

Boris Uspensky

## Space and Time as Cultural Categories



Born in Moscow, 1937. 1955-1960 student at the philological faculty of Moscow University; 1961 at the Institute of Linguistics and Phonetics, Copenhagen University; 1962 expedition to Yenisey (Siberia) for the study of the Ket language. 1963 *Kandidat nauk* (Ph. D.); 1963-1965 work on the typology of languages at the Institute of African Studies at the Academy of Sciences of USSR; 1965 appointed Senior Research Fellow of Moscow University. 1972 *Doktor nauk* (corresponds to *Habilitation*). Since 1977 Professor at Moscow University; visiting professorships at Vienna, Harvard and Graz Universities. Author of more than 300 publications in the fields of general linguistics, philology, semiotics, slavistics, and history. His monographs include *Poetics of Composition* (Moscow, 1970; English, German, Serbian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Japanese, Finnish, Bulgarian translations); *Tipologia della cultura* (with Y. M. Lotman, Milano, 1975); *Semiotica della cultura* (with Y. M. Lotman, Milano-Napoli, 1975); *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse/The Netherlands, 1976, translated into Japanese, Italian, Serbian, Bulgarian); *Sémiotique de la culture russe* (with Y. M. Lotman, Lausanne, 1990); *Semiotik der Geschichte* (Vienna, 1991); *Storia della lingua letteraria russa: Dall'antica Rus a Puskin* (Bologna, 1993). — Address: Russian State University, Institute for the Advanced Study in the Humanities, 6 Miusskaya sq., Moscow 125267.

My work at the Wissenschaftskolleg was primarily concentrated on two main topics: semiotics (in particular, semiotics of culture) and linguistics.

In the field of semiotics I was especially interested in the perception of space and time during the Middle Ages. The analysis of a relatively large corpus of various texts led me to the conclusion that both space and time were evaluated in moral categories, as "pure" or "impure". This seems to be true of the Middle Ages in general, although this division appears, for a number of reasons, to be much more evident in Medieval Russia. "Pure"

space or time was appreciated as prosperous, whereas "impure" space or time was considered to be dangerous. Correspondingly, "pure" or "impure" space or time presupposed essentially different behaviour; in particular, "impure" space and time called forth all kinds of magical behaviour. The evaluation of time and space could also become an important historical factor, even influencing the development of events.

The essential difference between space and time lies in the fact that, whereas it is possible, to a certain extent, to avoid dangerous ("impure") space, it is practically impossible to avoid dangerous time.

The differentiation between the "pure" and "impure" space may be equally relevant both for macrospace (i. e. geographical space) and for microspace (i. e. environment). By the same token the differentiation between the "pure" and "impure" time may be revealed both in macrotime (e. g., happy and unhappy years, seasons, etc.) and for microtime (e. g., happy and unhappy hours, moments, etc.).

At the Wissenschaftskolleg I started to write a book devoted to these questions. The book will be concentrated primarily on Russian medieval culture, but comparisons with other cultures will be also made. In this book I am trying to make use of different sources which are usually analysed separately: written documents (i. e. medieval texts as such) and anthropological data (i. e. popular traditions, if they can be traced back and regarded as archaic). I was not able to finish the whole book in Berlin, but I prepared some chapters discussing the evaluation of space in medieval Russia.

Especially Russian medieval geography made a very clear distinction between righteous and sinful (heretical, pagan, etc.) countries. Hence, any kind of travelling appeared as a movement within a scale of moral values; the upper degree of that scale was located in Paradise, the lower degree in Hell. In a sense Paradise and Hell were also geographical concepts, for they belonged to the geographical space. It was even possible to visit them, and we have descriptions of both Hell and Paradise made by Novgorodian seafarers.

This kind of understanding periodically caused a search for the righteous countries, which sometimes became a social phenomenon and even provoked the migration of certain portions of the population.

Specifically interesting in this respect is the diary of a Russian merchant from the fifteenth century, who was obliged to go to Persia and India and had to stay there for several years ("The Journey beyond Three Seas" by Afanadj Nikitin). His behaviour in those non-Christian countries (which were certainly considered to be "impure", sinful countries from the Russian perspective) turned out to be close to the magical: in many cases his behaviour was actually a sort of "anti-behaviour".

The above-mentioned book was my main project at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Besides this, I was able to write a series of articles, some of which also deal with problems of space and time.

One of these articles discusses the organization of space in the Ghent Altarpiece by Van Eyck. The analysis of the right-left orientation in the Ghent Altarpiece makes it possible to single out two spatial layers which are both combined and contrasted here. One of them is coordinated with the perspective of an external observer, who is outside of the world represented (his point of view actually coincides with the point of view of a spectator of the painting). At the same time the opposite perspective of an internal observer, who is implicitly located within the represented reality, can also be traced here. The different parts of the painting are organized according to drastically different principles. Thus the external perspective is used in the foreground, the internal perspective is revealed in the middle, i. e. the central part of the representation. This combination of Renaissance and medieval principles can be regarded as a combination of the Human and the Divine, which is probably one of the main topics of the Ghent Altarpiece.

One of my linguistic articles is also concerned with the treatment of time and space as reflected in the mirror of natural languages. The title of the article is "The Remote Past and the Second Genitive in the History of the Russian Language". I attempt to reveal a (deep) grammatical category which is common to both the verb and the noun. In the verb it is realised as a particular tense, i. e. a temporal category; in the noun it is realised as a particular case, i. e. a spatial category. This category can be conventionally called the category of partitivity: the issue here is the relation between the whole and a part which is relevant both for the description of a process as well as for the description of an object.

These papers are very different, but they are united by the problems of space and time as cultural concepts. It was a fruitful year, and it was good to be here.