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Published in the Slovak Republic  
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)  
Has been issued since 2005  
ISSN 1994-4160  
E-ISSN 1994-4195  
2019, 59(2): 243-248

DOI: 10.13187/me.2019.2.243  
[www.ejournal53.com](http://www.ejournal53.com)



## The Heritage of Yuri Lotman, Umberto Eco and Vladimir Propp in the Context of Media Literacy Education

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### Abstract

The material for this article was the works of V. Propp, Y. Lotman and U. Eco in the context of semiotic approaches and media educational opportunities. The author of the article fully agrees with U. Eco's opinion that modern society is unthinkable without (self) media education of a person, because in the near future our society will split into two – those who do without critical selection of received information in their contacts with the media, and those who are able to select and process information. At the same time, it is necessary to teach people to choose the most important and useful things, because if they do not learn to do so, access to all this information will be completely useless. Thus, the selection and processing/reasoning/analysis of media texts is the basis of media competence in the 21st century. Studying the media and virtual world requires knowledge and skills from different fields. In this context, the scientific heritage of V. Propp, Y. Lotman and U. Eco is truly inexhaustible and fits perfectly into the main spectrum of media education tasks, both at higher and secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Propp, Lotman, Eco, media texts, media literacy, students, school, university.

### 1. Introduction

In the pragmatic era of the 21st century, the importance of "classical" humanitarian knowledge is diminished not only by technocrats. On the one hand, "the notion that 'serious people' involved in the exact sciences – and even more so in the creation of new techniques – may be ignorant of the structural modeling of artistic and cultural objects (Lotman, 1992: 30), since they have, as they say, another "higher" mission, remains quite stable at the technocratic level. On the other hand, the most prominent characters in the media's close attention, apart from political leaders, are usually not genius scientists and cultural figures, but criminals (of course, not ordinary thieves, but more "vivid specimens" – serial killers, sexual maniacs, pedophiles, etc.) in conjunction with glamorous representatives of the show business. The latter become "experts" in the field of ethics and culture, whose views are mass replicated by television, radio, the press and the Internet.

This phenomenon in itself is not new: A.P. Chekhov described with irony in his brilliant story *First Class Passenger* (1886) the conversation between two outstanding, but unknown to the general public scientists – an engineer and an academician. With undisguised regret, the engineer who had recently won the first prize in a professional competition tells his vis-a-vis: "I could point out to you the many of my contemporaries, people of great talent and hard work, but who died in the unknown. All these Russian navigators, chemists, physicists, mechanics, farmers – are they

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popular? Are Russian artists, sculptors and literary people known to our educated masses? (...) and in parallel to these people I will bring you hundreds of all kinds of singers, acrobats and jesters, known even to little child" (Chekhov, 1886: 1145–1146).

Another thing is that this trend exactly noticed by A.P. Chekhov has become dominant today. The "media persons" have separated from the mass audience not only scientists, but also figures of "old-fashioned" art. At the same time, opinions are increasingly expressed about the usefulness and correctness of spontaneous education in the sphere of (media) culture (Razlogov, 2005: 69). And the results of this "spontaneity" have long been felt not only by the professors of media and art universities, who are forced to make a set of applicants who know almost nothing about the history of art, classical works of art and literature, but also by ordinary school teachers who try to somehow draw the attention of "computer-advanced" and "familiar with the media" schoolchildren to the existence of culture.

One of the most important tasks of media literacy education is to develop the ability of the audience to analyze media texts of different types and genres, including artistic ones. And here the works of outstanding scientists V.Y. Propp (1895–1970), Y.M. Lotman (1922–1993) and U. Eco (1932–2016), who have been studying the phenomenon of the text for many years, can provide invaluable assistance to the media educator. It is interesting that Y.M. Lotman had a chance to listen to lectures by V.Y. Propp and to talk to U. Eco many times. In addition to that, both Y. Lotman and U. Eco in their works repeatedly addressed to the research of V. Propp and highly appreciated them. There was also mutual respect between Y. Lotman and U. Eco, they understood the importance of each other's creativity. U. Eco wrote a preface to the English edition of works by Y. Lotman (Eco, 1996), and Y. Lotman – to the Russian edition of the famous Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. In his article about Umberto Eco Yuri Lotman, in particular, wrote that when they met in Italy, he asked him when he would come to the Soviet Union. "Only after you have my novel published," he replied (Lotman, 1989: 481). The novel *The Name of the Rose* was published in Russian before the collapse of the Soviet Union, but, unfortunately, U. Eco came to Russia after the death of Yuri Lotman ...

