

Juri Lotman's Cultural Explosion and its Function in Friendship Studies and the *Pragmasphere*

Original Study

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Abstract: In his 1992 work *Culture and Explosion*, Juri M. Lotman describes the notion of explosion as a “moment of unpredictability” (2009 [1992], 123). The concept of explosion entails the actualisation of one out of an array of possibilities with reference to a certain phenomenon. Although – on the surface level – the term may seem to suggest otherwise, the concept of explosion retains a quality of order. It implies the actualisation of one possibility out of a discrete set of possibilities, and does not correlate to a random or undefined actualisation (Lotman 2009 [1992], 123). Put another way, the term points to a chaotic realisation of a certain outcome that is ordered to the extent that the possible outcomes of the explosion must be finite. This article attempts to review Lotman's primary texts, regarding the concept of cultural explosion and semiosphere. Further, the current work explores the ways in which the semiosphere and explosion concepts are relevant in friendship studies, and how they can be developed in the *pragmasphere* model.

Keywords: Friendship, Love, Lotman, Explosion, Semiosphere

EXPLOSION IN LOTMAN'S WORKS

In chapter 12 of *Culture and Explosion*, Lotman postulates that the position of history, or at least the tendency of historians, is to look upon the past as only containing realised potentialities. He writes, “When we look into the past, reality acquires the status of fact and we are inclined to see it as the only possible realisation” (Lotman 2009 [1992], 126). This retrospectively oriented position that historians take, Lotman argues, relegates the unrealised potentialities of history to an almost ignorable status. Lotman dubs this the “retrospective view”, to the extent that it regards the unrealised potentialities of history as mere predictions and strips them of their status as potentialities (Lotman 2009 [1992], 127).

Thus, Lotman's definition of history implies a certain degree of appropriation of information to the extent that explosion (or the development of history) happens

unpredictably. It has been noted that in principle, there is an infinite amount of information that exists in the extra-cultural sphere, and the path of history involves the process of selection (Gherlone 2022, 287). Lotman himself describes this retrospective approach towards history as limiting to the extent that viewing history as a realisation of possibilities (a retelling of events that occurred) does not suffice to tell its whole story. He writes in *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, “not a single event regardless of whether it takes place at the level of collective or individual history, can be simply predicted at the moment of explosion” (Lotman 2013, 66).

Another point that is interesting to consider pertinent to Lotman's concept of explosion, is the idea of bifurcation as it is applied to cultural studies. The concept – as expressed in the work of Lotman – takes the position that the increase of the exchange between a system and

the outside (extracultural or extrasemiotic), increases the system's entropy until reaching a so-called bifurcation point (Grishakova 2009, 178). This bifurcation point in the development of a system can be understood in similar terms to Lotman's conception of cultural explosion to the extent that the greater the degree of entropy between a system and what is situated outside of it, the greater the potential for explosion and development. This, perhaps, brings us to an important point in Lotman's thought: the degree to which the exchange of information between different levels of the semiosphere contributes to the process of explosion. In *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman proffers the notion of boundary. To this end, he describes the semiosphere as "transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts, and the internal space of each of these sub-semiospheres has its own semiotic 'I' which is realized as the relationship of any language, group of texts, separate text to a metastructural space which describes them" (Lotman 1990, 138).

From this notion of semiospheric interaction follows the importance of understanding explosion as a concept that is borne out of communication between a semiosphere and that which is extracultural to it. The function of boundaries on the level of sub-semiospheres can be understood as the faculty that belongs "simultaneously to both the internal and external space, the semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual translatable 'filters', passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere" (Lotman 2005 [1984], 208–209).

Further, with regards to boundary, Lotman writes in *Universe of the Mind*:

The function of any boundary or filter [...] is to control, filter and adapt the external into the internal [...] it implies a separation of 'one's own' from 'someone else's', the filtering of what comes from outside and is treated as a text in another language, and the translation of this text into one's own language. (Lotman 1990, 140)

The notion of boundary as having the status of a third element with regards to the interaction of sub-semiospheres is interesting to consider. Ultimately, what the process of explosion amounts to is the abrupt translation of different elements in dialogue with one another, begetting further cultural development. These borders – or mechanisms of translation – (Torop 2009, xxxiii) exist as filtering devices. If the mechanism for explosion – the thing that pushes together sub-semiospheres towards the bifurcation point – is the interaction between the semiosphere and what is extracultural to it, then the boundary regulates this process. The boundary is the permeable layer which is responsible for the increase in entropy in the system until it has taken on more than it has jettisoned and meets a bifurcation point from which it may develop in a vastly multifarious, but principally finite number of ways.

