ABSTRACT
The paper is based on the philosophical and semiotic research. The key problem of the work is the issue raised by the French linguist E. Benveniste. The scholar wrote about the semiotic analysis of artistic objects (paintings in particular). The issue is a possibility to analyze a system semiotically if the system has an endless number of signs, which are not regulated by strict syntactic rules. To solve the problem the author of the paper tries to find out minimal structural units of the artistic code, a kind of phonemes typical of human languages. The author believes that it is quite possible to find such equivalents of phonemes in the artistic code (he suggests the term “equiphonemes”). The paper covers the analysis of syntactic rules, regulating the signs of different types. These signs exist both in nature and in human society. The author also studies a number of syntactic and grammar structures from the philosophical standpoint (for example, the inflection and the suppletion). The idea is that it is possible to analyze artistic works just like languages. The suggested methods date back to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Taking the Saussure’s saying “in language, there are only differences” for granted, the author makes a conclusion that it is possible to find such differences (binary oppositions) in artistic works. To achieve the purpose, it is necessary to study different cultures and analyze the absence or presence of certain artistic forms in different cultural strata. The second step is to analyze the reasons why such intercultural oppositions exist. Summing up, the author makes the final conclusion: cultural semiotics can function only as a discipline for comparing cultures to each other. It is a methodological approach that allows analyzing artistic works semiotically.

Keywords: culture, semiotics, methodological issues

STARTING POINTS:
1. Any cultural artifact (including artistic ones) can be regarded as a sign of a cultural code system.
2. The main problem of a cultural code structuring is the absence of syntax i.e. a strict system of rules determining the relations among cultural signs.
3. To solve the problem it is necessary to find out a strict analogy between a cultural code and a natural human language.

Keywords: cultural semiotics, sign, meaning differentiation, phoneme, equiphoneme.

INTRODUCTION
Any artistic painting, as well as an architectural structure, articles of clothing, table settings, and so on, can be interpreted as a kind of message with certain content. In other words, any cultural artifact is a sign. All such signs constitute a certain sign system and can be studied from the point of semiotics. The purpose of this paper is to find out a kind of cultural code syntax.

METHODS
The main research methods are the systematic and structural analysis as well as the comparative historical analysis. The specific methods of semiotics and general linguistics have also been used. The work is based upon a number of writings on cultural semiotics and general linguistics (for example, “Semiotics” by Roland Barthes, “The System of Objects” by Jean Baudrillard, “The Absent Structure” by Umberto Eco, “The Raw and the Cooked” by Claude Levi-Strauss, etc.).

DISCUSSIONS
At first thought, the problem seemed to have been solved long ago. Any artistic painting can be regarded as an icon. Charles Peirce has introduced the trichotomy of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. “An Icon is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it
possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not”.¹ Thus, an artistic painting falls within the sphere of semiotics.

Umberto Eco also believed that the problem had been solved: “… icons are non-coded analogical devices… icons are arbitrary and fully analyzable devices…”²

However, Emile Benveniste, speaking about the attempts to analyze the visual arts from the point of semiotics, contends that from the very beginning, we face important questions: do these arts have anything else in common except the vague notion of “visuality”? Do we have a single visual art that possesses a formal element, which might be considered a unit of the whole system? What is a unit of a painting or a drawing? Is it a shape, a line, or a color? Do these questions have sense after all? It means that not every group of signs can be called a system. Some elements of a work of visual art are just a mixture of signs. Benveniste puts it rather clear: artists are creating semiotics of their own. Strokes on the canvases build up artists’ personal oppositions, which are significant only on a certain level. Artists do not have at their disposal any commonly accepted signs created beforehand. They work with colors and tones. These are signs, which are in no way equal to linguistic signs.³

Here we have to pay attention to the years when Emile Benveniste’s book *Problemes de linguistique generale* (Problems in General Linguistics) was published. The first edition was issued in Paris in 1966, the second one – in 1972. In spite of the fact that by 1972 there had been a lot of writings where the problem had been announced solved, the author did not change anything in the cited article. For example, “Semiotics” by Roland Barthes, “The System of Objects” by Jean Baudrillard, “The Absent Structure” by Umberto Eco, and “The Raw and the Cooked” by Claude Levi-Strauss. All these scholars studied cultural semiotics (or semiology that is the same). Nevertheless, Benveniste did not accept their standpoint. Moreover, he believed that the establishment of cultural semiotics was still in the lap of the future: “Can formal structures of the type of those introduced by Claude Levi-Strauss into the systems of family relationship be recognized in the apparatus of culture? This is a problem of the future”.⁴

The issue highlighted by Benveniste can be phrased in terms of semiotics in the following way: do cultural patterns (visual arts in particular) contain such distinctive units, which could correspond to the distinctive units (phonemes) of a natural language?

