

Estonian Approaches to Culture Theory

Approaches to Culture Theory Series
Volume 4

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The Approaches to Culture Theory book series focuses on various aspects of analysis, modelling, and theoretical understanding of culture. Culture theory as a set of complementary theories is seen to include and combine the approaches of different sciences, among them semiotics of culture, archaeology, environmental history, ethnology, cultural ecology, cultural and social anthropology, human geography, sociology and the psychology of culture, folklore, media and communication studies.

Estonian Approaches to Culture Theory

Edited by

Valter Lang & Kalevi Kull

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Acknowledgements

This volume was initiated at the annual meeting of the board of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) in Põhjaka manor, Estonia, November 17, 2011. All CECT research groups were invited to suggest fitting articles in order to compile an interesting contemporary overview of culture theory works in Estonia. We are grateful to those who responded to our call, although it was not possible to include all of the material received – nevertheless, the initial selection set the tone of the present volume. This volume is recognition of both the fruitful discussions of CECT board meetings as well as the willing nature of CECT researchers to be challenged by new ideas and create new forms of cooperation.

We would like to thank the volume authors for their kind responses to editing their articles and for enduring the long process of compiling this volume. Our ambition to introduce modern Estonian art parallel to contemporary culture theory was encouraged by the Art Museum of Estonia – we are especially happy that our collaboration began with this volume.

We are grateful to Marek Tamm for some good ideas that we have used in the introduction. We would also like to thank Daniel E. Allen, our language editor and keeper of our house style, our editor Anu Kannike, and our managing editor Monika Tasa.

*This image is not available in online version due to
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**Jüri Palm "Oli kord" ("Once Upon a Time") 1977.
Ink, paper. 39.1 x 39.1 cm.**

Preface: Estonian approaches in culture theory

Valter Lang, Kalevi Kull

Credo

Culture depends on its self-description. This means that the development of any culture cannot be understood without knowing what the people knew about their culture. Likewise, theoretical knowledge, including local studies in the field of culture theory, can play a remarkable role in cultural self-awareness. Therefore, culture theory studies in Estonia do not represent only a certain field of local science; these studies, in the vanguard of the self-understanding of culture in Estonia, represent an obligatory part of the culture itself.

Culture is everything that symbolic communication does. While the capacity to build symbolic relations is the basis for the faculty of language, it is also responsible for the diversity and power of culture. This includes not only human relations and artefacts, but also accounts for our relationships with place and cross-temporal phenomena. Thus the framework of culture theory should also deal with the modification of landscapes, and with the sustainability of the ecosystem that contains a culture and is related to it. Culture is a chronotope, a spatio-temporal world that meaning-making humans are permanently creating; culture is also a semiosphere, a space of signs. These formulations represent the approach developed by contemporary Estonian culture theorists.

Progenitors

Estonian research in cultural theory has received worldwide attention since the 1960s, due to the pioneering work of Juri Lotman on the semiotic theory of culture. However, the history of professional culture theory research in Estonia can be traced back at least two centuries. Initially, the impact of Victor Hehn, Leopold von Schroeder, and Hermann von Keyserling, is visible. Upon closer inspection, a veritable group of scholars opens up.

At the beginning of the 19th century, probably under the influence of Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche (1762–1842), philosophy professor of the University of Tartu and

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a pupil of Immanuel Kant, the rationalist approach gained popularity in Tartu. This aspect did not diminish the scope of studies, rather it broadened the diversity of approaches, adding the emphasised dimension of depth to each of them. Carl Gustav Jochmann (1789–1830), who was born in Pärnu and later travelled in Europe, wrote influential essays on cultural philosophy, yet his relationship to Estonia remained disconnected. However, University of Tartu grew into one of the major intellectual centres of 19th-century Europe and gave rise to numerous studies that have underpinned the deep investigations of culture. For instance, Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1896), who was an eminent scholar in many fields – biology (including embryology, ecology, theory of development and evolution), anthropology, geography, history – carried out outstanding research in ethnology. Historian of culture Victor Hehn (1813–1890), who studied and taught in Tartu, wrote a remarkable work on the domestication of plants and animals. Gustav Teichmüller (1832–1888), a long-term philosophy professor in the University of Tartu, made an extensive study of the history of concepts. Linguist Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), a professor at the University of Tartu from 1883 to 1893, developed an early structuralist approach. Indologist Leopold von Schroeder (1851–1920), who was also interested in general linguistics, studied human ethology. Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), who studied theology in Tartu (and later established the Keiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, now the Max Planck Society, in Germany), performed a study of early Christian culture. Alexander von Staël-Holstein (1877–1937) was an Estonian (Baltic German) orientalist – this field has been permanently present in Tartu. Biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) made attempts to use general functional models of meaning-making for all organisms, applying this to the description of human society. Hermann von Keyserling (1880–1946), who studied chemistry in Tartu, was an influential cultural philosopher of the early 20th century.

