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### Résumé de l'article

La place occupée par Ivan Bunin dans la littérature russe est unique. Le présent article illustre la pertinence du travail de Juri Lotman sur la définition d'espace sémiotique artistique pour comprendre la modélisation du monde chez Bunin et la construction de l'espace artistique dans sa prose. Une attention particulière est portée à la sémiosphère, à ses mécanismes centraux et à leur réalisation dans l'oeuvre de Bunin, et tout particulièrement à la nouvelle intitulée "Histoire d'horreur".

# Artistic Space in the Prose of Ivan Bunin

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“Нет в мире разных душ, и времени в нем нет”  
“There aren’t different souls in the world, and  
time doesn’t exist in it” - I.A. Bunin, *In the  
Mountains*

“Художественное пространство представляет собой модель мира данного автора, выраженную на языке его пространственных представлений. При этом, [...] язык этот, взятый сам по себе, значительно менее индивидуален, [...] чем то, что художник на этом языке говорит, - чем его индивидуальная модель мира.”  
“Artistic space provides a *model of the world* of the author, expressed in the language of his spatial perspectives. As such [...] the language, taken by itself, is much less individual [...] than that which the writer says in that language and than his individual *model of the world*.” (Lotman 1992, v.1 : 414)

This article discusses semiotic problems and aspects of artistic textual space in the writings of Ivan Alekseevič Bunin in the context of Yuri Lotman’s semiotic theory of artistic space. We will also analyze one of Bunin’s short stories, “Horror Story” (Страшный рассказ). Lotman’s work on artistic space provides a metalanguage for understanding the individual writer’s model of the world in which his/her texts are embedded (1992 v.1 : 413-447). This is particularly important for understanding Bunin’s works because his artistic space is more conditionally-constructed than

any of his predecessors in Russian literature.<sup>1</sup>

Another crucial aspect of Lotman's keen insights into the construction of artistic space, one that is particularly important in analyzing Bunin's prose works, pertains to the paradoxical tension between different internal textual structures and the importance of the intensification of semiotic differentiation within the text itself (Lotman 2002 : 190-203). There are two key points made in Lotman's work on the semiosphere and on the construction of artistic space that are essential for our analysis. First, Lotman clearly defines his semiotic notion of artistic space as "mathematical/topological" (in contrast to the Bakhtinian notion of space, which he characterizes as "coming from physics"), where "space is a set of continuous objects (points), between which there exists a continuous relationship" (1997b : 720). Second, Lotman's work on the semiosphere carefully defines the functional mechanisms of "peripheral semiotic formations" :

Периферийные семиотические образования могут быть представлены не замкнутыми структурами (языками), а их фрагментами или даже отдельными текстами. Выступая в качестве «чужих» для данной системы, эти тексты выполняют в целостном механизме семiosферы функцию катализатора. С одной стороны, граница с чужим текстом всегда является областью усиленного смыслообразования. С другой, любой обломок семиотической структуры или отдельный текст сохраняет механизмы реконструкции всей системы. Именно разрушение этой целостности вызывает ускоренный процесс «воспоминания» – реконструкции семиотического целого по его части.

Peripheral semiotic formations can be presented not as closed structures (languages), but as fragments or even distinct texts. As these texts act as "foreign" for the given system, they fulfill the function of a catalyzer in the integrative mechanism of the semiosphere. On the one hand, the boundary with a foreign text always becomes an area of intensive meaning generation, and on the other, any given fragment of semiotic structure or any distinct text maintains the reconstructive mechanisms of the entire system. It is precisely the destruction of this integrative process that evokes the accelerated process of "remembering" – and the reconstruction of the semiotic whole from one of its parts. (1992 I : 17 [author's translation])

Using Bunin's "Horror Story", I hope to show how the complex and playful interactions of various textual substructures can generate new multi-directional meanings that provide us with a "general metalinguistic mechanism" with which to understand Bunin's unique constructions of artistic space :

Усиление внутритекстовой семиотической дифференциации – неизбежное следствие роста смысловой нагруженности текста – вызывает на другом полюсе усиление семиотической общности. Это порождает в определенный момент выделение общего метаязыкового механизма самоописания текста, с позиции которого текст приобретает черты полной семиотической однородности.

