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Semiotics of White Spaces on the Romanian Traditional Blouse, the *IA*

Abstract

In this article we understand the Romanian traditional blouse *IA* as a multi-dimensional semiotic object, with a complex semiotic structure. We will examine the structure and interpretation of semiotic borders and white spaces on *IA*, from the perspective of Lotman's semiotic theory of culture. The white spaces found on our shirts may carry out messages equally important as those expressed by the sewn signs. Not only they define the rhythm, allowing the patterns to breathe, but sometimes they have their own story to tell. The white spaces also come to define the community you belong to, if your age allows you to wear an ornated shirt. The lack of white spaces on the shirts of other ethnic minorities living alongside us may be a hint of their fears and insecurities: they tend to fill in the entire shirt with protective talismans, to make sure they are safe. In some circumstances, as it happens with the shirts from the shores of Nistru River, the white space is a warning. Yet the most interesting subject is to consider and compare the way that these white spaces are "read" and appreciated in our days, after all women had been influenced by the fashion industry and the communication in printed and social media. We like it or not, this influenced our way to define concepts such as "aesthetic", "elegant", "luxurious" or "refined".

Keywords: Lotman semiotic theory of culture; ethnosemiotics; semiotics of white spaces; Romanian traditional blouse *IA*; fashion.

Introduction

Juri M. Lotman captures, in a definition of culture proposed by Lévi-Strauss in 1949, an idea that will help him present culture as a semiotic system governed by rules of structure. It is the idea according to which Culture begins where there are Rules (Lotman, 1974, p. 19). Lévi-Strauss repeats this idea in a series of conferences given in Tokyo, in the spring of 1986. In his opinion, we are living in an age where "our societies create a lot of entropy", the immediate effect being the "anonymization of the individual". Although "modern man lives in disorder" (Lévi-Strauss, 2011, p. 121), a disorder foreseen at the dawn of the Judeo-Christian paradigm, where the events of myth have been replaced by the linear perspective of his-

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tory (Culianu, 2009, p. 135), culture remains one of the strategic instruments helping man create order (Lévi-Strauss, 2011, p. 121). From this standpoint, we still have the privilege of the historic period we are living in, which allows us to understand some of the complexity of the problems and meanings coded in a particular area of culture, namely in folklore and in our ancient traditions (Culianu, 2009, p. 25).

The arts of weaving (spinning, cutting, sewing, etc.) is among the great arts of civilisation mastered by man since the Neolithic (Lévi-Strauss, 1962/2009, p. 25). An ancient cosmogonic model, the *weave*, creates a principle of putting order into Chaos and organising the World (Noica, 1987, p. 23; Culianu, 2009, p. 93; Oișteanu, 2013, pp. 316-317). According to Mircea Eliade (1974), “for to weave is not merely to predestine (anthropologically), and to join together differing realities (cosmologically) but also to create, to make something of one’s own substance as the spider does in spinning its web” (p. 181).

Those who carry further the secrets of this craft basically code the vision of ancestral, ahistorical times, in the patterns and configurations sewn on the fabric. We are talking about a manner to place the order of ancient times on a cultural object that defines us in terms of identity, the Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*. We use this most simple word, *IA*, to define the traditional blouse which is exclusively feminine, due to both cut and motifs used for the embroidery; a shirt that is supposed to be entirely handmade, to be worn in certain special, sacred days, when the people of the past believed “the sky is open”. Creating your own *IA* requires, even nowadays (apart from knowledge and experience of embroidery techniques), respect in regards to certain gestures, rituals, chants and composition rules that were passed down from grandmother to niece, mother to daughter, since immemorial times.

From this viewpoint, this work is a plea for the (re)vitalisation of folk traditions, in particular the manufacturing techniques of the shirt with a crinkled neckline, or the shirt with embroidery (shirt with “*altiță*”), as the Romanian blouse is known.

This article treats the Romanian traditional blouse *IA* as an multi-dimensional semiotic object with a complex semiotic structure. We will also examine the structure and interpretation of semiotic borders and white spaces on *IA*, from the perspective of Lotman’s semiotic theory of culture.

In the first part of the article we discuss about the multi-dimensional semiotic aspect of clothing system, in general. In the following section we shall highlight a few methodological aspects of cultural semiotics. We shall also briefly discuss the theory of culture proposed by Juri Lotman and we shall present the main concepts developed by the founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics. In the following sections, we discuss the various levels of reading the semiotic object analysed, namely the Romanian traditional blouse, the *IA*. In the next section we examine the structure and interpretation of semiotic borders and white spaces on the *IA*, from the perspective of Lotman’s semiotic theory of culture. The last section is for conclusion.