Most of the abovementioned scholars were Baltic Germans. In the 20th century, scientists from Estonian families took over the field. Eduard Tennmann (1878–1936) wrote about the role of religion as an organiser of culture. Oskar Loorits (1900–1961) was a founder of extensive studies in local mythology and folkloristics. Alfred Koort (1901–1956), who became a Rector of the University of Tartu, made some progress in cultural philosophy. Professor Edgar Kant (1902–1978) initiated studies in human geography in Estonia. Nikolai Maim (1884–1976) developed a globalist model of culture. Arthur Vööbus (1909–1988) studied the history of culture in the Near East. Theologian Uku Masing (1909–1985) had a strong influence on comparative cultural approaches in Estonia.

University of Tartu geography professor Johannes Gabriel Granö (1882–1956), who studied Estonian landscapes, and Walter Anderson (1885–1962), who was a

long-term folkloristics professor in Tartu, also exerted remarkable influence on our cultural studies.

Juri Lotman (1922–1993), a specialist in Russian literature and the history of culture, introduced the whole field of the semiotics of culture into the humanities. He organised a series of legendary summer schools on semiotics, or secondary modelling systems, in Kääriku (Estonia) from 1964 to 1986. These meetings enabled the establishment of the Tartu–Moscow School of semiotics. Almost all subsequent research in theory of culture benefits from the influence of this school.

Later, Linnart Mäll (1938–2010) studied the role of humanistic base texts in Eastern cultures. Cultural psychologist Peeter Tulviste (b. 1945) has studied cultural historical types of verbal thinking. Jaan Valsiner (b. 1954) has developed a semiotic approach in cultural psychology.

The work of the abovementioned scholars with their diverse backgrounds prepared the conditions for top-level research in the theory of culture in Estonia in the 21st century.

Centre of Excellence

The Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) was established in 2008. The Centre acts as an umbrella organisation for eight established research groups – archaeology, cultural communication studies, contemporary cultural studies, ethnology, folkloristics, landscape studies, religious studies, and semiotics. In order to advance the theoretical analysis of culture, the CECT focuses on ancient social and cultural systems, folklore and heritage, the evolution and translatability of sign systems, contemporary everyday practice, landscape and sociological processes, media and life story research, the theoretical problems of cultural semiotics, etc. Enhanced interdisciplinary communication and joint seminars have turned the Centre into an inspirational environment for further steps in the field of the humanities.

Since 2008, the Centre has organized a series of international annual conferences on culture theory:

- 2008 – *The Analysability of Culture* (Tartu, 21–22 November)
- 2009 – *Spatiality, Memory and Visualisation of Culture/Nature Relationships: Theoretical Aspects* (Tallinn, 22–24 October)
- 2010 – *Time in Culture: Mediation and Representation* (Tartu, 28–30 October)
- 2011 – *Things in Culture, Culture in Things* (Tartu, 20–22 October)
- 2012 – *In, Out and in Between: Dynamics of Cultural Borders* (Tallinn, 17–19 October)

- 2013 – *Embodiment, Expressions, Exits: Transforming Experience and Cultural Identity* (Tartu, 30 October – 1 November)
- 2014 – *Deep Mechanisms of Estonian Culture* (Tallinn, 29–31 October)

The international book series *Approaches to Culture Theory*, published by the University of Tartu Press, was established in 2011. The majority of papers from the conference in 2009 were published in the first volume of the series, under the title *The Space of Culture – the Place of Nature in Estonia and Beyond* (2011). The second volume of the series, *The Curving Mirror of Time* (2013), presents research of the Cultural Communication Studies group in Tartu. A selection of papers from the 2011 conference were published in the third volume *Things in Culture, Culture in Things* (2013).

Current volume

The aim of the current volume is to present a ‘contemporary anthology’ – a representative selection of research in the field of culture theory in Estonia. The articles have been selected from recently published works; some of them were translated from the original languages of publication into English and improved especially for this volume. As any other anthology, this one can hardly be an exhaustive selection, more something of a ‘best of Estonian cultural theory’, an overview of what some of our scholars are dealing with today. The authors represent all eight of the Centre’s research groups:

- Archaeology: Valter Lang
- Cultural Communication Studies: Halliki Harro-Loit
- Contemporary Cultural Studies: Aili Aarelaid-Tart
- Ethnology: Art Leete, Kristin Kuutma
- Folkloristics: Ülo Valk, Tiiu Jaago
- Landscape Studies: Hannes Palang, Rein Raud, Tõnu Viik
- Religious Studies: Anne Kull
- Semiotics: Mihhail Lotman, Peeter Torop, Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull
- In cooperation with the Centre: Martin Ehala, Raul Tiganik.