In this section, I have attempted to explain the mechanisms that contribute to cultural explosion as proffered by Lotman in his primary writings. I have attempted to elucidate the connection between semiosphere, sub-semiosphere, and boundary. Whilst all three of these terms exist in harmony with each other, it is important to understand the nature of the connection between the three. The sub-semiosphere is not something that exists independently of the semiosphere, but rather is nested inside of the semiosphere. Additionally, I have attempted to demonstrate the border as a dynamic third space that exists on both the level of the sub-semiosphere and the primary semiosphere. The border's main function is that of a filter to the extent that it facilitates the interaction between sub-semiospheres, or between the semiosphere and that which is outside of it. It provokes the mechanism of explosion occurring at the bifurcation point when the entropy of the system has reached a critical mass. In the following section I will attempt to explain how the Lotmanian concept of explosion has applicability both in biosemiotic thought and in friendship studies.

INTIMACY AND FRIENDSHIP

Although love is a sexual instinct, we don't not love with that instinct, rather we presuppose the existence of another feeling, and that presupposition is, effectively, another feeling.

– Fernando Pessoa

This section will primarily focus on the concept of explosion within interpersonal relationships, examining it through the contemporary perspectives of biosemiotic thought and friendship studies. Additionally, in this section, I will present my model of the *pragmasphere* in an attempt to offer a modeling method for adult intimacy based on the Lotmanian concept of explosion.

In the article "Semiotic Scaffolding of the Social Self in Reflexivity and Friendship", Claus Emmeche argues for friendship as a type of semiotic scaffolding that functions on the societal and anthropic levels (Emmeche 2015, 277). By this, Emmeche hypothesizes that the nature of friendly relationships between humans aids in the development of an individual's self image and place in society. The role (or perhaps the somewhat idealised teleological end) of a friendly relationship should be, according to Emmeche, to direct and assist the individual in generating the nature of her relationship between herself and society (Emmeche 2015, 278). It should be noted that the essence of this relationship requires a certain degree of reflexivity, which – as it will be explained in this section – is a critically important characteristic of adult intimacy.

These types of relationships act as waypoints or compasses which orient the individual's behavior in the world with regards to their relationship with the other (Wiśniewska 2016, 420). This is a phenomenon which Emmeche connects to the concept *sunaisthesis* in a subsequent paper. The term refers to an individual's state of mediation between herself and the social world as being

defined, at least partially, through her friendly relations with the other (Flakne 2005, 42; Emmeche 2017, 53). It is important to note that this phenomenon does not imply a joint embodied consciousness but rather a mediation.

The notion of *sunaisthesis* strikes a similar chord to the ideas proffered by John Russon on the role of reflexivity in adult intimacy. In contrasting childhood intimacy and adult intimacy, Russon contends that while both imply intimacy with another, the childhood iteration is a “non-reflective and bodily sense of sharedness” wherein the child is not equipped to mediate the relationship between herself and the world, and depends on a parent or caregiver to fulfill this duty (Russon 2014, 65). Indeed, according to Russon, the function of childhood intimacy should be to prepare the individual for her place in society, and equip her with the tools necessary to navigate life without a caregiver in the face of an “indiffer[ent] and independent world” (Russon 2014, 68). Another function of childhood intimacy which Russon points out is to prepare the child for intimate relationships in adulthood (*idem*. 66–67). In an attempt to further contrast the difference between adult and childhood intimacy, Russon notes that a key distinguishing feature of adult intimacy is the degree to which choice-making is involved (Russon 2014, 68). This notion supposes that adult intimacy is borne out of the relation between two selves who have independently forged their individual identity and thus select from the vast array of options with whom they will share that individuality with. The shared individuality (what I will later propose as being a key characteristic of the *pragmasphere*) is perhaps a condition of *sunaisthesis*.

