. Discord comes quickly to the fore when we explore the reasons why self-signification and self-description necessarily fail.

Lotman would reply that *no meta-language can give an exact picture of semiotic reality*. A self-description fails because reality is far too complex and multidimensional. A self-image is incapable of accommodating the fast infiniteness of a semiotic reality (Lotman 2001: 129, 140–141). *And, as a scientist wants to adjust his/her models in communication with the research object, so does culture seek to adjust and improve its self-description in dialogue with reality*. The semiotic operation of culture is conceived after the objectivist standards of scientific activity. This conception is fundamentally at odds with Laclau, who thinks of a failure as *internal* to the process of semiosis (e.g. Laclau 1996: 36–40). The process of signification – including the hegemonic articulation of society – stumbles upon its internal limits. What maintains and triggers a self-signification is the structural void. A full totalization is impossible not because of the empirical complexity of reality, but rather because of the original lack in the process of signification (e.g. Derrida 2007: 365). Furthermore, an antagonizing other is not simply non-existent and a less valued element in the semiotic field. Through the articulation of the social link, it always obtains a real – i.e. positive – existence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 128–129). An antagonistic other *objectifies* and externalizes the impossibility internal to a signifying system (including society). This positive presence of negativity signals the deadlock in a hegemonic self-signification. Thus, in Laclau's point of view, at the origin of a failure is not the empirical infiniteness of a semiotic reality, but rather the structural impossibility of signification to realize itself as an intelligible totality.

4 “Non-original origin” of signification: Lotman's intellectualist dialogue *or* Laclau's political antagonism?

Looking back retrospectively on the rocky course which a specific culture has gone through, one is too seldom tempted to conceive all the intermediate stages and the events of dislocations as necessary steps toward a preordained *telos*.

This is the devious trap into which most exemplarily the Hegelians have been thought to step. In fact, every historical epoch contains several real possibilities on how to realize the project of its self-description. A closer inspection, Lotman thinks, will always reveal the veiled points of bifurcation where culture was facing alternative – and even opposite – paths, but out of which one was chosen and, consequently, all others excluded and forgotten (e.g. Lotman 2009: 158). This choice is always precarious. On a formal level, this way of reasoning recalls Laclau's definition of the political as the moment of undecidability or that of contingency. This is not all that there is to it, though. Namely, Laclau conceives of the institution and transformation of the part-whole relation *politically* as the *antagonistic* relation, whereas Lotman conceptualizes the emergence and change of the periphery-center relation in *intellectualist* terms as *dialogue*. The roots of this non-trivial discrepancy lie in *ontology*, i.e. in how our being-in-signification is experienced and thought.

If semiosis were based only on one single language, then reality would be buried under the semiotic layers, and it would be beyond comprehension. A look into history, however, proves this static model to be false. Irreducible pluralism is a critical reason, because of which the boundary of reality and semiotic space cannot be a pre-given and fixed fact. The unevenness and polyvalency creates pre-conditions not only for the reception of unknown texts, but also for the breakthrough through extra-cultural reality (Lotman 2009: 24). To guarantee its dynamic development and vitality, it is essential for a cultural semiosis to establish and maintain a playful relation with an extra-semiotic, or extra-cultural, reality. To take part in this kind of play means to engage in a *dialogue* with the unknown and foreign texts, and very often the external influences are translated and incorporated to the familiar canon. A dialogue with that which is exterior to a cultural space contributes to the *dynamic* development. *Boundaries, either external or internal to the semiosphere, are all dialogical*. Additionally, Laclau draws attention to the incompleteness and open-endedness of discursive-hegemonic formations. In his version of discourse analysis, however, power struggles and power relations take over the role of a dialogue. The social bond is constructed discursively out of different social fragments in relation to an antagonizing other. The limits of society are contested and antagonistic (Laclau 1996: 37). Whereas Lotman conceives of the boundary of reality and semiosis as a never-ending dialogue, Laclau thinks of the internal limits of the social as the zone of an incessant struggle to articulate a discursive-hegemonic order.