The first chapter of this collection is written by Mihhail Lotman. It draws attention to some paradoxes in Juri Lotman’s conception of structural semiotics, which did not find adequate expression in his publications. These paradoxical aspects of semiotics involve the separation of time from causality where result may precede cause in terms of information, and the relationship between sign and its meaning where meaning can be at the same time antecedent and subsequent, the cause and its result. Peeter Torop continues by analysing connections between culture and culture studies, particularly concentrating on the specificity

of translation – a concept that has been treated as central to discussion of the philosophy of culture. He elaborates the concept of the ‘thick translation’, which in parallel to C. Geertz’s ‘thick description’ is meant to signify translation that maximally opens up the cultural context. It follows that anthropology can be treated as culture translation and, therefore, translation can be examined not merely within the framework of translation studies but also within cultural anthropology. Tõnu Viik contributes by analysing Husserl’s account of the cultural uniqueness of Western civilization, focusing on cultural symbolic forms.

Martin Ehala turns to the theory of language ecology. He analyses the sustainability of language by distinguishing three main factors that influence it most: the external and internal environments, and the ethnolinguistic vitality of the community. According to Ehala, changes in the external environment of a language community must be adapted to by developing the internal environment (social institutions) of that community as fully as possible, while the strength of the latter depends on ethnolinguistic vitality, i.e. the ability of a community to behave in interethnic communication as a united collective factor. Kati Lindström, Kalevi Kull and Hannes Palang, in their chapter analyse semiotic treatments of landscape, where approaches to landscape as analogous to a text with its language and both writers and readers have turned to more naturalised approaches. This also includes understanding of landscape as chronotope and an ecosemiotic view of landscapes that goes beyond anthropocentric definitions. Valter Lang goes 3000 years back in time and tries to define prehistoric culture by using Juri Lotman’s treatment of semiosphere and cultural typology. He describes different sub-phenomena or models of cultural behaviour within eastern Baltic Bronze Age culture, which as a whole is distinguishable from neighbouring cultural regions.

Rein Raud dedicates his chapter to the analysis of identity, treating this concept as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon rather than a relationship between things and objective reality. Raul Tiganik and Anne Kull discuss the relationships between religion with its emphases on love, compassion, caring and peace from one side, and criminality and behavioural deviance from the other. Although the latter decreases the sense of security and increases the sense of danger both in the individual and in society, criminology has not been regarded as a partner for theology and religious anthropology as frequently as might be expected. Anthropological approaches to religion from the perspective of collective and individual characteristics are the subject of analysis presented by Art Leete. He compares characteristic research strategies, employed to explain Christian religious identities and processes in modern anthropological tradition, and applies them to his fieldwork data dealing with local traditions and vernacular expressions of faith among the Komi Republic in Russia. Ülo Valk discusses oral storytelling on the

basis of Estonian material, showing how dominant beliefs in the supernatural are connected with social changes and power relations in rural communities. He argues that in order to understand traditional legends, these legends should not be detached from the social world of the communities who tell them.

In her chapter Aili Aarelaid-Tart interprets human time as a cognitive construction of social reality that brings order to social interaction and communication. According to Aarelaid-Tart, the division of time into past, present and future is quite illusory and relative because in real life streams of events from the past and the representations of the future are subordinated to current needs. The next chapter, written by Halliki Harro-Loit, provides the concept of the diachronic change of journalistic conventions, which enables the author to highlight journalism as a specific phenomenon in cultural communication and reveal universal and unique processes in certain journalism cultures. Tiiu Jaago poses the question of how to apply today's research methodology in the analysis of source material collected during earlier periods. For instance, how do the memories of the 1905 revolution in Estonia, written down by historians in the 1920s and 1930s for the purpose of studying history, suit folkloristic narrative research today? She analyses the contact points between historical and folkloristic narrative research from three angles: the genre of these texts, the specificity of oral and written texts, and the impact of the researcher and narrator's cooperation on the archival text. The last chapter by Kristin Kuutma is concerned with the scarcity of theoretical discussions in Estonian folkloristics and proposes development of particular concepts through international disciplinary histories, and also contemplation of their interpretations and interpretative potentials.

As relevant to the diversity of our culture, this volume covers a great variety of topics related to the theory of culture. It is the first of its kind in scope and aim and is thus an important constituent of our larger project of advancing, integrating and institutionalizing studies in culture theory in Estonia.

The illustrations for the current volume represent Estonian art from the period 1967–1985. They are chosen from the collections of the Art Museum of Estonia.