Clothing System as a Multi-Dimensional Semiotic Object

According to Göran Sonesson (1992) the clothing system is a “multi-dimensional semiotic object” (p. 190). Sonesson reminds here an affirmation of Ferdinand de Saussure (1992), who understand clothing “as a particularly clear case of a naturally motivated sign system” (p. 188).

Clothes are systems of signs with a seemingly paradoxical semiotic behaviour. A relatively motivated relationship is created between the body itself and the clothes (Sonesson, 1988,

p. 19). This allows a semiotic approach in the study of clothing, beyond the functional paradigm (of utility and adaptation to the natural environment) and the analysis of the aesthetic functions specific thereto. It is no news that clothes are regarded as complex semiotic systems (Bogatyrev, 1937/1971; Barthes, 1967/1990; Enninger, 1984; Danesi, 2004; Todorovic *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, understanding clothes as a system of signs in relation to other systems of social signs explains some aspects of the communication function specific to this cultural object. Clothes convey messages regarding our social attitudes, status or political beliefs (Danesi, 2004, p. 178).

Clothes are the main way to assert one's identity, of "*presenting persona*" (Danesi, 2004, p. 178). They can be regarded as signs coding semantic markers relevant for the wearer's personality, social status or character traits (Danesi, 2004). Peter Corrigan (2008) discusses the double assertion of the semiotic system of clothes and distinguishes between two dimensions of clothing. Clothing as a *phenomenon* – endowed with certain semantic markers (which generate the mechanism of interpretation) – and clothing as an *object* – endowed with certain syntactic, material, perceptible markers (as surrogate markers that contribute to the construction of the mechanism of interpretation). The first dimension recreates structural aspects, working, for instance, as markers of social class. The second dimension refers rather to relational aspects, to the manner in which social relations are structured in the field to which the object belongs. In this context we remember the point of view of Roland Barthes (1990), for whom fashion is social discourse. Ioan Petru Culianu (2005, p. 26) denounces the structuralist approach of the fashion system proposed by Roland Barthes, which remains at the syntactic level, of static correlations between accessories and it reminds us of the morphodynamic point of view of proposed by Agnes Brooks Young (1937). Young describes the dynamics of the phenomenon of fashion, of the relation between synchrony and diachrony. The author intuitively a morphodynamic that governs the "system of fashion" according to the principle of recurrence, a principle that explains, *inter alia*, the social mechanism of *fashion trends*.

From ancient times, clothes propose an appearance, a story that I tell others about myself (Danesi, 2004, p. 182), thus triggering the mechanism of interpretation. Clothes invite to interpretation. Thus, *stories sewn on fabric* can build communication bridges between us and the others, and even particular solutions to the sensitive problem of the balance between diversity and identity worldwide.

Lotman's Theory of Culture. Methodology of Cultural Semiotics

According to Winfried Nöth (2014), Juri M. Lotman, founder of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, anticipated the "spatial turn" in cultural studies (p. 11).

Its concepts of a *text* understood as a *cultural type* or as a dynamic mechanism of building collective memory (Lotman, 1974), of a *semiosphere* as a metaphoric space for the interpretation of culture (Nöth, 2014, p. 11), understood as "the result and the condition for the development of culture" (Lotman, 1990, p. 125), or of a *model* – meaning that cultural systems can be understood as "abstract model of reality" (Lepik, 2008, p. 66) which reproduce a certain view of the world – will prove extremely rich for studies in semiotics and more.

For Juri Lotman (2002) culture is "totality of non-inherited information that is acquired, preserved, and mediated by different groups of human society" (p. 56, as cited in Lang, 2014, p. 141). This definition allows understanding culture as "multi-language system", practical-

ly „the secondary modelling system” (Torop, 2014, p. 57). This *secondary modelling system* require natural language, considered as *primary modeling system*, for description or explanation (Deely, 2007, pp. 10-14; Torop, 2014, p. 57; Tarasti, 2015, p. 62). Basically is an extension of this system (Sebeok, 1988; Cobley, 2010, p. 2055).

Understanding culture as “the sum of non-hereditary information” (Lotman, 1974, p. 54), suggest the importance of the learning process for culture. The ability to independently create texts involves learning the system of rules which make the foundation of this “complex semiotic structure” (Lotman, 1974, p. 116) that we call culture.