The intensification of semiotic differentiation internal to the text is an unavoidable consequence of the increase in the text's meaning-based load bearing and evokes an intensification of semiotic congruence at the other extreme. This gives rise, at a particular moment, to the emphasis on the

general metalinguistic mechanism of the text's self-description and it is here that the text acquires the traits of full semiotic uniformity/homogeneity. (Lotman 2002 : 203 [author's translation])

## Bunin on Bunin

When discussing Bunin's works, it is especially important to define his personal perception of life, as an artist and a man, and to understand and experience what Lotman calls the author's unique *model of the world* (*модель мира*). This model served as a foundation of Bunin's artistic method, which, during his lifetime, some praised for its modernism and others for its loyalty to Russian literary traditions. Bunin himself wrote in a letter to Rževskij, "To call me a realist means not knowing me as an artist". Another quote that reveals the essence of Bunin's artistic method, and his undeniably subjective, phenomenological approach to the experience of the surrounding world is quoted in Mal'tsev (1994 : 100) : "The world is a mirror, reflecting what is looking at it". It was exactly this approach that predetermined the structure and artistic space in Bunin's works. Bunin never set out to provide an objective picture of life in its historical aspect, as was characteristic of Russian realism.

## Bunin's Prose

It is significant to note that by the time Bunin was studying in the gymnasium (secondary school), his father had already bankrupted the family fortune and estate. Consequently, Bunin did not finish the gymnasium and was unable to enter university. His childhood and youth were spent in the open country. His tastes in reading and literature were initially shaped by his home tutor Baskakov (including reading Cervantes, Lermontov, Pushkin, and Gogol) <sup>2</sup> and later by his older brother, Yulij, a university student. Baskakov lived in the Bunin home for three years prior to Bunin entering the gymnasium.

As a result, Bunin's artistic vision was fostered by contemplation of his surroundings and nature, and experiences from those observations. Here it is appropriate to note a remark made by Stepun that is necessary for understanding Bunin's creative work : "We cannot forget that the Greek word 'theory' means not thinking, but contemplation" (1998 : 94). Bunin's genius remembered this. Indeed, Bunin thinks with his eyes, and the best pages of his most profound works serve as living proof that contemplation of the world with intelligent eyes is worth more than any philosophical explanation.

From an early age Bunin conceived of himself as part of nature. This sense of belonging to everything occurring in nature became not only the ground for his perception and experience of the world, but also defined him as an artist. Nature, in Bunin's works, is never a background that accompanies the mood of the hero, it is rather an active character. It is no coincidence that the hero of *Life of Arseniev* (*Жизнь Арсеньева*, originally

published in 1930), “the first Russian phenomenological novel” (Mal’tsev 1994 : 305), says that “there is no such thing as separation between us and nature, that every self-contained movement of air is the movement of our own lives” (что нет никакой отдельной от нас природы, что каждое отдельное движение воздуха есть движение нашей собственной жизни) (*Life of Arseniev* 1993 v.5 : 217). Just like the hero of his short story “On the farm” (На хуторе) (1993 v.2 : 44), Bunin always “felt his connection with this speechless nature” (живо чувствовал (он) свое родство с этой безмолвной природой). Note the following reflections of the main character, Aleksej, from Bunin’s only novel, *Life of Arseniev* :

Небо и старые деревья, у каждого из которых всегда есть свое выражение, свои очертания, своя душа, своя дума, - можно ли наглядеться на это?... Как отрешалась тогда душа от жизни, с какой грустной и благой мудростью, точно из какой-то неземной дали, глядела она на нее, созерцала «вещи и дела» человеческие!