Following Barthes, Eco thinks that it is possible to view any cultural artifact as a message (semiotically). The iconic code is generated from the architectural one and becomes an object of communication. When a community is formed, any usage of something in it becomes a sign of this usage. For example, to use a spoon to get food into the mouth is, on top of everything else, to implement a certain function with the tool that is supposed for it. A spoon itself “informs” people around what it is for. When people see somebody eating with a spoon, they get a message about the “how-to-use” skills and about the difference from other ways of eating, for example, with fingers.⁵

Eco believes that since cultural artifacts convey information, it is a sufficient reason to apply methods of semiotical analysis to them. At the first glance, this approach seems grounded because semiotics is about messages, communication, and signs. In practice, there is a hidden logical mistake, which seldom attracts attention. Rephrasing Barthes’ idea, which Eco followed, we have every right to say: when a community is formed, any natural phenomenon becomes a sign of this phenomenon. Thunder and lightning make up a natural phenomenon called “storm”; and people perceive them as the signs of a storm. Smoke and ash, getting out of the magma chamber, make up a volcanic eruption and “inform” people about it. However,

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nobody ever tried to speak about tornado semiotics, earthquake semiotics, and natural semiotics in general. The absurdity of the concept is rather obvious. But Eco’s concept of cultural semiotics is based on identical basic premises, and very few scholars oppose it.

Roman Jacobson wrote about this inconsistency. Indexes include a wide spectrum of signs, which are interpreted by a recipient but have no exact addressee. Animals do not leave traces for hunters deliberately, but these traces work as the signata that allow the hunter to deduce the signata that is to identify the type of the animal, the way it went, and the time when that happened. Identically, doctors use symptoms of different diseases as indexes. Thus, symptomatology – the medical science of signs, which reveal a disease and its specifics – could be regarded as a part of semiotics if, following Peirce, we interpret indexes as a subclass of a broader semiotic class. The foundational principle of semiotics “something stands for something else” (aliquid stat pro aliquid) makes us think that unintended indexes are a kind of signs, but we should not overlook the cardinal difference between communication that implies a real or a probable addressee, and information, the source of which is not actually the addressee of the signs, interpreted by a recipient.6

Jacobson tries to eliminate the contradiction by differentiating the concepts of information and communication. Indeed, they are genetically different, but it is not important to a recipient and to an interpreter, whether the signs are given deliberately or not. In both cases, a recipient will perceive the signs as a message that should be interpreted. In fact, we should distinguish the two types of indexes: natural and societal ones. Jacobson writes about unintended natural indexes, but he makes a mistake. Unintended signs are, for example, thunder, smoke, or ash. However, when a bear stands on its hind feet and removes the bark of a tree, showing how tall it is, the bear does that deliberately for sure. The message is meant for other bears, but everybody can read it. Are the traces on the tree a kind of information or communication? Jacobson does not answer the question. When a fox goes around, crossing its own traces to confuse a probable enemy, it does it to eliminate the true message. This type of sign can be called “an anti-index”.

Human society is much the same. When I am typing “Igor Dmitrievich, please, pay attention to this passage from Jacobson’s writing”, specifying the year the work was published and the page number, I am definitely making an index just like the bear mentioned above. If the phrase is read by a person I am not addressing to, but this person is interested in cultural semiotics, my message will be same informative to him or her: he or she will be able to find the text I mean. Or I come into the room and find a notebook there. I see its owner’s name and phone number on the first page. I guess the owner of the notebook was not going to leave it there on purpose, but he or she left an unambiguous index: he or she was in the room. This is an unintended index typical of human society just like thunder, which means the storm (a natural index). Finally, when a diversionist is escaping, he or she is acting like the above-mentioned fox, using different substances to confuse the dogs. It is about anti-indexes again. Thus, natural signs and societal signs can be both information and communication. Anyway, these are messages.