Aleksandr Pjatigorski (1996), one of the founders of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, together with Juri Lotman, also captures the dynamic aspect of culture and defines this concept as a „system of self-description” or a „metaconcept” (p. 55). In order to capture and take into account the dynamic aspect of culture Juri Lotman introduce the concept of *semiosphere* (Torop, 2014, p. 58). Some of the attributes of the semiosphere are similar, in some aspect, with the attributes of *textual* object (a particular cultural object) and *textualisable* objects (culture as text, an event): definability, structurality and coherence (Torop, 2014, p. 58). According to Lotman (1990):

Every culture begins by dividing the world into ‘its own’ internal space and ‘their’ external space [...] The boundary may separate the living from the dead, settled peoples from nomadic ones, the town from the plains; it may be a state frontier, or a social, national, confessional, or any other kind of frontier. (p. 131)

Lotman (1984, 1990) introduces the concept of semiosphere “in analogy to and in extension of Vernadsky’s (1926) concept of the biosphere” (Nöth, 2014, p. 12). This is not about a relation of formal analogy, or logic, but rather about a relation “between two possible worlds” (Lotman, 2014, p. 25). If biosphere is governed by laws of science, “the semiosphere though is formed by means of semiotic mechanisms” (Lotman, 2014, p. 25). The semiosphere is formed and function based on several principles. One of them is *discontinuity* and *heterogeneity*, which means that semiosphere is characterized by diversity of elements and different functions. Another one is *binarism* and *asymmetry*, understood as „bipolar asymmetry of the centre, with its conservative tendencies towards stability and stagnation, vs the periphery, with its tendencies towards instability and creativity” (Nöth, 2014, p. 19). Not least, the existence of *boundaries*, understood as “a ‘third space’ between the semiosphere and its external environment” (Nöth, 2014, pp. 19-20). The boundary is a *communicative mechanism* which operates as a „sum of bilingual ‘translatable filters’, which translate so-to-say a text into another language that is situated outside the semiosphere in question” (Lang, 2014, p. 143). In traditional mentality, also is made this cultural distinction between spaces: *intra muros* (as a cultural space) and *extra muros* space (non-cultural, natural space) (Oişteanu, 2013, pp. 580-581). Practically, the boundaries is „one of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation” (Lotman, 1990, p. 131). In this study we will see how it work this mechanism at the level of representation on the Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*.

The concept of text remains at the centre of concerns of cultural semiotics (Torop, 2014, p. 58). The dual aspect of the text, on the one hand as a “discrete artefact” (Torop, 2014, p. 58), and on the other hand as a dynamic process, as a living collective memory (Lotman, 1974, pp. 22-23; Lindström, Kull, & Palang, 2014, p. 115), allows the configuration of a research method in the field of cultural semiotics. Peeter Torop (2014) suggests to consider the both aspects of cultural semiotics: the ontological and the epistemological dimension of the

methodology of cultural semiotics (pp. 58-59). Both aspects shall be analysed at three levels of research (see Table 1 below):

On the level of language, the important distinction is between discrete (natural language) and continual (iconic-spatial) language (language of pictures, movies or theatre); on the level of text between textuality and processuality; and on the level of semiosphere between narrative (linearity) and performance (simultaneity). (Torop, 2014, p. 59)

Table 1. Methodological aspects of cultural semiotics

	Ontological aspect		Epistemological aspect	
	Static view	Dynamic view	Static view	Dynamic view
Language	Discrete languages (e.g. specialized languages)	Continual/iconic-spatial languages (e.g. integrated, creolised languages)	Delimiting of research object	Dialogisation (procesual creation of language for dialogue)
Text	Textuality	Processuality	Structural analysis (material, composition)	Chronotipical analysis, multimedial analysis
Semiosphere	Narrative	Performance	Narrative (levels)	Performance (levels)

Source: Torop, 2014, p. 59

In what follows, we discuss each of the three levels of analysis.

The Romanian Traditional Blouse as Visual Language

According to Peeter Torop (2014), “on the level of language, on one hand we have the definition of the object of study (disciplinary/terminological) and its dialogisation (finding a flexible and emphatic language of description)” (p. 59). Therefore, we combine the two aspects of analysis from the level of language, the structure together with description of how the embroidered fields are organized on Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*.