## 2. Materials and methods

The material for this article was the works of V. Propp, Y. Lotman and U. Eco in the context of semiotic approaches and media educational opportunities. Let's remind that the semiotic analysis of media texts is understood as the analysis of the language of signs and symbols; the given analysis is closely connected with the iconographic analysis. Semiotic Approach (Le decodage des medias) is based on semiotic theory of media, which is substantiated in the works of such media theorists of semiotic (structuralist) area as R. Barthes (Barthes, 1964), C. Metz (Metz, 1964), Y. Lotman (Lotman, 1992), U. Eco (Eco, 1960; 1976; 1998), etc.

## 3. Discussion and results

Y.M. Lotman rightly emphasized that "the text appears before us not as a realization of the message in any one language, but as a complex device that stores a variety of codes, capable of transforming the received messages and generating new ones, as an information generator with features of intellectual personality. In connection with this, there is a change in the perception of the attitude of the consumer and the text. Instead of the formula "the consumer deciphers the text" it is possible to be more precise – "the consumer communicates with the text". He comes into contact with the text. The process of deciphering the text becomes extremely complicated and loses its one-time and final character, approaching the familiar acts of semiotic communication of a person with another autonomous personality" (Lotman, 1992: 132).

Probably, we can agree that "all texts existing in the history of human culture – artistic and non-artistic – are divided into two groups: one of them seems to answer the question: "What is it? (or "How does it work?"), and the second is "How did it happen?" (Lotman, 1973). Lotman conventionally called the texts of the first group "plotless", and the second group "having a plot", precisely defining that "plotless texts affirm some order, regularity, and classification. (...). These texts are static in nature. If they describe movements, they are movements that are regularly and correctly repeated, always equal to themselves" (Loman, 1973).

This point of view of Y.M. Lotman practically coincides with V.P. Demin's reflections that the known detective characters – Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Maigret – "figures rather conditional, calculatedly constructed for performance of the functions. The illusion of life arises as

our response to the feeling of their successful construction. (...). The famous Aristotle's phrase about drama, which is impossible without intrigue and possible without characters, nowhere is it more appropriate than in relation to the detective. The detective story is possible without detailed descriptions, without landscape beauties and memorable characteristics, without a deeply worked out social background and half-tone nuances in the dialogues. But without inventively developed intrigue – no" (Demin, 1977: 238).

It is clear that in the process of media literacy education of schoolchildren or students it is much easier (at least – at the first stage of training) to address to the media texts, which have stable structural codes, in other words, to the works, which have a pronounced fairytale, mythological basis, or the basis of the entertainment genre. Here, the best guides to the analysis of media texts can be found in works by V.Y. Propp, which clearly identify the main story situations and typology of characters in the fairy tale genre (Propp, 1998: 60–61). Our previous publications provided examples of the analysis of specific audiovisual media texts (Fedorov, 2008: 60–80; 2009: 4–13), based on the methodology of V.Y. Propp. The analysis of media texts and other mass genres, such as detective and thriller, is based on a similar principle (Bykov, 2010; Demin, 1977: 238; Eco, 1960: 52; Shklovsky, 1929: 142; Todorov, 1977: 49). And this type of analysis can also be successfully used in media pedagogy.

However, this analysis technology is no longer sufficient for more complex and genre-ambivalent media texts. "If Propp's method is oriented to calculate this single text-code from different texts, presenting them as a bundle of variants of one text, then Bakhtin's method (...) is opposite: not only different, but, which is especially important, mutually-translatable subtexts are singled out in a single text. The text reveals its internal conflict of interest. In Propp's description, the text gravitates towards panchronic equilibrium: precisely because the narrative texts are considered, it is especially noticeable that there is essentially no movement – there is only a fluctuation around some homeostatic norm (equilibrium – disturbance of equilibrium – restoration of equilibrium). In Bakhtin's analysis, the inevitability of movement, change, and destruction is hidden even in the statics of the text. Therefore, it is a subject even in cases where, it would seem, is far from the problems of the subject. According to Propp, the natural sphere for the text is a fairy tale, and according to Bakhtin, a novel and drama. (...) In any civilization we know in any detail, we encounter texts of very high complexity. In these conditions, a special role is played by the pragmatic attitude of the audience, which can activate the propp's or bakhtin's aspect in the same text" (Lotman, 1992: 152, 155).