It is quite correct to indicate that both the dialogic boundaries and the antagonistic limits signal the structural openness of signification, but this formal similarity does not mean that discourse theory ends up in being the same thing as the semiotics of culture. The conceptual weight attributed either to dialogue

or to antagonism actually points to two opposing predicaments – namely, to political practicisism and to *intellectualism*. This is confirmed by Laclau's endorsement of an organic intellectual who participates *actively* in the struggle to articulate politically the antagonistic limits of the social; and by Lotman's defense of a semiotician as a scientist who uses and develops all sorts of models and typologies and who seeks to keep distance from his/her objects of research for the sake of objectivity. This disagreement culminates there, where it is necessary to explain in what way the transformation of a cultural self-portrait differs from the change of a discursive-hegemonic order.

All sorts of languages, out of which the semiotic space is composed, are neither absolutely asymmetrical nor completely isomorphic. To assure some form of co-existence, it is urgent to translate encoded texts from one "dialect" into another. The acts of translation are the elementary forms of dialogue where participants dynamically change from being a passive recipient to being an active transmitter of information (Lotman 2001: 143). Lotman extends this general model to the macro-level changes, i.e. to the long-term cycles of life. As in the discrete phases of a conversation and so in the stages of a cultural change, an interval separates the periods of receiving to that of transmitting. While the meta-language of a dominant center is expanding and producing all sorts of new texts, a periphery receives and absorbs a foreign influence. In due course, as in conversations, the positions are prone to change: after the period of reception, a periphery may begin the phase of expansion and, in the end, re-describe the entire field of culture. A center and periphery are engaged in an incessant dialogue, as a result of which their topological positions are apt to change (Lotman 2001: 145). Lotman exemplifies this insight with the Renaissance, with "the 'Italian period' of European culture" at the time of which "Italian became the language of courts and of dandies, of fashion and of diplomacy" (Lotman 2001: 145). In European countries, Italian became a widely spread meta-language. Seen in a broader historical perspective, this stage was preceded by an earlier period, where Italy received, absorbed, and mastered foreign influences from the various corners of the world. *The logic of a dialogue is a model for explaining how a periphery takes the position of a transmitter while a previous center retreats to the position of a receiver.*

Laclau, like Lotman, starts with the plurality, with the heterogeneous terrain which offers many real possibilities on how to construct the social bond out of it (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 140). Of these possibilities, however, none is an ideal representation, able to overcome all social divisions and reflect society for itself as it is in itself. Democratic representations are always overdetermined and opaque, for the reason that there is no one-to-one correspondence between social demands and their political expression. That is also why a hegemonic

self-signification, regardless of its inherent drive to establish communitarian fullness, never manages to produce a transparent representation. One can always discover heterogeneous elements such as Marx's *lumpenproletariat* which the relatively homogenous space of representation is unable to accommodate (e.g. Laclau 2005: 139–156). Furthermore, the only possible way to bring into being the hegemonic relation is to give a real existence to an antagonistic other. These limits, however, are not objectively fixed once and for all: that is to say, there is neither a permanent enemy nor an eternal friend. Instead of being forever banned from the public space, a heterogeneous other may be “the starting point for a new collective identification *opposed* to the law of the city” (Laclau 2014: 211; original emphasis). A counter-hegemonic force, after it gathers strength, can overthrow a ruling regime and, further, it can re-articulate social formation. In some significant aspects, this way of reasoning resembles the transformation of a center-periphery relation, but for Laclau it is rather the contingent outcome of political struggle – and not dialogue – that eventually determines what form the antagonistic divide of the social will acquire.

To sum up, dialogue and antagonism lead therefore in opposite directions of how to think of the transformation of cultural and social structures. To refute this claim, one may reply that this discrepancy is not as sharp and essential as it may seem. Namely, it is perfectly conceivable that semiotics may be reformulated in terms of discourse analysis and *vice versa*. One can even argue that the discursive formation of the social link (i.e. the chain of equivalences) involves translating and mediating the different types of demands and social struggles. Thus, dialogue does not have to be opposed diametrically to antagonism. Nevertheless, I believe that this discrepancy is not just another irrelevant issue of terminology which one can easily ignore and do away with. To grasp what exactly is at stake, I suggest going to the roots of the matter, that is, to *the ontological underpinnings of the antagonism-dialogue opposition*.