The sky and old trees, everyone of which always possesses its own expression, its own shapes, its own soul, its own thinking, - is it possible to stop looking at them?... How the soul was separating from life, with what sad and blessed wisdom, as is from some unearthly distance, did the soul look at life, contemplating the “things and acts” of human beings [translation mine]. (1993 v.5 : 98)

In the short story entitled “Pines” the main and only event is the death of Mitrofan, but this doesn’t make him the story’s main character. For this role is played by death itself. It is presented to the reader as a wintry cold pine forest, where the sky can be “deep” and “cold”, in which there is a “trembling emerald star of the north-east that appears as a star before God’s throne, from which God is invisibly present over the snowy woodland”, where there are “pines, as church banners” and the “rumble of the pines speaks over and over about an eternal and sublime life”, and where the “burial hill sometimes appears to be an ordinary pile of dirt, and at other times significant – thinking and feeling” (1993, v2 : 204, 212-13).

In another short story, “Mitya’s Love”, nature is not only the main character, but “the most active character” (Stepun 1998 : 115). The “warm, sweet, fragrant rain,” the linden trees, “covered...with patterned young leaves,” and “the bridal whiteness of the apple trees” with their sprawling branches, “womanly touching his face and smelling like lemons,” and even “the owl, the eagle of the forest, making love” – screeching pitifully and crying entreatingly, flapping his wings and bursting with mischievous laughter – all of this is the yearning and sweetness of sex, spilled in abundance in the surrounding nature. These are not metaphors of love and sexual maturation, but love in all of its cosmic incomprehensibility – impossible to describe in words. In his description of nature in this story, Bunin shows in a persuasive and highly artistic manner the transformation of the natural essence of mankind into a tragedy of the loving human soul.

The illusiveness of life, evanescence and ease with which life disappears, and, at the same time, the eternity of cosmic force become the organizing elements, which carry the central meaning in the short story "Light Breathing" (*Легкое дыхание*). The main event, the murder of a gymnasium student, is presented in such a way that the structure of the sentence which conveys the Cossack officer's fatal gunshot "drowns this frightful shot, deprives it of its power and turns it almost into a mimic sign, [...] as the emotional color of this event is put out, pushed aside, destroyed" (Vygotsky 2001 : 203). This happens because the story is not about the shooting of Olya Meščerskaja, but about our fast-paced life – full of illusions and unrealized dreams. It is about how tragically short, regardless of the years lived, the path is from the light breath of youth to the cold autumn wind of the grave, where one day the light breath of each human life will inevitably extinguish itself.

Examples of identifying man with nature as equally existing in a cosmic space are evident throughout Bunin's *oeuvre*. A feeling of incomprehensibility toward the mystery of life, love, and death occupy the imagination of both Bunin-the-man and Bunin-the-writer. It is life itself, the natural forces of the universe that grip man, rather than situations from everyday life, that constitute the central problem in Bunin's works.

Therefore, social or ethical problems and conflicts never became subjects of investigation in Bunin's writings. He felt cramped in the space of socio-historical objectivism. Bunin was offended when it was said that he wrote about times long past, stating, "I write about the Russian soul, and that has nothing to do with old or new [...] But they continue to write about pictures of a former life – this is not what my work is about" (Я пишу о душе русского человека, при чем здесь старое, новое [...] А они : все это картины старой жизни – да не в этом дело) (Bunin & Bunina 2005 v.2 : 140). History as such is not important for Bunin, because he views the world as unchanging and eternal. Note Bunin's characterization of his novel, *Life of Arseniev* (Bunin & Bunina 2005 v. 2 : 161) : "Here is a young man who travels, sees everything, experiences war, revolution, and then Bolshevism, and reaches the conclusion that life is above everything, and draws one up to heaven" (Вот молодой человек ездит, все видит, переживает войну, революцию, а затем и большевизм, и приходит к тому, что жизнь выше всего и тянется к небу).

Bunin's heroes live in the past and present at the same time. They do not yearn for the future and do not dream about it. As said by the hero of the short story "New Year" (Новый год) (1993, v. 2 : 249) : "Dreaming about the future was unpleasant". It is precisely through regeneration of his perception of the past and by experiencing this perception anew again and again that Bunin explores the mystery of human existence in the universe.

