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Between Times and Spaces: Polyglotism and Polychronism in Yuri Lotman / *Entre tempos e espaços: poliglottismo e policronismo em Iúri Lotman*

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ABSTRACT

Even if Lotman's theory has often been presented as a semiotic theory based on categories of space, temporal categories are crucial as well. And as we can speak of polyglotism as one of the main features of culture, we should speak of polychronism as well. In each state of culture, in fact, we find many temporal codes, and the internal dialogue is not only based on codes coming from different spaces (in the normal sense of polyglotism), but also as coming from different times (in the sense of a sort of polychronism). Lotman's reflections about this aspect of culture could be very useful in order to understand some aspects of our society, where we find a form of *presentism*, the temporal dimension corresponding to localism within the spatial dimension, which globalization has produced.

KEYWORDS: Lotman; Semiosphere; Auto-communication; Translation; Perspectivism

RESUMO

Não obstante a teoria de Lotman tenha sido frequentemente apresentada como uma teoria semiótica baseada em categorias de espaço, as categorias temporais também se destacam em sua relevância. Se se pode pensar o poliglottismo como um dos principais mecanismos da cultura, também deveríamos considerar igualmente o policronismo. Na verdade, em cada momento da cultura encontramos muitos códigos temporais cujo diálogo interno não se baseia apenas em códigos provenientes de diferentes espaços (no sentido comum de poliglottismo), mas também em códigos de tempos distintos (no sentido de uma espécie de policronia). As reflexões de Lotman sobre tal mecanismo da cultura poderiam contribuir para entender alguns aspectos de nossa sociedade em que encontramos uma forma de presentismo, a dimensão temporal correspondente ao localismo dentro da dimensão espacial, produzido pela globalização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Lotman; Semiosfera; Autocomunicação; Tradução; Perspectivismo

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In a society where immigration and mobility are increasingly prevalent, the experience of polyglotism is becoming more and more widespread. We live in cities where people hail from very different backgrounds, where we are surrounded by shops selling products belonging to cultures so far from our own, with the effect that we grow accustomed to names that were once exotic (Indian *saris*, pseudo-Palestinian *keffiyeh*, Chinese *woks*, Arabic *kebabs*). We listen to music that exposes us to the languages of other cultures: a Babel where polyglotism is the rule and where the semantic repertoires are rapidly changing.

However, there is not only an ethnic and geographic polyglotism, linked to the different backgrounds of the members of our society. Another way to think of cultural polyglotism is to reflect upon the different temporal codes which coexist in a state of culture, thinking not only of the dialogue between languages that hail from different spaces (in the normal sense of *polyglotism*), but from different times (in the sense of a sort of *polychronism*).

My goal here is to offer a brief theoretical reflection on this dimension, referring to the theory of Yuri Lotman, which gives a particular semiotic centrality to the temporal dimension.¹ At the end of this contribution, we will see also some risks of this ‘polychronism’, first of all a contemporarisation of the past that risks to reduce it just to a repertoire of quotes without specificity.

1 Lotman and his Approach to Time

In order to consider that special kind of polyglotism referred to here as polychronism, Lotman’s theory of culture is very useful, because many pages in his texts speak about the fact that there are different temporalities in a same single state of culture. We will refer in particular to the following essays, which present an actual theory of time in the cultural space: Part II: The Semiosphere and Part III: Cultural memory, History and Semiotics in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic theory of Culture* (LOTMAN, 1990); Chapter 3, Gradual progress; Chapter 4: Continuity and

¹ For an overview of the Lotman’s theory and its relevance for a cultural semiotic approach, see Lorusso, 2015, chapter 2.

discontinuity; Chapter 11, The logic of explosion; Chapter 12, The moment of unpredictability; Chapter 19, Perspectives, and Chapter 20, On place of conclusions in *Culture and Explosion* (LOTMAN, 2009).

As Remm (2010) and Gherlone (2014) have pointed out, Lotman's theory looks more like a *spatial* theory of culture than a *temporal* one; the semiosphere is theorized as a *synchronic* space, in which the question of borders (a *spatial* dimension therefore) and that of the functional organization of an organic ecosystem are central. However, if we consider his late writings (from 1990 onwards), we can see how any spatial understanding of the cultural sphere always includes a temporal dimension.

The spatiality of cultural space is not separate from its temporality, but rather analogous and interchangeable to it. The opposition of categories of space and time is introduced according to the needs of the processes of cultural (self-)description. Accordingly, the *beginning* and *end* can be seen as spatial or temporal (or spatio-temporal) categories (REMM, 2010, p.11; emphasis in original).