We understand the Romanian blouse as a language also from the viewpoint of rules to generate this cultural object. This entire sequential order of making the object (the Romanian blouse, *IA*), from rules of weaving to rules of cutting fabric and embroidering (sewing) our ancient motifs on fabric configure the “grammar” of a language. We know that the presence of a rule “potentially leads to an unlimited number of applications”. (Marcus, 2011, p. 162). This genetic property of a rule suggests a learning process. All the rules that make the “grammar” of a Romanian blouse have a relatively stable semiotic behaviour and they are learned in the community of women who sew blouses since they are just apprentices. Certainly, the woman who sews can choose, at various levels of organising the cultural object we are discussing (the Romanian blouse), “certain recurring traits that she elevates to the point of becoming rules” (Marcus, 2011, p. 162). Thus, the motifs and the way they are organised on the fabric acquire a creative dimension, they are not mere *replicas* or “replicable stylisations” (Eco, 2008, p. 366). The repetitive structures are directly visible in the “grammar” of a Romanian blouse. They become thus an invitation to reading and (re)interpreting

the language of embroidered signs. From this point of view, the language of embroidered signs is a “world of possibilities” (Marcus, 2011, p. 163).

The intricate embroidery on our *IA* is far from being a simple ornament. In order to be able to ‘read’ it, you have to master the „language“, both the signs and the grammar. It is, in fact, a universal language, inspired by the Universe to express the Universe. *IA* is an *Imago Mundi* and the grammar is about the right order of the world. Every woman making an *IA* and wearing it makes a statement and expresses her own vision of the same world we all live in.

The Sky

When wearing an *IA*, a woman carries the sky on her shoulders, in the most important and most intricate part of the blouse, named ‘*altița*’. As normally, this segment, a square of 25 x 25 cm, is populated with all the elements and the creatures that belong to the sky and every woman makes her own choice from: suns, moons, sun and moon, day and night, stars, lightning, comets, wind, windmills but also angels, birds and insects. The eagles and the bees are among favorites, used rather often.

The element, once chosen, is sewn repeatedly in an horizontal row, as many times as it fits in the size of the fabric. And there are multiple such rows, usually stretching from 3 to 9, as there are more skies (heavens).

Altița is all arranged inside of a ‘cradle’, a border in ‘U’ shape, and it is not good to close it to a rectangle. The cradle must be infinite, opened at the upper part. *Altița* was considered sacred and used in the funeral rituals. When somebody died, an ‘*altița*’ was placed on the roof of the house. The soul, recently escaped out of the body, must’ve felt naked and scared and disoriented and *altița* offered a comforting familiar refugee. The soul nests in, and from the roof of the house it can watch all friends and relatives who come to say farewell.

The Earth

Under the sky – *altița*, we can clearly see the *earth* (or “*Încreț*” in Romanian language), represented with specific geometry and colors.

Colors are another important element of visual language. At this point, it is important to remember that we understand colors as *cultural unit* (Eco, 1985; 2008). Along with their perceptible qualities (visual material), the psychological dimension plays an important role in deciphering the meaning of colors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002; Leone, 2007). We take account of this observation regarding colors throughout the entire study.

In the situation of the Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*, on *The Earth* (*Încreț*) shall be used any shades of brown, from white and pale yellow to black. As for the geometry, the specific embroidery technique forces you to stick strict geometry. The diamond, with seeds inside – is by far the most popular symbol for fertility. Other signs, developed from spirals, tell the same story of life and perpetuation of life: energy, masculine power (force), feminine power (seduction) and describe the fertility of the Earth, generous to keep us alive.

The Rivers

Springing out from the earth, the *rivers* are flowing down the sleeve of the garment. On the blouses from the mountain regions, they are represented as in reality: angled, abrupt, flowing fast, dynamic. On the blouses from the plain regions, the rivers are represented lazily,

with meandrous and rich vegetation, like in any meadow: buds, branches with flowers, cereals (wheat), aromatic herbs. Hundreds of different patterns reflect the famous biodiversity still preserved in Romania. All these rivers, in the end, meet the waves of THE SEA, bordering the edge of the sleeve, the edge of the world.