As Mal'tsev quotes from Bunin's archives (1994 : 81) : "I kept thinking about the miraculous power that the past possesses. Where

did it come from, and what does it mean? Is this not where one finds the biggest mysteries of life?” (Я все думал о той чудесной власти, которая дана прошлому. Откуда она, и что она значит? Не в ней ли заключается одна из величайших тайн жизни?).

When considering the particular aspects of Bunin’s artistic space, the author himself says it best in *Life of Arseniev* (2003 : 238) : “I was born at a particular place and time. But, God, how dry, insignificant, and inaccurate this all sounds! I feel something completely different! It is embarrassing and awkward to say it, but that’s how it is : I was born in the universe, in the infinity of time and space...” (Я родился там-то и тогда-то... Но, Боже, как это сухо, ничтожно и неверно! Я ведь чувствую совсем не то! Это стыдно, неловко сказать, но это так : я родился во вселенной, в бесконечности времени и пространства...). It is precisely this sense of a person’s place in the surrounding world that produces the high level of conditionality that characterizes artistic space in Bunin’s works.

The *non-temporal dimension* of Bunin’s short stories and novel defines the structure of the fabula-syuzhet, which is often expressed without regard for chronology. Time warps, associative memory, contrastive juxtapositions are typical devices for Bunin. Since events themselves never play the main role in his short stories, the beginning and the end of the syuzhet often don’t correspond to the beginning and the end of the story line (fabula) itself. This is why, even though in some of Bunin’s work it is possible to isolate the chronotope of occurring events, the latter isn’t essential for understanding the main plot line as “prescribed” by the author. Likhachev (1987 : 435) addresses this point in the more general context of literary analysis : “What matters more in literature isn’t the entity of the work, but rather its ideal prescription... The triumph of the prescribed over the given in the reader’s reception of the text is what constitutes the essence of aesthetic perception” (В литературе не столько важна данность произведения, сколько его идеальная заданность.... Торжество заданного над данным в рецепторном акте и составляет сущность эстетического восприятия).

### Bunin’s “Horror Story”

In light of the above discussion, I will analyze Bunin’s “Horror Story” (1993 v. 5 : 446-7), a rather typical Buninian short story in terms of his philosophy and artistic method, yet one that is little-known and discussed seldom by critics.

To briefly summarize the fabula, two unidentified men kill an old Frenchwoman in a house, where she lives presumably as a governess. There is no motive for the crime – the killers do not steal anything. There is no repentance, and no punishment. The criminals are not apprehended. This is a senseless and brutal murder. Equally strange and illogical is the behavior of the victim. The main theme of the story is expressed by one isolated phrase that connects with the story’s title

(1993 v. 5 : 447) : “nonetheless, the most horrible thing on this earth is mankind, his soul” (все-таки самое страшное на земле – человек, его душа).

As is typical of Bunin, the heroine of the story is not introduced. We do not know anything about her, and cannot picture her outside of the given situation of the story : she does not exist in the imagination of the reader separate from the moment in which we observe her. What kind of person was that old Frenchwoman? What (or who) did she love and hate? How did she end up in this house? We only know what she was like at the moment of her unexpected and violent death.