At the same time, Lotman's viewpoint that the dialogue between the "author" and the "recipient" differs "not only by the commonality of the code of the two adjacent statements, but also by the presence of a certain common memory of the addressee and the addressee. The absence of this condition makes the text unencrypted. In this respect, we can say that any text is characterized not only by code and message, but also by orientation to a certain type of memory (the structure of memory and the nature of its filling)" (Lotman, 1992: 161). In our view, the decoding (perception with subsequent analysis) of a media text by the audience occurs in any case, regardless of "shared memory". The level of this "deciphering" is another matter. Moreover, the presence of shared memory between the recipient and the recipient does not guarantee that the author will be satisfied with the level or direction of interpretation of his text by the recipient. Whatever the depth of decoding a media text, the diversity and inconsistency of its interpretation by the audience is inevitable.

Moreover, the message appears to be an empty form, which can be attributed to a variety of meanings (Eco, 1998: 73). At the same time, the message acquires an aesthetic function when it is constructed in such a way that it turns out to be ambiguous and directed at itself, i.e. it tries to attract the attention of the addressee to the way it is constructed. Functions can coexist in one message, and usually in everyday language all of them are intertwined, while some one appears to be dominant. A message with an aesthetic function turns out to be ambiguous, first of all, in relation to the system of expectations, which is the code (Eco, 1998: 79).

As a consistent supporter of semiotic media theory, U. Eco gave his theoretical views in detail in a monographic folio, which has withstood (since 1968) many publications in different languages of the world. Russian translation of the book *Missing structure. Introduction to Semiology* was first published in 1998.

U. Eco argued that the key task of media literacy education should be to analyze media texts of different types and genres (Eco, 1998: 71–415), based on semiotic, structuralist approaches.

Structure, U. Eco wrote, is a way of doing things that I develop to be able to refer to different things in a similar way (Eco, 1998: 65), but on the other hand, structure is something that is not yet there. If it exists, if I have identified it, I only own a link in the chain that indicates to me that there are more elementary, more fundamental structures behind it (Eco, 1998: 327).

It seems that this paradox shows the essence of using semiotic media theory in media literacy education. This is why U. Eco is absolutely right, arguing that in an era when mass communication is often an instrument of the authorities exercising social control through the planning of messages, where it is impossible to change the ways of sending or the form of messages, it is always possible to change – in a kind of guerrilla way – the circumstances in which the addressees choose their own codes of reading (Echo, 1998: 415). Essentially, it clearly shows the mechanism of confrontation between the audience and the targeted ideological impact of media texts and attempts of media manipulation of human consciousness. Namely, the ability to independently interpret, critically evaluate media texts is the core of media competence, by which we understand the totality of its motives, knowledge, skills, and abilities of a person (indicators: motivational, contact, informational, perceptual, interpretative/assessment, practical activity, creative), which contribute to the selection, use, critical analysis, evaluation, creation, and transmission of media texts in various forms, forms, and genres, and analysis of complex processes of media functioning in society (Fedorov, 2007: 54).

Analysis of the media text is a kind of "decoding", if we assume that the code is a structure presented in the form of a model, which acts as a fundamental rule in the formation of a number of specific messages, which are thus able to be communicated. All codes can be compared on the basis of a common code that is simpler and more comprehensive (Eco, 1998: 67).

The number of variants of this kind of reading/interpretation code is great, and regardless of the professional and/or artistic level of the media text. That is, the message appears to be an empty form, which can be attributed to a variety of meanings (Eco, 1998: 73). However, of course, it should be remembered that the book *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is, of course, open to interpretation, but it is in no way possible to draw the theorem of Pierre de Fermat, or Woody Allen's complete filmography from it. This seems to be truism, but a fundamental mistake of irresponsible deconstructivists was to believe that you could do anything with the text. This is a blatant absurdity (Eco, 1998).

An important role in the process of perception/reading is played by the circumstances, the situation of the audience's contact with the media text. They influence both the meaning and function and the information component (Eco, 1998: 71–72). Therefore, we can say what a work can become, but never what it has become (Eco, 1998: 87).

In recent decades, in media literacy education, theoretical concepts (practical, semiotic, etc.) have become more and more popular, avoiding touching on the aesthetic sphere of media texts, considering it to be a secondary and irrelevant one for the society of pragmatists armed with information technologies. U. Eco does not rejected the aesthetic component in the semiotic theory of media, stressing that the message with an aesthetic function turns out to be ambiguous, above all, in relation to the system of expectations, which is the code (Eco, 1998: 79).