This point is rather difficult. The number of natural signs is evidently endless. Benveniste noted same endlessness of cultural messages not related to a human language. Potentially, the number of linguistic signs is also endless, but any human language has basic units (phonemes). They do not have meanings of their own and function only as signs to show the identities or differences in meaningful units (morphemes and words). Below we will see that phonemes are not the only linguistic meaning differentiators, which are essentially meaningless. We can find no such features in natural signs (Jacobson’s unintended indexes). Is there anything like a phoneme in cultural sign systems other than languages? Specialists in cultural semiotics say “yes”. Benveniste says “no” because it is impossible for a sign system to have an unlimited number of elements, which, moreover, can be interpreted in many different ways. Lotman agrees with this opinion: “We have in mind a specific sphere, possessing signs, which are assigned to the enclosed space. Only within such a space is it possible for communicative processes and the creation of new information to be realized”.7 Every single sign has its meaning. It means we can speak of cultural signs semantics. Every sign can be interpreted; it influences a recipient this or that way. Thus, there is a pragmatics of cultural signs: we can analyze the relationships between a sign and its recipient. But this approach does


not give us an opportunity to identify a syntactic constituent of cultural signs because there is an unlimited number of the signs and relationships among them. At best, it is possible to speak about syntax within a single cultural tradition, genre, or creations of an artist or an architect. That is why, probably, Benveniste called cultural semiotics a problem of the future: cultural semiotics has no syntax.

Is it possible to settle the argument? Boris Uspensky suggests the two types of semiotics. A sign can be analyzed as a single unit, regardless of the communication process, or as a part of a system, in which the communication happens. A sign system that works as a means of communication is language… Thus, it is helpful to distinguish semiotics of sign and semiotics of language (language system). The first type of semiotics is rooted in the works of Charles Peirce and Charles W. Morris; the second one dates back to Ferdinand de Saussure.8

The first type of semiotics is about semantics, pragmatics, and syntax. The second one does not concentrate on a separate sign. It concentrates on language, which is a mechanism for information transmission through the use of a certain group of elementary signs.9

At the first glance, the distinction seems rather grounded. Nevertheless, after taking a closer look at the issue, it becomes clear that the initial problem of interrelations among signs has not been solved but just omitted. As standard, it is accepted that while analyzing a cultural language, we do not need this triune semiotics of sign. However, a certain group of elementary signs can become language only in case they function according to syntax rules. Even senseless concepts, being organized syntactically, get some sense. This sense is not denotative but connotative like in the phrase the iggle squiggs trazed wombly in the harlish hoop.

Thus, the structure predetermines the meaning to a great extent. So, the circle has been closed: it is impossible to consider cultural signs regardless of interrelations among them and the rules, which determine these interrelations.

In our opinion, the way out might be in distinguishing binary oppositions not within cultural systems (that is what cultural semioticians have been doing) but between different cultures.

Traditional cultural semiotics is based on the works of Peirce and de Saussure. They were linguists. That is why cultural semiotics inherits both advantages and disadvantages of the linguistic approach. One of the disadvantages is the desire to find identities, unified elements, and a kind of “protocode” in the end. Linguists are looking for this “code of the codes”, which lies at the heart of language structures.

This approach fits into the central focus of western philosophy. It comes from the ideas of Greek natural philosophers who were looking for materia prima that potentially contained all the forms of existence. Both semioticians and “pure” linguists have always regarded the search for similarities as their main purpose, forgetting about the famous de Saussure’s saying: “in language, there are only differences”. In linguistics, it is the search for a common root of different languages, and the confidence in its existence dates back to the Bible story about the Tower of Babel. “The first classification tried by linguists has been that which classifies languages into families supposed to have issued from a common prototype. This is the genetic classification. The first attempts came in the Renaissance when printing made it possible to know the languages of neighboring or distant peoples. The observations of the resemblances among these languages led rapidly to grouping them into families, which were less numerous than the existing languages, and whose differences were explained by reference to myths”.10 Semioticians are looking for the general protocode from which all the existing codes can be deduced but it has nothing to do with cultural semiotics. To make up the necessary binary opposition we have to find not a similarity but a difference. Only in this case, cultural artifacts can become signs available for the semiotic analysis. In language, it means that differences in vocabulary, grammar, and syntax are signs that are available for a real semiotic analysis, which is not limited by one of the constituents – semantics, syntax, or praxis. If we apply the semiotic method to a culture, we have to view a cultural artifact as a sign only in case different cultures reveal different functions of the same sign, i.e. there

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9 Ibid.

are other forms of the sign (artifact) as well as the rules of its functioning and even existence. Consequently, we have to analyze not just cultural signs, but different strata of their existence, otherness, or non-existence. Thus, the method is about analyzing artifacts related to human existence in different cultures, but in the same object environment. In fact, the primary goal of cultural semiotics is to find some equivalents of language phonemes in cultural artifacts. These “equiphonemes” will give an opportunity to identify the relationships among cultural signs, that is to establish syntax of cultural semiotics. Thus, we get back to the rephrased “Benveniste’s problem”: does a cultural code contain distinctive units, which correspond to the distinctive units (phonemes) of a natural language?