The Romanian Traditional Blouse as Text

From the cultural semiotics point of view the text is a dynamic mechanism for construction of collective memory (Lotman, 1974). Any text include creativity, understood as „non-regulated future possibilities and unpredictable processes“, and memory, as a „individualized past“ (Lindström, Kull, & Palang, 2014, p. 115). Both dimensions, creativity and memory, are generative mechanisms for identity. As we mentioned in the introduction of article, Romanian traditional blouse *IA* it is a way of asserting the identity, of “*presenting persona*” (Danesi, 2004, p. 178). Wearing your own *IA* is like wearing a passport, valid not only for this world but also for what’s beyond it – it’s a shirt for both body and soul.

Wearing it for a social gathering, be it a religious festival or the traditional dance on Sundays, made it easy for people to know your exact place of birth, social and marital status but also your personality and virtues and they could decide, at a glance, if it was worthy to approach you in any way. Because the eyes of the people from the past could ‘scan’ your *IA* and get the message.

A woman could choose to wear her bridal *IA* for her own funeral. Not only to look beautiful in this important day of the passage, but to have her soul protected from all the frightening trials of the journey afterlife. And finally, when she was to arrive at the destination, joining her ancestors, they would recognize her and greet her as one of their own. And everything would be fine.

From semiotic point of view, at the level of text, manufacturing and wearing your own *IA* it’s a kind of *signifying practice*, a concrete *process of meaning production* (Kristeva, 1980, p. 251). This is the reason why, at this level, we highlight the “production of meaning rather than the exchange of meaning” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 252). From this perspective, “on the level of text, on one hand we have analysis strategies that are based on the characteristics of the subject matter (structural) and the organization of the subject matter (compositional)” (Torop, 2014, p. 59). We shall be more interested in rules of productivity, structuring and architecture rather than structural transformations, the way of reading white spaces in relation to the areas embroidered with motifs.

The Architecture of the *IA*

Initially, *IA* was made out of linen, hemp or even very fine wool fabric – gathered and prepared by every woman for her own needs, from plant to fiber, to fabric. Few centuries ago, the home-made silk fabric, named *borangic* and the cotton fabric also started being used.

The white fabric and its structure, used as strict grid for the embroidery, are very important.

The cut is unique and it stands along the classic ancient cuts of the world: saree, toga, kimono, T-tunic shirt. *IA* is made out of 4 pieces of fabric, smocked around the neck with a fine

rope, hemp thread. The shirt practically spreads from the neck down, exactly like the body does: chest, back and sleeves, covering the arms.

The interesting fact is that even the most intricate *IA* can be made without the use of scissors. In fact, when portioning the fabric, the use of scissors was considered forbidden, like a foreboding. We can dare to imagine this blouse being worn since immemorial times, even before the Bronze Age. All the devices used for producing the fabric still (even in 2016) are entirely made of wood. Clearly women associated metallic tools (knife, scissors) with the aggressive times that followed. Instead, a flame was used to create a break in the sheet of fabric, in order to sheer it to pieces of right size. And the right size is: squares. And the fire is pure. Nothing is random in *IA*. Because the fabric was seen as a protective shield against all the unseen evil. Therefore any break in this spiritual shield that white fabric is, stands as a possible Achille's heel, a vulnerable edge that has to be bordered, reinforced later on with the power of red thread (red and black are apotropaic colors) (Almalech, 1996; Eco, 1985), or with protection signs, like the most popular „wolf's teeth“.

The fabric had to be used in its entirety. In this very basic cut, there are no leftovers of fabric. Not only is the material precious, created within a lengthy, difficult process, but *IA* has to be a whole, total and complete.

The importance of this principle was also shown when women created universal T-cut, tunic shirts for their men, children or for their own daily wear (for working days). Within this cut, they were supposed to remove a piece of fabric which would allow the head to fit through. This little square of fabric couldn't simply be left unused because evil could be tempted to sneak in it. Therefore the fire would be used again to purify: the fabric was burned and the ashes buried under a tree in the backyard.

During every single step in the creating of an *IA*, the women were aware of their roles as creators, and, since they were about to create an image of the world in the form of a garment, they couldn't afford to lose bits of it along the way.

They used to start their work on the blouse on a 'Moon-day' – on Mondays, when „the time is fresh“ and they wore the finished *IA* for the first time in a 'Sun-day' – on Sundays, usually Easter Sunday. As in any creation process-making an *IA*, making bread – all the main personalities of the world keep you company, taking part of the process: earth, wind, water and stars.