According to Lotman, culture is made up of layers (a spatial metaphor) that develop at different speeds. Such different speeds can vary from the slowness of a tired progress to the explosiveness of a sudden and unforeseen change. The latter is defined by Lotman as an *explosion*. The last contributions by Lotman (published under the title, *Culture and Explosion*) are devoted to precisely this temporal heterogeneity. As he notes:

Culture, whilst it is a complex whole, is created from elements which develop at different rates, so that any one of its synchronic sections reveals the simultaneous presence of these different stages. Explosions in some layers may be combined with gradual development in others. This, however, does not preclude the interdependence of these layers. Thus, for example, dynamic processes in the sphere of language and politics or of morals and fashion demonstrate the different rates at which these processes move. And although more rapid processes may exert an accelerating influence on those that move more slowly, and whilst the latter may appropriate for themselves the self-description of those that move more quickly and thus accelerate their own development their dynamics are not synchronic (LOTMAN, 2009, p.12).

The fact that there are different speeds between the different *organs* of a culture is not a disease of the system, according to Lotman, because, indeed, it is the friction between slow processes and accelerated movements that generates the new. “The aggression of one does not subdue but, rather, stimulates the development of the opposite tendency” (LOTMAN 2009, p.12). To evolve according to a unique rhythm that is entirely its own can mean maturing, but not profoundly changing, because truly innovative change takes place through the contact with otherness, foreignness, thus through the contact with a different process. Thus, the coexistence of time periods and different speeds is something necessary for cultural life. Just as culture needs polyglotism, in the same way it needs polychronism.

Lotman’s metaphor of the museum (that precedes *Culture and Explosion*, but which is clearly in line with that book) is well known: he uses it in order to explain what he means by the synchronic state of a culture, how many temporal codes and temporal pasts it includes:

Imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on displays, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; there are also the explanations composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also tour-leaders and visitors in this hall, and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which in a certain sense it is). This is an image of the semiosphere (LOTMAN, 1990, p.127).

The semiosphere, which is synonymous with culture, is a multichronic space, where any subject has different kinds of relationships, horizontal relationships (with the other texts and other languages that circulate in the historical context in which he or she is, inside and outside his or her own environment) and vertical relationships (the way texts and codes of the past have influenced the present day and model, in a way, the future). It is exactly this overall set of “horizontal” and “vertical” relationships that constitutes the specificity of each culture state; it is this network of relationships that defines that fleeting, ever-changing, reticular, mobile, widespread entity that culture is. It is necessary to keep in mind – Lotman writes just at the end of *Culture and Explosion* – the fact that the system has a memory of its past states and an anticipation of potential

“future states.” Thus, semiotic space is simultaneously multi-dimensional in both the synchronic and diachronic sense.

If, through the metaphor of the museum, Lotman underlines the temporal multiplicity of a universe of culture, in another essay (The artistic context as an everyday space, 1974 in Lotman, 1998, pp.26-28), in order to explain the *inclusive* and *exclusive* characterization of the category of culture, he uses another spatial metaphor, close to that of the museum but different in its focus: the metaphor of the interior (*l'intérieur*). Like any house or dwelling, like any “inner” space – Lotman says – the artistic and cultural space is never filled only with works and objects that are synchronic with the moment of their creation. Every room includes elements from different ages and dates, without including (or wanting to include) everything. The person who lives in that house will have applied a criterion of selection, making some elements compatible and others utterly inadequate. As an interior element, culture needs a selection criterion that would define compatibilities and incompatibilities. “The characteristic of each age and culture is the existence of quite fixed and typical relationships together with very specific incompatibilities” (LOTMAN, 1998, p.28). Cultural universes, in fact, tend to an internal organisation and this allows some possibilities and excludes others.

As the culture mechanisms grow increasingly complicated, the simple juxtaposition of the 'cultural' space (organised) and the 'non cultural' (not organised) is replaced by a hierarchy: inside a closed space stand increasingly higher hierarchical sectors (LOTMAN, 1998, p.28).

This is an important point for our argument. According to Lotman, plurality is necessary; polyglotism and polychronism are necessary, but they must be unified, they must be governed, regulated by a criterion of order. As many scholars underline (cf. in particular Torop, 1994; Zylko, 2001; Andrews, 2009), even if asymmetry and dynamism are essential features of any semiosphere, they are submitted to a constant work of regularization that turns what is not systemic into something systemic, turning the ambivalent into something that is not ambiguous, the peripheral into something central, the chaotic into something with an order.