Once again, as often happens in Bunin, the key idea is already given in the first sentence (1993, v. 5 : 446) : “In a naked park, disfigured by the dead of winter [...]” (В голом, обезображенном зимней смертью парке...). Death, as depicted in nature and introducing the reader into the storyline seems to immediately, become secondary. However, the combination of death and winter sets-up a cyclical repetitiveness that lessens the singularity of the event : it now falls under the heading of eternally and unchangingly repeated natural occurrences. The combination “winter death” in presupposing cyclical repetitiveness, downplays the uniqueness of the event, inserting it instead in the category of *eternally and unchangingly* repeated natural events. As a result, it is clear from the beginning that death is not the dominant theme structuring the meaning of the text. As the story progresses, Bunin’s writing continues to shift the accent from the human protagonists over to nature. The effect on the reader is to create a sense of humankind’s inclusion in the cycle of nature. The “naked park”, “the park’s death”, “old, young, tender snow” : the mystery of life and death is reflected in the depiction of nature. Thus, *winter* is both death and birth of new life. Further comparison with other living creatures (*cf.* “new snow as tender as a swan’s down”) completes the picture of an all-encompassing unity of creation. The syntagm “emptiness of night” (пустынность ночи, not пустота ночи) gives one more important juxtaposition of space and time, and, due to the ambiguity of the reference in the text, fails to describe either the actual space or time of what is taking place.

The inevitability of suffering and death unites the two main characters in the short story – nature and the old Frenchwoman. Furthermore, the image of the “dead park”, already “disfigured by the dead of winter”, both foreshadows and visually presents the heroine’s horrible murder. It is precisely in this way, disfigured by death, that she is found in the morning on the sofa “with a slit throat, a naked skull without her wig, with protruding and astonished, wild crawfish-like eyes”.

The change of the landscape in the story emphasizes the union of man and nature. The park, which only a few hours ago was covered in “virgin snow as soft as a swan’s down”, has already become pale. One feels the coldness and foggiess of the damp and white hazy day. A new life has just begun, but it already possesses signs of dying, a new death,

as life and death are inseparable.

Time of day plays a special role in the story and requires a more detailed discussion. The heroine writes four messages, but only in the first two is the time indicated: “quarter past twelve”, “the clock struck one”. Bunin intensifies the image of the unrelenting passage of time by using an impersonal grammatical construction, making the expected outcome inevitable, where any resistance would be futile. At this point, the tracking of time stops, and the story transfers into a new phase of plot development – movement “in place”. Until the *fatal hour* (поковой час) (it is important to note that the killers are also waiting for that fatal hour, except for them it is not *fatal*, but fortuitous – they are “waiting for the *darkest* hour”), the old woman walks from one room to the next, a movement that is stated in the text three times. After that, the verb “to walk” is not used, even though there is movement in space: she plays the piano, and later she ends up in the study. However, the movement from one room to the next is not indicated by any verb of motion. Evidently, both time and space cease to be felt on the threshold of death. Her choice of reading is quite ironic – a geographic atlas by Reclus: the boundary of space where she finds herself cannot be encompassed by this book. The heroine is moving beyond any geographic boundary. Her time has come “frightfully and triumphantly”, as if announcing the coming of a great discovery – the discovery of death. Time and space unite in infinity (recall that their alignment has already happened earlier in the text in the description of nature [cf. “the emptiness of night”]), and for the heroine of the story they no longer matter.

The inevitability of the heroine’s death is emphasized through contradictions in the narrator’s remarks. He first tells us that she is “completely alone” in the house. Immediately after that, however, the narrator shares that he can’t understand why the old Frenchwoman doesn’t go downstairs where the housekeeping staff are, but instead decides to write notes. It turns out that there are several people in the house. Throughout the story, the only reason that can explain the strange or irrational behavior of the heroine is an overarching sense of futility.

The actions of the old Frenchwoman are described in the story using more than thirty verbs. However, only seven of them are perfective verb forms. Among them none point to any defensive action on her part during the attack (for example, we are told that she “decided to write”; “made some commentary”; “left a note”; “left the doors open”). Moreover, some of the verbs provide information about her own actions that are not in her best interest (cf. “she turned the light on in all the rooms”, which means that the murderers are able to see her better from the street). It is worth noticing how all of those verbs (including also “read a little” and “lie down for a bit”) depict events of short duration that contrast with the “long” eternity that will soon ensue.