Incredible as it seems, this blouse, *IA*, comes in a universal, unique size. As time passed, women worked their charms, aged, their weight fluctuated, they got pregnant, they lost weight, they breastfed – wearing the same *IA*, like a „second skin“ (Buta & Nanu, 2009). Summer or winter, again it didn't matter. Smocked around the neck and down at the sleeves, held tight at the waistline, *IA* holds air in its folds, ensuring the wearer a comfortable protection against the cold.

This cut is still specific for women living in the Carpathian Mountains regions, most probably being spread along valleys and fields by the sheep-herds wives, in their nomadic, seasonal routes.

The White Spaces

Since the motifs – thus the embroidery – are so important, we can't be blamed if we tend to neglect the white spaces of the *IA*, assuming they have no role to play.

But they are vital for some of the most important and wise messages that *IA* carries in it: balance, rhythm, harmony. They would not be possible, in our vision, if white spaces of apparent ‘nothing’ wouldn’t be allowed to exist.

More than the blank spaces between words or paragraphs, understood as invitations to naturalness of reading (Pinker, 2015: 198), the white spaces, or even the lack of them, in case of Romanian traditional blouse, *IA* – provide useful information about status, origin or even warnings. However, from semiotic point of view, white space are semiotic elements which influence users understanding, with an important role in separating elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

White Defines Age

Babies have nothing to be proud of, yet; and seniors have to reasons to show off. They are supposed to leave their ego aside and be concerned about the next world: a „white world“, without feelings. In this case, white is the color of nothing, of total peace.

What about the bridal white dress than? Well, it was recently ‘imported’ from Western Europe. The color of purity? No such thing in our tradition. The proper color of the brides was red, obviously, the apotropaic color. Because a bride is beautiful, desirable, vulnerable and she needs protection. Red is also the color of blood, a reminder of the sacrifice a bride is about to make. The new couple will put the foundations of a new family, a new home – a small world in itself. Any creation, exactly as the creation of the world, is supposed to have a sacrifice (shed of blood) at the beginning, in order to last.

White Defines What is Missing and What is Important

Sometimes, the white spaces are in fact “spared” of embroidery in order to define other patterns, in their negative form, often interlaced with others. And there is a balance between what exists and what’s missing. In order to enhance the importance of these ‘negative’ motifs, their white space is underlined with fine, precious, gold or silver thread, using certain embroidery techniques, the chain-stitch. So they have added value. They are important, they are to be noticed.

And there are meaningful combinations of matching colors. For instance, inside a black background, the white space is enhanced with silver thread, like the moon in the night sky. Inside a red background, the white space is enhanced with gold thread, like the sun at sunrise.

White Defines Communities

The white spaces also come to define the community the wearer belonged to. An alpine village has a different structure than a village established in the middle of the field. This is a result of the geography, climate and main occupations. In the mountains, the houses are far apart and people far more independent; you might not see your neighbors too often. In the plain, people prefer to live very close together, keeping the land available for agriculture. You can often see this expressed on the shirts. Small, rare, independent motifs for the mountain; compacted in the valleys and in the fields.

The lack of white spaces on the shirts of other ethnic minorities living alongside Romanians may be a hint of their fear and insecurities. They tend to fill up the entire composition

or even the entire sleeve of the shirt with all sort of protective talismans, just to make sure they are safe. It might be a case of ‘horror vacui’, since there are other proofs that their folk tales provide, regarding the existence of dangerous spirits of the forests. In contrast, for Romanian population, the forest is seen as „sister“, as shelter, as home; they can’t be afraid of the space that belongs to them and that they belong to.

White Defines Status

Making a precious, intricate *IA* could offer to anyone a reason to show off and express a high standard of living. Because being able to take time off from the hard work and spend time and enjoy making the embroidery means you are doing so well, financially, that you don’t have to work daily, all day long. So, many women spent their nights, working on candle-light, to be able to keep up with the others who had more free time. Therefore the white, empty sleeves of the bridal *IA*-s from the Bucharest region are a true exception.

This is a situation when the white space of the sleeves is intended to enhance the precious fabric used, different than that covered with embroidery, no matter how rich and the message is a social one: I’m a bride, therefore I feel like a princess.

Another odd fact is that home-made, hand-made silk fabric was widely available in the south of Romania, especially after the 17th century. The climate allowed the mulberry to grow everywhere and so the silk-worms were grown in so many households. Women used this material not only for headscarves, over 3 meters long, but also for towels and even bed-sheets, due to its special qualities (resistance, aspect, thermic comfort). Despite not really being such a rare material, it played a special role when used for the sleeves of bridal shirts. How come?