It is a criterion of order that regulates the action of filtering and adaptation upon which each culture is based. The filtering does not solely involve what is external and different, but also what is inside the internal space but extraneous. To accept plurality means to accept forms of extraneity, which can be a *space* extraneity (that comes from outside our borders) or a *time* extraneity. Perhaps this aspect, linked to time, has not been sufficiently considered. At each synchronic state there is a double “risk of corruption,” a double potential extraneity: the extraneity of the time layers different from the current one and the extraneity of the cultural layers coming from spaces external to one’s own space.

The past, in fact – although it is our past, the past of our country, of our family – may be as unknown and distant from us as the present of another “tribe.” Lotman is very clear about this point. The internal conflict of culture is also a time issue. Not all the “cells” of a culture evolve at the same speed (for example, stable systems like language vs. mobile systems like fashion), and sometimes the evolution of the system is not compatible with the need for homogeneity of the system. Despite the acceptance of plurality, when plurality becomes very heterogeneous, we develop the need for persistence and homogeneity, which the system requires in order to keep on recognizing itself as such, as unique. The integration of plurality and the specialization of single identities are the two facets of one single cultural organism. Once integration gets to include too many subjects, specialization simplifies reality by reducing its heterogeneity.

In dynamism the simultaneity of the two processes in culture is important. On the one hand, in different fields of culture, specialisation of cultural languages takes place as a result of autocommunication and identity searches. On the other hand, on the level of culture as a whole, the integration of cultural languages emerges as a possibility of self-communication and self-understanding. Yet the dynamism of integration is revealed in the simultaneity of the two processes: self-descriptions and alongside them, meta-descriptions or descriptions from the position of culture as a whole (TOROP, 2009, p.xxviii).

2 The Role of Autocommunication

As we can discern from the passage above, the dimension of autocommunication is central in Lotman, and to handling the (even temporal) heterogeneity of culture. I believe that this point is one of Lotman's most relevant contributions to the understanding of cultural dynamics: a series of manifestations (texts, symbols, rites, myths...) are nothing other than representations of self as coherent unity, discourses addressed to oneself to reinforce the coherent perception of one's own identity: a reading key given by us to ourselves.

As Torop (2009) points out, the tendency to reduce the heterogeneity of culture manifests itself through self-description (elaborated individually by subjects about themselves) and meta-description (elaborated by artists, scholars, analysts of the culture as a whole). Meta-mechanisms, in fact, re-frame everything within a coherent identity. Thus, diversification/homologation, pluralism/unitariness, change and continuity are always guaranteed and linked. Polyglotism and heterogeneity guarantee change, meta-mechanisms through which culture defines itself guarantee continuity and unification. And meta-mechanisms occur also in temporal facts.

The meta-mechanism not only provides a certain standard for the synchronic state of culture, but also his version of the diachronic process. It selects not only the texts of the present but also those of the past culture. (*in: Culture as collective intellect and problems of artificial intelligence, 1977*) (LOTMAN, 1980, p.40).

In re-working the temporal dimension, culture as a collective consciousness interprets itself through a strong process of filtering, assuming some texts and expelling others. As Lotman clearly demonstrates with his example of Peter the Great, in his 1986 conversation on People, Destiny, Everyday Life, in which the Russian Tsar brought about a profound renewal of Russia by embracing Europe and excluding all that was traditionally Russian: "all that was new was good, all that was old was bad." The labour of redefining Russian identity was a labour of its heritage, its roots. Looking to Europe as a model meant reconstructing the *history* of Russia *ad hoc*, giving it a renewed

temporal dimension. And in this way, he built a new present, with very special Russian forms of life, inventing a new tradition² and sketching new possible futures.

In other periods and in other places, self-modelling implied the opposite. If Peter the Great based the valorization of Russia on the New, in the European Middle Ages, novelty seemed sinful and the repetition of the old, of the already said, was the ideal of intellectual work, placing scholars as “dwarves on the shoulders of giants.”

It clearly emerges, therefore, that the fundamental category with which to understand cultural history, cultural *temporal narratives*, is *translation*. Lotman already used translation in a spatial sense, as crucial on the boundaries of identities: even when considering the past, culture carries out an act of translation. In the elaboration of its own historical identity, each culture translates and adapts elements of the past in the frame of the present, building its own version of history. What is so interesting in this work, is what is “saved” as significant and what is rejected. Lotman states very clearly: “the ‘non-facts’ of different periods would make interesting lists” (LOTMAN, 1990, p.218). The history of a culture, the temporal process of a form of life, is made by “positive” elements and by absent elements, which we should list as the first ones. Positive and absent elements are all part of a meta-description, the result of our work of self-communication.