To quickly recapitulate the section thus far, we have identified that a key characteristic of adult intimacy in friendly or romantic relations requires a degree of choice-making. These types of relationships are reflexive insofar as individuals engaged in them already have an established identity which can be understood as a mediated position between themselves and the world which emerged from childhood non-reflexive intimate relationships. This position of mediatedness is independent of their relationship with another. The individuals engaged in this relationship with another are in a state of *sunaisthesis* which corresponds to a “joint perception” of the world (Emmeche 2017, 53).

An important set of distinctions ought to be made at this point regarding the different types of love or intimacy as they have been explained in semiotic thought. In *The Semiotics of Love*, Marcel Danesi outlines typologies of love. Perhaps the most important ones to consider in service of this essay are the notions of *eros*, *agape*, and *pragma*. Firstly, *eros* is defined as the initial state of attraction that one feels when encountering the other individual. Danesi claims that the *agapistic* stage can be described as the condition of “falling in love”. The third and perhaps most essential form of love identified by Danesi is *pragma*, or “standing in love.” This condition is marked via a collaborative effort between the individuals involved in the relationship to maintain the relationship so that it may withstand the turbulence of their lived

experience. The condition of *pragma* seems to correlate most closely to *sunaisthesis* insofar as it involves a collaborative effort to maintain the semiotic scaffolding that individuals have established for themselves on the basis of the interpersonal relationship. Crucially, Danesi writes, “it could well be that *pragma* emanates from *agape*, at least when it ‘works out’” (2019, 3). What this quote implies is that the emergence of *pragma* relationships occurs from other stages. While Danesi does not explicitly claim that a hierarchy exists between these three terms, a hierarchical dimension is entailed insofar as *pragma* is not immediate and likely depends on *agape*.

Before moving further, it is important to acknowledge and define the difference between the development of romantic love and the development of a friendship. While Danesi does not necessarily view these three stages as hierarchical, as mentioned, my application of these categories offers a temporal dimension to its progression.

In principle, every relationship that begins from the moment of recognition or *eros* and progresses into the *agape* stage has the potential to become a *pragma* relationship. Whether or not this occurs is about how the specific relationship in question actually progresses. In Emmeche’s terms, the condition of *agape* corresponds to the buds of *sunaisthesis*, and in Russon’s terms, it corresponds to the sharedness experienced by individuals engaged in relationships of adult intimacy. Further, Emmeche describes friendships of *agape* as marked by unconditional love for the other (2025, 20). The nature of a *pragma* relationship can be understood as a product of Lotmanian explosion. The first stage of this explosion begins at a bifurcation point that manifests in a moment of recognition between the two or more individuals engaged in the relationship. This initial moment corresponds to an experience of *eros*. The recognition that produces the initial condition of *eros* is the recognition of a certain quality in the other that is appealing, attractive, and potentially pleasurable. From this blossoms the *agapistic* stage of the relationship during which the individuals involved face a non-reactive, non-immediate stage wherein they decide whether or not they love the other individual for themselves and not just for the ways in which they provoke a pleasurable reaction in the other.

Emanating out of *agape*, individuals then face a choice of whether to continue on and forge the relationship further, which corresponds to a condition of *pragma*. A way of distinguishing between *agape* and *pragma* is the distinction between “falling in love” and “standing in love”, which both distinguish themselves from bodily (*eros*) attraction (Danesi 2019, 3). Danesi makes the argument that this stage is marked by the importance of choice-making. He writes, “love is hardly inevitable; it is a subjective decision. It also implies that we seek *agape* not just enact the urges of *eros*” (2019, 16). However, what differentiates this stage from the final stage of *pragma* is that there is no degree of reciprocity required. In connecting the act of falling in romantic