Before 1821, the Romanian regions named Wallachia (the south) and Moldova (the east) were under Greek command, with rulers assigned by the Ottoman sultan. And when they came along, these men brought with them their aristocracy, their women, their fashion and clothes. Silk shirts were almost a must for the Greek women, worn under a dress (kaftan) on top. This dress often had short sleeves or split up towards the shoulders and so the silk sleeves of the underneath shirt were visible. It’s virtually impossible to create embroidery on the silk fabric due to its irregular, unstable structure. Therefore, in order to relate to this fashion, the brides living in Bucharest (capital) area, must have been inspired by this foreign fashion of the rulers and members of the upper class. They willingly gave up to the „river“ section of the *IA* composition in order to express status and fashion.

Yet the same amount of work was invested in the creation of the shirt, all concentrated for the shoulders (*altita*). Silver and gold thread, sequins and purple silk were used. So both areas speak about a higher social status, activating a principle of order that classifies and defines (Stewart 2008).

White is a Warning

In some dramatic circumstances, as it happened with the shirts from the shores of Nistru River, the white space on the sleeves is a warning.

Despite the troubled history, repeated waves of migrations, invasions and foreign occupation, which lasted for centuries, Romanians had their ‘safe’ space called home. Their world, where the laws they knew from their ancestors applied. Danube, the biggest river of Europe,

was both a bridge and a border with the Balkan region, in the south: a bridge because of the Romanians living south of Danube, not to mention the Aromanians, the Vlachs, all speaking slightly different dialects of eastern Latin; border because any large river can slow down any army and Danube served as protection against Ottoman invasions.

But the East edges were by far the most exposed to repeated attacks. The Nistru River was not large enough to offer proper protection and so many waves of aggressors crossed it: Tatars, Cossacks, Russians, etc.

The Romanian population which happened to live on the east shores of Nistru River started to grow at the end of the 18th century, due to people coming in, in search of a better life. They left Romania to spread into 'the wild, wild east' which, at that time, was rather empty, being depopulated by plagues and constant conflicts and instability. But they paid a high price. This new world had different values, different rules or no rules at all. And this sad truth is expressed, naturally, on the *IA*-s from this troubled region.

First of all, instead of multiple rivers there's only one left : Nistru itself and it is represented as it is in reality, almost as we would see it on a map, with an unruly course. What is unique is that it is not flowing down, relaxed, along the sleeve, to meet the sea-waves at the edge, like the rivers on all the other *IA*-s from the 'safe' Romanian space. The river is placed under the horizontal band dedicated to the earth, embracing it, bordering it in sides and down side. The sleeve looks like a safety-map, letting out a warning: Do not cross this river! If you do, it's on your own risk. Beyond this river there is chaos, emptiness and death. Practically, it is about the cultural update of outer space, the *extra muros* space (Oişteanu, 2013, pp. 580-581) or *external space* (Lotman, 1990, p. 131) by the distribution of fields with embroidered motifs on Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*.

The harsh reality is that, in this stripe of land, the eastern shore of the Nistru River, the conflicts and the tensions are far from over. Although self-proclaimed Republic of Transnistria has no official recognition, its immoral and illegal borders create stress and, especially during the winter time, when Nistru freezes – real economical inconvenience for the Romanian population living in those villages which „didn't surrender“ during the Transnistrian war, in 1992. There were also civilian victims and their widows, orphans and the veterans are neglected by Moldovan authorities.

More than anything, they suffer cultural isolation and feel they belong to no country, they feel forgotten and useless. And it is true. We don't know about them and the history of their lands is not mentioned in our history books.

Yet a very interesting subject is considering and comparing the way these white spaces are 'read' and appreciated in our days, after all women had been influenced by the fashion industry and the communication in printed and social media. Whether we like it, this influenced the way we define concepts such as 'aesthetic', 'elegant', 'luxurious' or 'refined'.

In our days, an *IA* with plenty of white space and very fine, calligraphic embroidery positioned in the right places works out like a minimalist ad with a white background, a strong, central message and a copy written with small characters. It appeals to people with higher expectations, higher education, who choose quality over quantity, and pay more attention to subtlety.

We considered they need a voice and an ambassador and who better one than their *IA*? Minimalistic. Because the *altița* is also white; white stars, defined by silver thread, discrete shine. And so, from a distance, bordered by the one river that matters, you only see the earth. Their land, won over with the blood of their ancestors and their dear ones.