Here we find a very important point, which has to do with the *perspectivism* of Lotman. If in the generalized cultural dynamism what changes is not only the present but also the past, and our idea and definition of the past, then events, past events, are never given and defined once and for all. They are texts, discursive architectures, human products. In the essays of *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic theory of Culture* (LOTMAN, 1990), Lotman reflects extensively on the category of event, pointing out the specificity on the historical thought, which has to move on from human elaborations (because events are texts) and is unable to move on from data, evidences (as scientific discourse). We can never think of the past as something fixed and rigid, because dynamism pertains to the whole semiosphere, the past included:

The interrelationship between cultural memory and its self-reflection
is like a constant dialogue: texts from chronologically earlier periods

² The key reference for the concept of “invention of tradition” continues to be Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

are brought into culture and interacting with contemporary mechanisms, generate an *image of the historical past*, which culture transfers into the past and which, like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present. But as it transforms the present, *the past too changes its shape*. This process does not take place in a vacuum: both partners in the dialogue are partners too in other confrontation, both are open to the intrusion of new texts from outside, and the texts, as we have already had cause to stress, always contain in themselves the potentiality for new interpretations. Just as different prognoses of the future make up an inevitable part of the universum of culture, so culture cannot do without '*prognoses of the past*' (*in*: Can there be a science of history) (LOTMAN, 1990, p.272; italics mine).

We project ourselves in the future and in the past, with the same needs, the same questions, the same passions. This is why we try to predict the future, of course, but also why we make prognoses about the past, as it would still be undetermined. We look back at the past from a particular position in the present, and this is not only a matter of point of view (of something that is “there,” before us), but also a matter of definition (we give names to the past – and so we *constitute* the past from our own position): we *give identity* and order to the past according to our position in the present.

The historian regards an event from a point of view which is oriented from present to past. This view, by its very nature, transforms the object of description. The picture of events, which appears chaotic to the casual observer, leaves the hands of the historian in the form of a secondary organization. It is natural for the historian to proceed from the inevitability of what has occurred. However, his creative activity is manifested in other ways: from the abundance of facts stored in memory, he constructs a sequential line, leading with the utmost reliability towards this conclusive point (LOTMAN, 2009, p.17).

Between the historian and the events there is always a mediation – a text – because each historian is part of a culture, they are immersed in a culture that will give them patterns, models, values, signs.

This is why we should not think of memory in terms of a depository, but as a kaleidoscope, where each one only gives relevance to certain facets, and only recognizes itself in certain parts (GHERLONE, 2014, p.118). After all, the dynamics of reflection are crucial in the whole of Lotman's theory; the relationships between the subjects and his opposites are ruled by enantiomorphism, that is, a mode of reflection

where the two parts, the two sides of a whole are the same but opposite, as would be the case with superimposing gloves.

In Lotman (1990, p.272), we read: in memory,

[...] the least appropriate one is the image of the library with books on its shelves, or a computer with data of whatever quantity stored in its memory. Memory is more like a generator, reproducing the past again; it is the ability, given certain impulses, to switch on the process of generating a conceptualized reality which the mind transfers into the past.

Thanks to the mechanism of a generator, through the structure of a kaleidoscope, each culture organizes its own history: its past, its present and its expected future. In tracing the sequential line of our own history, as we look back at the past we reduce its heterogeneity, yet, somehow, we double our temporal experience. We feel ourselves to be in *our present* and in the *present of the past*. Of course we are living a paradox, an illusion, because in assigning a meaning to the past, we use a retrospective gaze (from the present to the past), but re-living that past, projecting us in that past, we pretend to have the gaze of the past (that move from the past to the present, step by step).

The retrospective view allows the historian to examine the past from two points of view: being located in the future in relation to the event described, he sees before himself a whole chain of completed actions; transporting himself mentally into the past and looking from the past into the future, he already knows the results of the process. [...] The historian may be compared with the theatrical spectator who watches a play for the second time: on the one hand, he knows how it will end and there is nothing unpredictable about it for him. The play, for him, takes place, as it were, in the past from which he extracts his knowledge of the matter. But, simultaneously, as a spectator who looks upon the scene, he finds himself once again in the present and experiences a feeling of uncertainty, an alleged “ignorance” of how play will end. These mutual but also mutually opposing experiences merge, paradoxically, into a certain feeling of simultaneity. Thus, the event that has occurred presents itself in a multi-layered fashion: on the one hand, it is aligned to the memory of the explosion it has recently experienced and on the other – it acquires the features of an inevitable destination. The latter is psychologically connected with the tendency to turn back to that which has occurred and to subject it to a “correction” in the memory or in its retelling. This is why we should examine in detail the psychological basis of written memoirs and what is more, the psychological substantiation of historical texts (LOTMAN 2009, p.126).