It is noteworthy that this approach is also used in linguistics. Contrary to popular opinion, phonemes are not the only linguistic meaning differentiators. In language, the stress shift sometimes works as a kind of equiphoneme and changes the word meaning, for example, PRES-ent and pre-SENT. The phonemes stay the same, but the meaning has changed. Silent letters are another type of equiphoneme (“night” and “knight”). The second example is especially important because silent letters relate not only to the issue of meaning differentiation but also to the role that graphic signs play.

The stress shift is an example of the otherness of the sign. The additional example of sign otherness is the change of inflections. The sign is the same, but its form is changing. What is a meaning of the inflection if it is a sign in itself?

First, the inflection has got an existential sense. It proves that there is a semiotic system with definite features like well-developed syntax, differentiation of lexical and grammatical meanings, etc. Second, inflections show a certain level of thinking emancipation that a language allows. Inflections are the basis for dividing languages into synthetic and analytic ones. “The synthetic way of grammar expression works within a word while the analytic way goes beyond it. In syntactic languages, a word does not lose its grammatical features out of a context while in analytic languages a word with no context retains only the nominative function. Grammatical characteristics in analytical languages cannot be revealed without a syntactic context”.11 The fact that language determines the way of thinking has been known since the theory of linguistic determinism appeared. But, as far as we know, nobody has discussed the degree of this determination in the two types of languages. It is obvious that commitment to a word meaning or to a syntactic constituent must somehow influence the interpretive ability of language. The multiplicity of interpretations, in its turn, determines how much this or that language limits thinking. This issue, being intuitively evident, should be studied thoroughly. And third, inflections reveal a type of culture and major cultural values. Lotman explains that this semantic aspect can be called an axiological sense of inflections. The link between the concepts of meaning and value can be easily traced in everyday life. We can say: “that’s a meaningful event”, or “don’t pay attention, it has no meaning”. This way we confirm that in our minds “meaningful” is “valuable”.12 Distinguishing the four types of culture – semantic, syntactic, asemiotic, asyntactic, and semantic-asyntactic – Lotman shows the interdependence of major cultural values and the relationships between the signatia and the signata.

Finishing the discussion of inflections, it is necessary to mention one more way of meaning-making: suppletion. As a rule, the inflectional method of new meanings making within one and the same paradigm13 is about a change in some part of a word, but there are exceptions. In some cases, inflecting provokes a complete change of the phonemes. As a result, different forms of one and the same word have nothing in common. First of all, it is true for personal pronouns (I – ME), some verbs (AM – WAS, GO – WENT), and adjectives (GOOD – THE BEST, BAD – THE WORST). From the grammar point, suppletion is rather rare, but from the philosophical and semiotic points, it can hardly be overestimated because suppletion relates to deep and essential elements of human existence; it raises the most fundamental philosophical issues. The first issue to note is the relation to the problem of a subject. The human ego, in this case, reveals its existential sense.

13 We are using the concept of paradigm here in its linguistic sense.
not real anymore, and to the future, which is not real yet. That is why we get suppletive forms here (AM, IS, ARE – WAS, WERE – WILL BE). The present tense forms of the verb “to be” used to have the common root es- far back in the past, but due to different phonetic factors they have changed beyond all recognition.\textsuperscript{14} It is quite possible that the forms have also changed due to a shift in people’s minds. People have altered their attitude to their selves, triggering the above-mentioned phonetic factors. This is what Charles Bally writes about it: “The words, which obey the phonetic law, do it according to the role they play in discourse”.\textsuperscript{15} It is obvious that the role of words, which express the essence of being, is not to be compared to all the other roles. The special way of word building reflects it. Benveniste writes: “Language re-produces reality. This is to be understood in the most literal way: reality is produced anew by means of language. The speaker recreates the event and his experience of the event by his discourse”.\textsuperscript{16}

It is noteworthy that suppletion is the way of evaluative adjectives formation. This fact probably relates to the concept of value. The chain “subject – existence – value” is semantically unique. It is interesting that suppletion cannot be found in all languages. It is the attribute of well-developed languages and societies.