The semantic dominant of the story is clearly expressed using

demonstrative pronouns (“this/that, which”) that, on the one hand, carry out their grammatical function by pointing out the main conflict of the work, and on the other hand by acting as euphemisms. Throughout the first part of the story, the author uses demonstrative pronouns to code the roles of *victim* and *murderers* (“eta” [эта] or “this” for the victim and “te” [те] or “those” for the murderers). However, in the last paragraph Bunin suddenly changes the code : “Where are they now, these two?” (Где они теперь, [эти, “eti”] двое?) I would suggest that this change happens because the author is more concerned with the opaqueness and impenetrable nature of the human soul, and less focused on social conflict between “these” and “those” ones. As stated at the end of the story (1993 v.5 : 447) :

The most horrible thing on earth is man and his soul. And especially the one soul that, after committing its terrible deed, remains forever unknown, uncaught, unrevealed.

Все-таки самое страшное на земле – человек, его душа.

И особенно та, что, совершив свое страшное дело, утолив свою дьявольскую похоть, остается навсегда неведомой, непойманной, неразгаданной.

This is true not only in the case of a stranger’s soul, but also for a familiar one, even for one’s own soul. As Bunin states in his story, “The Grandfather” (*Дедушка*) (1993 v.6 : 505) :

“A stranger’s soul is darkness. – No, one’s own is much darker.”

“- Чужая душа – потемки. – Нет, своя собственная еще темней.”

Therefore, it is fair to say that at the heart of “Horror Story” lies the central conflict that drives all of Bunin’s works : the conflict between humans and the unseen forces that surround them, that dominate them, regardless of time or place. For Bunin, time and space are unchanging in the context of an infinite universe, and as stated in quote I used as epigraph : “there aren’t different souls in the world, and time doesn’t exist in it”.

In “Horror Story”, the most important thing is not where and when the action occurs, but how people behave and what they experience and feel. Two questions that emerge from the story are “why did they [the murderers] kill the old Frenchwoman?” and “why didn’t she save herself?” If the text doesn’t answer these questions, it is because for Bunin there is no proper answer for them. For instance, I believe it would have struck Bunin as inadequate to explain away the events of the story by probing the nature of social conflicts. For Bunin’s approach is a more “general” or “universal” one where historical or geographical considerations are not deemed relevant. What is horrifying about this “horror story” is not any specific murder, but the fact that the human soul is unknowable and that it is impossible to know what motivates it to act.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to explore the *lingua*-cultural aspects of a text that has generally been ignored by critical analysis. In this instance, they come under what Lotman calls “peripheral semiotic formations” (периферийными семиотическими образованиями?) (1992 I : 17). For instance, by analyzing the number of *lingua*-cultural objects contained in the text, we can assert that the events of the story occur in Russia. Thus, there would be no need to call the old woman a Frenchwoman if the story took place in France. Her nationality is pointed out because it distinguishes her from other characters; it is part of her identity. We also know that she has superiors. This is not her house, but neither is she a servant. On the social ladder, she is located somewhere between the owners/aristocrats and the servants. Therefore, we can infer it is likely that she is a governess. It was typical of wealthy Russian families to have a French governess in the 19th and 20th centuries prior to the October Revolution.

The residence where the story unfolds is referred to with the term *usad'ba* (усадьба), which means either “estate or homestead”. This was a common, everyday term in Russia, from Petrine days all the way to the 1917 revolution. Bunin also uses the Russian words for “garden” (three times) and “park” (four times) to denote the estate and its grounds, and he does so in a very specific manner. Thus, whenever it is the heroine’s point of view that is at stake, the estate appears under the guise of the garden (for instance, she writes : “There is someone in the garden”). It follows that if we were to conceive of the crime from the victim’s point of view we could say : “The old Frenchwoman was killed by those individuals who were in the garden”. The narrator also informs us that the doors of the living room open onto the garden. Gardens, of course, need tending to and in the various instances where the term is used there is an intimate, proprietary feeling at stake from the heroine’s perspective : this is “my” garden, “my” home. Therefore, the individuals who stand “out there” are encroaching on my home, my garde, my life.