In conclusion, what emerges besides the problem of “regularization of the unpredictable,” which Lotman shows us in his late essays of *Culture and Explosion*, through the tracing *ex post* of a clear (and causal) timeline, is that:

- polychronism is essential to culture;
- in this polychronic sphere everything depends on the gaze and on the position of who is looking, so that the image of the past, present and future is always changing;
- we need a criterion to handle this temporal heterogeneity, this pluralism, because there cannot be a purely temporal expansion *ad infinitum* but only a limited plurality that we have to order, starting from our own present.

This cultural theory of time, that I've just sketched here, is particularly useful, in my opinion, in order to clarify some contemporary uses and abuses of history, which are a special case of polychronism.

3 Today's Polychronism

Today we live a sort of multiplication of different temporal layers, a multiplication that shuffles many kinds of pasts (the ancient past, the recent past, the world war past, the post-Soviet past, the post-ideological past, and so on) and many kinds of temporalities (the immediate one of the present, the *longue durée* of the economy, the persistence of cultural heritage, the “contemporaneity” of globalization etc). We find ourselves in a situation of extreme temporal complexity, where we have to face more temporalities than ever before. This is due to many factors:

- our knowledge of the past is increasingly detailed;
- the changes in our society are happening much faster than in previous ones (and this creates new pasts very quickly);
- we have a meta-linguistic way to relate to the past that quotes it and re-uses it, as postmodernism has started to do;
- we have a real passion for memory (both on an academic level and in everyday life), so that everywhere we have memorials, new museums, films about our past;

- globalization has confronted us with different states of development, each one with its own temporality.

In this regard, Bakhtin's *chronotope* category³ is quite useful (BAKHTIN, 1937-38).⁴ According to Bakhtin, in literature there are some stereotypical ways of appropriating temporal and spatial aspects of reality. Narrative offers a number of images (the road, the castle, the provincial town, the threshold) that link particular places to a certain kind of temporal process and event (disruptive, repetitive, cyclic, and so on) and a series of possible and predictable developments derives from this spatio-temporal link. These images are "the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.250); from their spatio-temporal density comes their narrative potential. We can say that in Bakhtinian world, chronotopes serve to converge narrative elements otherwise scattered, to give them concreteness, evidence and connection, so as to develop successive plots. The chronotope is at the same time an element of synthesis and an element of further developments: places like the street, the living room, the castle, the square (these are the examples that Bakhtin gives) encompass particular actors, particular passions, particular valorizations.

Bakhtin talks about the chronotope only in the context of literary discourse, does not extend it to other areas of culture, as I am doing here. In my opinion, culture as a whole has a need for chronotopes: that is, culture looks for marked space-time, which act as a synthesis and potential for further developments.

One of the difficulties of contemporaneity is, from my point of view, that we have many chronotopes. We live in a time characterized by a multiplicity of chronotopes. We no longer have a dominant chronotope, but rather, what is dominant is the tendency to mix, to shuffle different chronotopes. We have more temporal layers (in Lotman's terms) than in the past, and we have more chronotopes (in Bakhtin's terms) at disposal in order to narrate our temporal experience, but without one dominant chronotope: the web (first of all), the street, the future (of science fiction but also of technology), the square (let's think to the phenomenon of Arab Spring). The result is a very heterogeneous and ever-changing "history telling," whereby – looking to our past –

³ On the role of category of chronotope, see Torop (2017).

⁴ On the relationship between Bakhtin's and Lotman's theory, see Torop (1999), Petrilli (1999), Shukman (1989) and Bethea (1997).

we proceed in a horizontal way (jumping from one chronotope to the other), and not in a vertical way. Chronotopes (that of the road, of *Paradise Lost*, of the desert, of 9/11...) become a set of possible quotations and, as a consequence, the role of the subject of enunciation grows in importance. The place, the time and the identity of the subject of enunciation is what justifies and explains the set of chronotopical quotations shuffled together.