love, and attempting to establish close friendship with another, Claus Emmeche draws attention to the fact that this agapeistic act of the fall may be unrequited in both cases. He writes, “Like falling in love, falling in friendship need not have the same reciprocity (*q.v.*) that characterise a genuine friendship, as its passionate feelings can go unrequited and the beloved friend can fail you” (2025, 175). Further, Emmeche has claimed that the act of “falling in friendship”, while a less commonly used and understood term, “may not be an uncommon experience” and is marked by a certain degree of attraction or infatuation. In his discussion of this phenomenon, Emmeche relates the cases of individuals who recognized others as having a magnetic quality about them, which was apparent the moment they laid their eyes on the individual in question (2025, 174–175). Indeed, when discussing the experience of *eros* with regards to friendship, it is important to distinguish it from sexual attraction. In the context of a friendship, *eros* manifests in what we may consider to be a recognition of compatibility, shared interests, or other qualities. This initial attraction, which is perhaps emotional and intellectually based rather than sexually based, retains the spontaneous quality that Danesi associates with *eros* in the context of a romantic relationship. As evidenced by the examples given by Emmeche with regards to “falling in friendship”, persons may still be said to experience a moment of recognition which conveys certain attractive qualities for friendship, in a fashion similar to the sexually based stirrings engendered by an experience of romantic *eros*.

While this essay applies Danesi’s ideas regarding romantic love, it is important to note that this represents a theoretical extension rather than a direct application. While sharing certain structural similarities – particularly the development of *pragma* – friendship and romantic love serve different social functions. However, the developments of these relationships – with particular emphasis placed on the fall (or the movement beyond *eros*) – seem to operate on similar courses to one another. The similarities in the trajectories of these progressions are apparent in the ways in which mutual recognition, reflexivity, and emotional closeness evolve. Those parties engaged in non-romantic close friendship still engage in reflexive *sunaisthesis*, and take mutual pleasure from their mediated experience of the world.

In Book IX of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the condition of a virtuous friendship is described as a sort of jointly held orientation towards the world through the relationship with the friend. Aristotle writes:

Now his being was seen to be desirable because he perceived his own goodness, and such perception is pleasant in itself. He must, therefore, perceive the existence of his friend together with his own, and this will be realized in their living together and sharing in discussion and thought; for this is what living together would seem to mean in the case of man, and not, as in the case of cattle, feeding in the same place. (2009, 213)

What this suggests is that a hallmark of friendship is emotional intimacy. Rather than sexual or romantic attraction, the condition of “friendship *eros*” manifests itself as emotional or intellectual recognition. This distinction preserves the phenomenological similarity of the experience of recognition, while still differentiating between romantic and platonic relationships.

When individuals enter into a relationship of *pragma*, they enter into a relationship of sustained *sunaisthesis* that can be modeled by the *pragmasphere*. The nature of the *pragmasphere* – a relational space which develops as a product of an explosion and is then maintained by the involved parties – is similar to the relevant noise model hypothesized by Baciagalupi and Favareau. The *pragmasphere* functions as “an interstitial, continuous, and pervasive medium that both moulds and is simultaneously moulded by the behaviour of [...] primary nodes” (Baciagalupi, Favareau 2023, 2587). The *Pragmasphere* (which is presented in the figure below) presents a model of adult intimacy wherein the two individuals engaged in the intimate relationship influence both each other and the relationship itself.

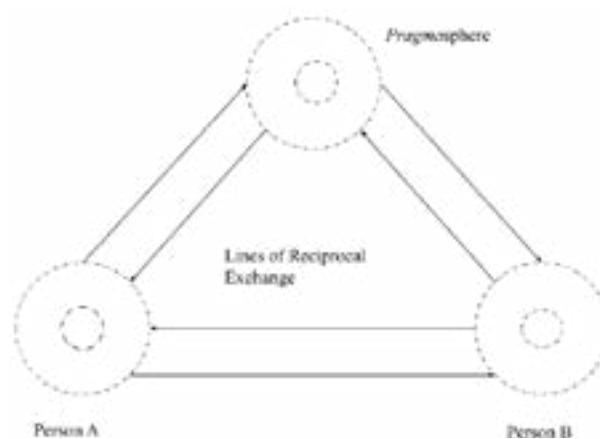


Figure 1: The Pragmasphere

The arrows in Figure 1 demonstrate the translation between the different spheres and the permeability of their boundaries. Persons A and B influence each other’s behavior, which begins at the moment of recognition (explosion) and corresponds to the initial *eros* experience. This initial moment of recognition serves as the first level of the interstitial medium through which – if the relationship continues to develop – it aims at the stage of *sunaisthesis*, which becomes the second level of the developmental process of the *pragmasphere*. The *pragmasphere* – rather than being solidified – remains open to ongoing modification through continued input and translation via the primary nodes. This reflects the condition of a *pragma* relationship which is in one sense enduring, but critically, engaged in a continuous state of development.