A different perspective is offered when the more neutral term “park” is used to denote the same segment of space. As “park”, the *usad'ba* is presented externally and it first appears, as we have seen, “disfigured by the dead of winter”. The murderers (they aren’t yet “those” or “these”) sit in the park as the house, we are told, was “vigilantly looking into the dark park”. It is further along in this paragraph that the narrator mentions how the doors of the living room give onto the “garden”. In the next sentence, however, as the wind blows into the house through these very doors, we are told that it carries the cold air from the “pale” park. Characterized as a “park”, the estate’s grounds now project a different quality, that of a public space rather than a private, intimate one.

Another *peripheral semiotic formation* of the story relates to one of the two killers. Specifically, an intertext that emerges through a textual fragment allowing for the construction of yet another semantic textual

level. While the old Frenchwoman doesn't ever see the murderers, she feels their presence, and "knows" that there are two of them, and "one of them is short, bow-legged like a dachshund". It is revealing to relate this description to an identical one found in Bunin's novella "The Village" (*Деревня*), where in the wedding scene, a boy appears who is described as "bow-legged, like a dachshund". Might it be that this boy has grown up and now represents that generation which was described by Bunin in his 1924 speech in Paris : "and again came true the word of the Scripture : 'And the face of the generation will be dog-like' (1993 v. 8 : 411).

Analysis of the *lingua*-cultural aspects of the text shed important light in contextualizing Bunin's story, but it does not change the essence of the central conflict between humankind and the cosmos. This is why the heroine's murder is not shown – the action of the drama happens "behind the scenes" as it were. The reader is only informed after the fact of the results of the action. This is given in the text on two planes which we can call the "everyday" and the "metaphysical". On the everyday plane, the narrator presents the event as if it were a police report : "she was found in the morning with her throat cut". Later, however, the murder acquires almost a metaphysical dimension for it appears as the inevitable result of life's tragedy. For the reader who is present at the scene of the crime, it is hard to accept witnessing the personal tragedy of death from an external perspective that emphasizes its cosmic insignificance or triviality. And although the house is said to be "blazing with fire" (this, it seems obvious, is the view from the "interior"; from the old woman's perspective), the world outside unflinchingly runs its disinterested course as it appears "yellowing in the pale light of the day". There is here a discrepancy between the old woman's feelings as the victim of a cruel and senseless act and the dispassionate external world which is emphasized by Bunin's typical method of semantic displacement. While "blazing with fire" may not be an uncommon way to describe human experience, it is decidedly more unusual to use the term "blazing" to characterize the quality of the light inside a house. But this semantic transference is met with the outside world's utter indifference for the fate of this dying human being : the blazing fire now appears simply as a yellowing pale light.

### Semiotics of Artistic Space

In his work on the text as a semiotic problem (2002 :190-203), Lotman states that the artistic text's aptness as a generator of meaning always assumes the presence of complex dialogical relationships between its various segments (or substructures), as well as juxtapositions with some extra-textual context. This results in strengthening internal textual-semiotic differentiations and ensures textual unity. Thus, while the text presents itself as a message, it is never entirely homogeneous in its internal structure. Rather, the text is always a conglomerate of heterogeneous textual elements :

Элементарная модель текста рисуется в следующем виде : представляя некоторое выделенное и имеющее внешнюю границу сообщение, текст одновременно внутренне неоднороден [...] Однако одновременно необходимо, чтобы текст функционировал как нечто едино, не распадаясь в процессе разнообразной семиотической актуализации на части. Это достигается тем, что по отношению к окружающему его контексту он выступает как существенно однородное, то есть семиотическая неоднородность его актуализируется при имманентно-внутреннем описании и ступшевывается при сопоставлении с контекстом. Это выделяет отмеченную границу, отделяющую текст от внешнего контекста. Итак, с одной точки зрения, будет актуализироваться единство текста, а с другой – его (минимально!) двойственность.