The impression, therefore, is that this multiplication of temporalities, this kind of *polychronism* in which we currently find ourselves, tends to generate as its opposite a sort of passion for the present: a “presentism” that is the equivalent of the localism that globalization has produced. In the last quotation I gave, Lotman was speaking about “a feeling of simultaneity.” This simultaneity shuffles temporalities and creates a collapse between past temporalities and present temporalities, confusing chronotopes.

3.1 The Presentism

The idea of “presentism” is borrowed from a contemporary historian, François Hartog (2003), who thinks that our contemporary way of living historical time aims to bring it back to the present.

We can consider, for example, anniversaries. Many anniversaries are celebrated today. Often, however, these moments are not occasions for an effective deepening of the past, I mean: opportunities to try to look at that past with a good distance and recognize its value, the role of a given event in History (the “great History” with a capital H). Often these moments are occasions to talk about them as if we were living them today; to project ourselves into a time that does not exist in fact, which is a present in which we relive the feelings of the past. This is a theme that I tackled in an essay of mine in 2013, in which I analyzed in particular the 2009 twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. All the media – in Italy but the phenomenon is widespread – tried to project the viewer or the reader in the Berlin of that time, pretending to be able to bring him back to live today, at the present time, the feelings of that time. In this way the past becomes only the occasion of a renewed emphasis on the present, a way to strengthen the present, expanding its boundaries backwards, up to the past.

This return to the present, to the “localism” of the *hic et nunc* is typical of moments of confusion, of multiplication. Following Lotman, faced with multiple temporal levels, culture reacts by returning to a point of stabilization, one that is self-centered. The self (also when we speak about History with a capital H) becomes the criterion to order and handle plurality and, in temporal terms, the self corresponds to a form of *hic et nunc*.

Therefore, even if we are in a culture where the plans of temporality are more and more numerous (because memory has become a sort of “trend” – with memory museums, memory graphic novels, vintage designs – and, on the other hand, the speed of our technological devices and our life is becoming faster and faster and the digital archives are making available a lot of previously inaccessible information), the effect is not a real expansion of the time line, but a sort of need to bring everything back to the present, in a constant “instantanisation” of life.

The paradoxicality of this tension between unity and diversity, between the tendency towards multiplication and the need to re-centre ourselves on a core identity, has already been noted in the globalism of our world. Today, thanks to geo-political evolution and technological progress, we live in a globalized space, where the entire world can be the context for our discourses. My voice, my discourse, are not heard only by those who have a direct relation with me but can be heard simultaneously all around the world, in the same way that what I am eating or wearing in Italy can be eaten or worn in China or Chile. Therefore, beside this “translatability” of my discourse, the *local* nature of my enunciation has not changed. On the contrary, the specificity of some features is more and more underlined: individuality is much stronger today than in the past, the search for what is typical and specific about a certain world is a common feature in our life. At a political, cultural and folkloric level, regionalism is growing, almost everywhere.

This phenomenon (see Sedda, 2008), normally called “glocalism” (sum of globalization and localization), also has to do with the temporal dimension of our life. As happens for spaces, if on the one hand, we live in a temporal dimension that is ever-expanding, on the other hand we produce enunciations more and more linked to the present. We cannot refer to the past without reference to the present; we cannot go

through the several timelines which cross our culture without a point of view that is radically situated in the present moment.

In a certain sense, in a typical post-modern way, we are only able to *quote* the past, but we are not able to *know* the past in itself. The result of this multiple repertoire of chronotopes is a sort of free access to time, which implies an ongoing “contemporarisation” of history: what happened in the past can be re-lived today and can also happen again in the future... and we can jump from one past event to another, in the past or in the future, without stringent constraints, without rigid models.

This strong contemporarisation, this constant presentism, often offers, rather than a real ethical use of the past *for* the present, a simply “experiential” use of the past *as* present. There seems to be a dominating confusing system that mixes past-present-future, history-chronicle-memory and this, in my hypothesis, is one of the most pervasive cultural features of our years: a radical, confusing, polychronism.

When faced with this, Lotman's theory can be very useful. As his theory suggests, culture does not tolerate an excessive diversity, it does not tolerate a radical dynamism. Culture grows through polyglotism, looks for the multiplication of languages and codes. In its most creative phases culture accepts many different temporalities, but culture also does a great job in creating a clear image of itself, identifying a centre, translating and transposing what is different into what can be acceptable.

There is no globalization without localism, and there is no temporal complexification without reference to the present. Today’s presentism is nothing but the flipside of polychronism.

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