Silent letters are the meaning differentiators of another type. They do not change the sign, but provide the binary opposition, a kind of binary code “presence-absence”. Here we come across a wonderful language phenomenon. Jacobson, following Charles Bally, called it “a zero sign”. “According to the Ferdinand de Saussure’s basic premise, for the language, it is enough to oppose the presence of a sign to its absence. Zero inflection is opposed to a phoneme in morphological alteration, and it corresponds to the Charles Bally’s definition of zero sign: a meaningful sign not embodied in sounds. For the language, it is enough to oppose the presence of a sign to its absence in terms of both the signatia and the signata”.\textsuperscript{17}

All the above-mentioned examples prove that phonemes are not the only meaning differentiators. Natural language has got other elements, which generate new senses within one and the same paradigm, just like phonemes. This fact gives us a reason to think that cultural codes, which have nothing to do with natural languages, possess some elements of this type (meaning differentiators). It is obvious that a sign not embodied in sounds cannot be a phoneme.

We have got many examples of such binary oppositions. The linear perspective of the West, the Ancient China’s axonometric perspective, and the inverted perspective of the Russian icon painting can be regarded as the equivalents of language phonemes, which Benveniste was looking for. They are elementary meaning differentiators that have no meaning of their own. Here are some other examples:

1) Many Western artists painted still life pictures, but Ancient China’s artists never did. This is a necessary binary opposition.

2) The heroic epos is quite ancient and common to the Western culture, but China had nothing like that until the 13\textsuperscript{th} century. This is another binary opposition.

3) The European science has been developing its own terminology. Before the Chinese had established contacts with Europeans, they did not have the concept of the term. One more binary opposition.

The number of such examples is large, but evidently not unlimited; otherwise it is not the way to solve the problem. Nevertheless, what we have described seems enough to make major conclusions of this paper:

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{14} Shaykevich, A. (2005). Vvedeniye v lingvistiku, Moscow: Akademiya, p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Balli, Sh. (1955) Obshchaya lingvistika i voprosy frantsuzskogo yazyka, Moscow: Inostrannaya literatura, p. 31.
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\end{itemize}
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Cultural semiotics can be only comparative, otherwise the Benveniste’s problem (an endless number of cultural signs) becomes unsolvable. But if we accept the suggested methodology, we get an opportunity to analyze cultures purely semiotically. Actually, it is not a brand new approach; we are just coming back to Claude Levi-Strauss’ and Lotman’s studies. The first scholar’s ideas are useful for a synchronic analysis while Lotman paved the way for a diachronic one. The example of the approach is a specific problem highlighted by Levi-Strauss in his “Structural Anthropology”: “…should we dismiss the fact that some tribes permit premarital sexual freedom while others require chastity, on the premise that these customs can be reduced to one function, that of ensuring permanent marriage?”18 In this case, we are dealing with the otherness of the cultural sign, which exists in different cultures, but in the same object environment. It was Levi-Strauss, who pointed out how cultural signs relate to language signs, and, as a consequence, how ethnography and ethnology relate to linguistics. This is mostly about methods. “From words the linguist extracts the phonetic reality of the phoneme; and from the phoneme he extracts the logical reality of distinctive features. And when he has found in several languages the same phonemes or the use of the same pairs of oppositions, he does not compare individually distinct entities. It is the same phoneme, the same element, which will show at this new level the basic identity of empirically different entities. We are not dealing with two similar phenomena, but with one and the same… In anthropology as in linguistics, therefore, it is not comparison that supports generalization, but the other way around”.19 However, after these methods are polished, we will get a wonderful opportunity to analyze cultural phenomena from a variety of angles. An oppositional analysis should probably start from the widest strata. We should oppose the cultural signs of the East and West. That is just the beginning. Following Huntington’s clash of civilizations chart, we can try to find binary oppositions between genetically close, but different cultures, for example, the modern Western culture and the Roman one. Going further, it is possible to find such oppositions within a culture that has different vectors of development due to different political and social conditions (Russian and Ukrainian, South Korean and North Korean). Finally, binary oppositions can be found even within one and the same culture, for example, Russian culture before and after 1917. In the end, if we semiotically compare Bunin’s and Ehrenburg’s works done in Russia and in France, it might be more useful than many textbooks on history.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, it is necessary to say that cultural semiotics should become a unifying discipline. Cultural semiotics is nothing without comparing different cultures. There is no Malevich's Black Square semiotics or St. Peter's Basilica semiotics.

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