The image and the story – and the *IA* from Nistru became viral. Mission accomplished, as so many women decided to create and wear their own „Nistru *IA*“, in order to show they care, they want to reconnect and contribute. After a month, I returned in the remote Romanian villages from the east on Nistru with more than 1000 March – talismans, flower seeds, cards – crafted by Romanian women to be offered as the tradition requires, in the beginning of the spring. Books had been donated and children from these villages were invited in a summer-camp in west Romania, to be able to socialize with children their age.

White spaces can be a powerful communication tool and can change things for better.

The Semiosphere around the Romanian Traditional Blouse, the *IA*

On the last level of analysis, the level of semiosphere, “the lines runs between the levels of narrative and performance, the basis for linear and simultaneous analysis strategies” (Torop, 2014, p. 59).

We shall not insist too much on this level of analysis. In a recent article (Drăgan, 2016) we have explored the way in which virtual communities have replaced old sewing bees (p. 38). We showed there how the experience of modern living, in a networked society, can happily meet the traditional experience of the community. The lanes of the global village, which are now the connexions enabled by social networks, can be a place to meet and to experience life as a group.

Basically, we see the configuration of a semiosphere around this cultural object, the Romanian blouse. From the standpoint of this article, at the level of the semiosphere, the concept of *boundaries* becomes increasingly relevant:

The notion of the boundary separating the internal space of the semiosphere from the external is just a rough primary distinction. In fact, the entire space of the semiosphere is 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, always bearing in mind that languages and texts are hierarchically disposed on different levels. These sectional boundaries which run through the semiosphere create a multi-level system. (Lotman, 1990, p. 138)

We have tried to capture the meanings of such *boundaries* in the distribution of embroidered spaces on our traditional blouse, either we talk about *The Earth* (Încreț), which is itself an boundary, either we talk about the relation between the white spaces and embroidered fields and how are organized on Romanian traditional blouse, *IA*.

Conclusion

In this article we understand the Romanian traditional blouse *IA* as a multi-dimensional semiotic object, with a complex semiotic structure. We examine the structure and interpretation of semiotic borders and white spaces on *IA*, from the perspective of Lotman’s semiotic theory of culture.

We have tried to show the fact that the white spaces on our traditional blouse are just as important as the embroidered spaces, that their way of organization on canvas provide useful information about status, origin or even warnings.

Wherever people speak the Romanian language, the *IA* is present and it stands like a flagship for our identity. Whenever Romanians migrated (in the past or more recently) in search of a better life, no matter how far they went, women took their *IAs* with them. Meanwhile, the *IA*, „La Blouse Roumaine“, as Matisse painted it, entered the crazy world of fashion industry as „peasant blouse“. We agree that:

Romanian women have the Romanian blouse in their DNA and there is no such woman who cannot cut and sew a Romanian blouse and they will become aware of it as soon as they begin. [...] Romania is now recognized in Europe, in the world, because women still sew by hand and this work is appreciated. The fact that you do not wear an industrially made shirt, but a one-of-a-kind blouse, requires vibration and emotion, which only a human hand can convey. Along with its mistakes, this is what actually gives it its charm and makes it one-of-a-kind. And having a one-of-a-kind piece of clothing in this day and age is a luxury (Drăgan, 2016, p. 46).

Beyond fashion, the *IA* represents a „book of wisdom“, one which you can wear. The key for a happy, balanced, meaningful life is ‘written’ on it with needle and thread.

In a world dominated by the discourse of globalisation, communities of women who preserve the craft of sewing our traditional blouse try to restore the old significance connections of the systems of ancient signs in our traditional culture. The configuration of signs sewn on the Romanian blouse reproduce symbolically those people’s view of the world. It captures the geometric logic and perfection of configurations (the *syntagmatic order* of signs), the coherence of combinations of embroidered signs (the *paradigmatic configuration* of signs) and, implicitly, the significance potential of reading such a language, the *Language of Embroidered Signs*.

Through various projects, such as *Semne Cusute*, the group *Semne cusute în acțiune* or *IA-AIDOMA*, the authors of this article use digital technology, geometry, design, architecture, visual communication to support and promote folk tradition. We believe it is important to valorise what is rich in our old crafts while we still have the privilege of the historic period we are living in, which still allows us to understand some of the complexity of the problems and meanings coded in a particular area of culture, namely in folklore and in our ancient traditions (Culianu, 2009).

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