Further, borrowing terminology from Baciagalupi and Favareau, spheres A and B should be understood as primary nodes. The two opposite facing arrows that run between the primary nodes and the *pragmasphere*

indicate the way in which its sustained existence both moulds and is moulded by the behavior of the primary nodes. In more practical terms, this condition of reciprocity changes the primary nodes independent of the existence of the *pragmasphere*. If the *pragmasphere* is destroyed or abandoned (as in a breakup or a schism in a friendship), each of the primary nodes is permanently altered by the existence of the *pragmasphere*. The arrows running between the individuals and the *pragmasphere* indicate a lingering trace that is left in the individuals as a result of their participation in the relationship. This, in turn, influences the behavior of the primary nodes – as well as their preferences for seeking out future relationships of intimacy – and affects how they perceive themselves in the world (i.e., their state of mediation between themselves and what is not themselves). This is evidenced to the extent that the shared experience of mediation alters the character of the nodes and imports into them the characteristics of the relationship which affects subsequent *pragmaspheres* which they may develop throughout their lifetime.

Thus, the *pragmasphere* is in temporal flux. It undergoes a process of continuous renegotiation between the primary nodes. We may understand a breakup or irreparable schism in the relationship as another form of explosion where the system's entropy reaches a critical mass and the boundaries can no longer filter effectively, leading to a failure of the system and its dissolution.

In this section, I have attempted to give a brief overview of the existing literature on the semiotics of friendship. Additionally, I have presented my model of the *pragmasphere* which should be regarded as a modelling method for adult intimacy which borrows elements from the relevant noise model proposed by Baciagalupi and Favareau, as well as the concept of explosion from Lotman. Lotmanian explosion is a crucial component of the *pragmasphere* insofar as it develops from a moment of recognition that occurs at a bifurcation point. The moment of recognition implies a conscious choice to regard the other as possessing potentially pleasurable characteristics. This choice-making moment becomes possible only after the individual has a "sense-of-self" which can be understood as an independently forged mediation between themselves and the world which emerges as a product of the non-reflective intimacy of childhood.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay was to both explicate the explosion concept as it relates to the semiosphere in the works of Juri Lotman and apply these concepts empirically. A critical notion of the semiosphere in the works of Lotman is the permeability of the border. The border is not a device to keep things in the semiosphere separate from that which lies outside of it, but rather functions as a filter that regulates translation. Explosion is, as defined by Lotman, an abrupt translation between elements within the semiosphere that occurs at a bifurcation point which in turn dictates the course of future development. The retrospective view of history ignores the criticality of the

explosion, prioritizes realized events, and ignores the array of other possible options that could have potentially come to fruition.

On the notion of translation, Baciagalupi and Favareau's relevant noise model proves to be useful as it conceptualizes an interstitial medium that both influences and is influenced by the primary nodes. The term sub-semiosphere as it has been used in this paper corresponds to the levels of the semiosphere. In other words, the semiosphere as a concept is composed of sub-semiospheres nested within it, which interact with each other in order to beget cultural development. In the *pragmasphere* model, spheres A and B – when engaged in a state of *pragma* – mediate their experience through the interstitial medium of the *pragmasphere*. The initial recognition of the other as possessing pleasurable characteristics (*eros*) is the catalyst for the explosion. This moment of recognition happens due to the porous nature of the semiosphere's boundary, and affords – on the level of the individual modeled by the sub-semiosphere – a certain discriminatory capacity. This discriminatory capacity dictates whether or not the explosion happens.

To conceptualize *true love* or *true friendship* as such stakes a retrospective point of view that discounts the importance of individual agency and choice-making. As it has been pointed out, the capacity for this choice-making – the evaluation of personal relationships and the value individuals may derive from them – comes primarily from the non-reflective intimate relationships individuals have with primary caregivers in infancy and childhood.

Whether or not a relationship from *pragma* results from the explosion is, as Lotman theorized with regards to both cultural and individual history, unpredictable. To share the world in adulthood with another remains a constant and ephemeral longing. The longing can only be satisfied through reciprocity between two or more parties who love each other not for what usefulness the other provides for them, but for the way in which their sharedness enhances their experience of the world. This all begins with a look.

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