Drawing from Heidegger's idea of ontological difference between being and beings, I would distinguish in Lotman's work two notions of dialogue: firstly, one of the ontic and, secondly, that of the ontological. Under the ontic type, I suggest classifying all the possible acts of communication. However, Lotman is not satisfied with a mere description of the ontic characteristics of all possible conversations. As his works testify, he deems it necessary to trace the very possibility of communication back to its condition of possibility – i.e. to the existence of the semiosphere. The linguistic interaction presupposes the prior openness of semiosis, the pre-existence of a semiotic space. Thus, before having pronounced any single word, we are already inescapably captured within the world of a semiosis, within the uncanny power of signification. This, I think, is

the main idea of Lotman's assertion that "semiotic experience precedes the semiotic act" (Lotman 2001: 123). From my point of view, this precedence is primarily ontological. Before communicating anything at all, the semiotic experience, or the experience of "semioticity," conveys the fundamental fact – "There is meaning." What exactly is pre-intuited is the possible significance of all structures (Lotman 2001: 128), or, put differently, the experience of semioticity communicates our being-in-semiosis, our being-in-language that tends to be concealed and forgotten in the actual acts of conversation. However, to be immersed in the semiosis means for Lotman to be embedded in a dialogic situation. This explains why "the need for dialogue, *the dialogic situation*, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis" (Lotman 2001: 143–144; original emphasis). The semiotic experience conveys nothing less than our inherent need to engage in dialogue. For any real dialogue to take place, we must already dwell in the dialogic situation in which all real dialogues become possible. (Lotman 2001: 142). *Prior to any type of ontic dialogue, semiosis has already disclosed itself to us as the "space" of dialogue.*

By the same token, in discourse analysis we can separate the ontic and ontological concept of social antagonism. To explicate this claim, let us start with how Laclau distinguishes concrete discourses from the "discursive," i.e. "the horizon of any object's constitution" that "cannot generally possess conditions of possibility, whereas the concrete discourses built within that horizon certainly do possess them" (Laclau 1990: 220). As linguistic beings, we are always already dwelling in the discursive horizon, in which the constitution of all signifying structures and other types of signifying acts is possible. *The experience of the discursive points to our being-in-signification*, the content of which is the fundamental fact: "There is meaning." What is conveyed here is not some semantic value, but rather the very openness of signification. For Laclau, though, it is pre-eminently at the limits of society (or discursive formation) where language conveys nothing less than itself, but what expresses itself at these limits is the pressing need to determine the content of an order (e.g. Laclau 1996: 44). This need for an order is in substance the need to distinguish the "us" from the "them," the "friend" from the "enemy." Just as Lotman's need for a dialogue precedes a real dialogue, so the antagonistic situation precedes the real embodiment of antagonism. Thus, to be situated in the discursive horizon means to be immersed in the antagonistic situation that ontologically precedes and exceeds all the possible articulations of an antagonistic frontier. *Prior to any hegemonic incarnation of the social divide, signification has already disclosed itself to us as the "space" of antagonism.*

Thus, Lotman distinguishes the real dialogue (the ontic) from the dialogical situation (the ontological) in the same way as Laclau differentiates the antagonistic horizon as the condition of possibility for the concrete hegemonic articulation of antagonism. In general, the discrepancy of dialogue/antagonism boils down to two incompatible ways of how to understand and think of our being-in-signification.

Regardless, there is one significant – but still formal – analogy. Namely, both for Lotman and Laclau, it is impossible to bring into language directly the very relation of signification irrespective of whether we think of signification as the relation of dialogue or as the relation of antagonism. This means that neither the dialogical relation of reality and semiotic space nor the antagonistic relation of the real and discourse can be fully transparent. Just as Lotman rejects the possibility of an ideal dialogue, of a complete identity of receiver and transmitter, so does Laclau reject conceiving social antagonism as the Manichean struggle between the absolute light and the absolute darkness. That is why there is no “originary origin,” no immediate access to the relation of signification. To clarify this claim, it is instructive to turn to Derrida, according to whom there is no “transcendental signified,” i.e. no immediate access to the structurality, or being, of structure (Derrida 2007: 354). But in opposition to a mere absence, the impossibility of pure being points to a “nonlocus” that, as a sort of function, can be filled in with “substitutes” for a transcendental signified (Derrida 2007: 353–354). This way of reasoning illuminates our analysis. What, as we know, triggers and keeps signification operative is the relation that links a semiotic space with reality and a discursive structure with the real. A real dialogue and a hegemonic order convey and fix but do not suture this relation of signification. Neither of them is capable of extinguishing the movement of a signification and of grasping the signifying relation in its objective transparency. All this amounts to saying that *Laclau’s hegemonic formation and Lotman’s self-description are actually “non-originary origins” or substitutes, the function of which is to represent the relation of signification or being.*