An elementary model of the text looks like this : the text is simultaneously internally heterogeneous by presenting a message that is to some extent differentiated and possesses an external boundary [...] However, it is simultaneously necessary for the text to function as a unity, and not disintegrate in the process of the variable semiotic actualization of its parts. This is achieved because the text behaves as if it were primarily homogeneous in relation to its surrounding context. That is, the semiotic non-uniformity of the text is actualized in its immanently generated internal description and becomes part of the background in contrast with the context. This delineates the designated boundary that distinguishes the text from its external context. And thus, on the one hand, the wholeness of the text is actualized, but on the other hand, so is its (minimal) duality. (My translation).

Therefore, as a result of the internal *recodification* of the meanings of sundry differentiated and ambiguous textual elements, an internal semiotic differentiation is created that fills the text with an explosion of new meanings.

Exploring this semiotic problem using the example of Bunin's "Horror Story," we see that the text breaks down into segments, which form fairly complicated, playful relationships with each other. This is how we know that the heroine is "completely alone" in the house, and at the same time, it is obvious that there are at least several other people there. Later in the text, we read : "it is known that there were two of them," and yet, we do not have that information – the old woman doesn't see them, though it seems to her that she knows how one of them looks. After the crime is committed, one of them leaves footprints which inform us that the old woman was right. Out of all the available books in the house, the heroine, contrary to all logic, chooses the Reclus Atlas, and for music, she selects a lively Finnish polka. She understands her fate, and plans to defend herself. Yet, she is writing notes for no apparent reason, and instead of calling someone for help or finding a place to hide, she turns on the lights in all the rooms, giving the killers an opportunity to spy her moving around the house. Then, she lies down on the sofa and falls asleep with a book in her hands. They murder her. Why? We do not know. What for? They didn't steal a single thing. Until the end of the story, none of these parts of the text are connected into a semantic whole. What is this story about? Only the phrase at the end of this short story, ("nonetheless, the most frightful on this earth is a man, his soul") helps the reader unite all of the seemingly illogical,

disconnected and even contradictory segments of the story. As a result, a story about the murder of an old Frenchwoman is transformed into a metaphysical reflection about life and death, about the human soul, including the one who is capable of committing a heinous crime, and the one who becomes the victim of it. What is it that moves the soul, a soul lost and lonely in this cosmic “emptiness of night?”

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, “Horror Story” went largely unnoticed by critics although it was especially popular with readers. However, read with the help of Juri Lotman’s semiotic approach to the artistic text – and in particular his semiotics of artistic space – the story, as I hope to have shown, reveals itself to be central for understanding the prose of Ivan Bunin.

## Notes

1. Lotman published a single article devoted to Bunin (1993/1997a : 730-747), where he analyzes two “oral” short stories that were recorded by Irina Odoevtseva in 1947.
2. Transliteration of Russian names and titles follows the standard used in Slavic linguistics and literature. Exceptions to this are names that have a conventional form in English-language publications (including Pushkin, Likhachev, *Life of Arseniev*).

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## Abstract

Ivan Bunin occupies a unique place in the context of Russian literature. The following article demonstrates the relevance of Juri Lotman’s work on defining semiotic artistic space by examining Bunin’s modeling of the world and his construction of

artistic space in his prose works. Special attention is paid to the semiosphere, its central mechanisms, and their realization in several of Bunin's works, and especially the short story entitled "Horror Story".

**Keywords:** Artistic Space; Semiosphere; Lotman; Bunin; *Life of Arseniev*; "Horror Story".

## Résumé

La place occupée par Ivan Bunin dans la littérature russe est unique. Le présent article illustre la pertinence du travail de Juri Lotman sur la définition d'espace sémiotique artistique pour comprendre la modélisation du monde chez Bunin et la construction de l'espace artistique dans sa prose. Une attention particulière est portée à la sémiosphère, à ses mécanismes centraux et à leur réalisation dans l'oeuvre de Bunin, et tout particulièrement à la nouvelle intitulée "Histoire d'horreur".

**Mots-clés :** Espace artistique; Sémiosphère; Lotman; Bunin; *La vie d'Arseniev*; "Histoire d'horreur".

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