In this regard, there are two problems that can be considered separately, and at the same time they are closely related: (a) aesthetic communication is the experience of such communication that cannot be quantified or systematized structurally; b) and yet behind this experience there is something that, undoubtedly, should have a structure, and at all its levels, otherwise it would not be communication, but a purely reflexive response to the stimulus (Eco, 1998: 87).

U. Eco's semiotic approach to media literacy education in relation to works of art is based on a fair assertion that an artistic work is not reduced to a scheme or a series of schemes extracted from it, but a semiotic researcher (or a competent media reader/viewer/listener) drives media text into the scheme in order to understand the mechanisms that provide a wealth of readings and, therefore, the continuous giving meaning to the work of communication (Eco, 1998: 284).

At the same time, in the modern world, "elements of traditional aesthetics, such as play, subjectivity, personal origins, authorship, etc., are retreating before the actualization of mythological consciousness and the archetypal layer, which begins to actively program not only mass behavior, but even political history, not to mention art" (Khrenov, 2008: 30). This, in turn, actualizes the use in media literacy education of the methodology of analysis of folklore texts developed by V.Y. Propp (Propp, 1976; 1998), for example, for such works as the trilogy about Indiana Jones by S. Spielberg or "Avatar" (2009) by J. Cameron.

One of the stamps of the journalism in recent decades has been the "profound" reasoning that the Internet wets people from reading books and the press, and this, in turn, dramatically reduces the level of literacy of the population. Responding to such passages, Umberto Eco argued that the total orientation of the modern audience towards audiovisual, computer media texts does not lead to a decline in literacy at all, because the computer returns people to the Gutenberg galaxy, and those who graze at night on the Internet ... work in words. If a TV screen is a window into the world in images, the display is an ideal book where the world is expressed in words and divided into pages (Eco, 1998).

Indeed, in the Middle Ages, it was believed that the cathedral gave people everything they needed for both everyday and afterlife, and that books only distracted them from basic values and encouraged excessive awareness and unhealthy curiosity, – That is, 500 years ago, orthodoxy feared books as much as now they are afraid of computers and the Internet, while it is not necessary to oppose visual and verbal communication, but to improve both (Eco, 1998).

Moreover, U. Eco emphasized the new hypertextual possibilities that computer "quests" or Internet forums provide for modern man: in a hypertextual arrangement, even a detective story can have an open structure, and the reader can decide for himself whether he will be a butler murderer or someone instead of him, or even an investigator. This is not a new idea. Before the invention of the computer, poets and writers dreamed of a fully open text that readers could rewrite as they liked infinitely (Eco, 1998).

This has been a clear division in traditional society into those who produce and use culture; people who write and read books. Everything changes with the Internet. A new era of the independent publishing is opening up: anyone can write something with the recognition of a wide range of readers, and this is wonderful (Eco, 2007).

Similar processes take place in media literacy education as well. Thirty years ago, its full implementation required not only qualified media teachers and teaching aids (which were very few), but also cumbersome technical means (for example, filming equipment for filming and projection), etc.

Today's computer, internet, multimedia technologies give people unprecedented opportunities for effective independent media literacy education. Necessary teaching aids (designed for any age of the audience) and a monograph can be downloaded free of charge from electronic media literacy education libraries. Audiovisual and regular texts recorded on CDs, DVDs or other media can be purchased, rented and/or downloaded again from the Internet. Having "learned" theoretically and methodologically, one can create a media literacy education forum/blog, posting, for example, one's own media texts for prompt discussion (while engaging in virtual discussions, polemics with Internet users in different cities and countries)...

#### 4. Conclusion

U. Eco was convinced that modern society is unthinkable without (self) media literacy education of a person, since in the near future our society will split into two – or has already split into two – those who do without critical selection of the information they receive in their contacts with the media, and those who are able to select and process information (Eco, 1998). At the same time, it is necessary to teach people to choose the most important and useful things, because if they do not learn to do so, access to all this information will be completely useless (Eco, 2007). Thus, the selection and processing/reasoning/analysis of media texts is the basis of media competence in the 21st century.

Studying the media and virtual world requires knowledge and skills from different fields. In this context, the scientific heritage of V. Propp, Y. Lotman and U. Eco is inexhaustible and, in our opinion, fits perfectly into the main spectrum of media education tasks, both at higher and secondary schools.

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