This fact that discourse analysis and semiotics can be formulated with the help of Derrida does not imply that we can do away with the opposition of dialogue and antagonism. This ontological discrepancy determines their conceptual framework. Specifically, it comes to the fore when one examines the role of politics in culture and society.

Lotman, I think, perceives politics as *one* language among *many* others. In contrast to Laclau’s treatment of politics as practice, I think Lotman turns politics into one regional sphere of culture or that of society. To explain this claim, let us take the concluding chapter of *Culture and Explosion*, where the

traits of politics seem to depend on the type of culture (Lotman 2009: 172–174). Lotman distinguished two types of culture: a binary and ternary system. Binary systems such as in Russia imagine “the idea of the complete and unconditional destruction of existing developments and the apocalyptic generation of the new” (Lotman 2009: 173). In contrast, ternary systems (dominant in Western Europe) balance the change and continuity. The explosion in one sphere of culture does not automatically lead to the transformation of all fundamental co-ordinates of all cultural layers. The fall of Napoleon and the dissolution of the Roman Empire, for instance, did cause the total destruction of Western civilization (Lotman 2009: 172–173). A ternary system, favoured by Lotman, allows a dialogical interaction between the different layers of semiosphere. Following this general postulate, we may conclude that the political realm as one subsystem of semiotic space is always in an on-going dialogue with other social realms. A cultural and social self-description is born out of a dialogue. Dialogue plays a crucial role in the constitution of semiotic reality. All in all, Lotman's semiotics develops an intellectualistic view.

Lotman conceives politics as one specific subsystem of culture, whereas Laclau pursues an opposite path leading to the politicization of cultural identities, practices, and institutions. *Lotman culturalizes politics, whereas Laclau politicizes all the cultural identities, institutions, and practices.* This does not mean, of course, that everything is immediately political. To signify itself at all, a semiotic field of culture must necessarily exclude politically all alternative self-descriptions. From Laclau's point of view, all social identities, even if they may not appear so at first sight, are always covertly political (Laclau 1990: 34–35). The political underpinnings come forth in a state of crisis, where all the cultural phenomena *may* acquire a political significance. Whereas Lotman makes politics into one *field* of culture, Laclau approaches social reality from the standpoint of the political that subverts and mediates the social body. That is to say, Laclau is not so much interested in politics as one autonomous region of society. The division into spheres, which liberals comprehend as a pre-given and objective fact, is the result of political struggle. Society, including liberal society, is instituted politically. *The political is not the region of society or that of culture, but rather the constitutive “principle” of social objectivity.* Furthermore, it is relevant to add that Laclau does not just put forward the regional ontology – i.e. an ontology of politics – but rather the ontology of all beings. This kind of general ontology is political, i.e. political ontology (e.g. Laclau 2014: 204–205). Discourse analysis, like in the semiotic theory of culture, claims to be universal. As Laclau universalizes his ontological way of thinking, so does Lotman universalize his semiotic method. These two universalizations are incompatible with each other.

To sum up, it may be possible to translate Laclau's ideas into the terminology of Lotman's semiotics and *vice versa*, but in doing so, one tends to overlook an unbridgeable abyss which separates discourse analysis from semiotics. This abyss is productive for the reason that it induces dialogue and antagonism, but for all this to have meaning, one must have already decided on one approach. All the subsections of the current article aimed at guiding a reader toward the points of juncture where one is forced to decide whether to go along the path of Lotman or, instead, that of Laclau.

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