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Alternative cultural space in the contemporary Russian prose

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Abstract

El objetivo de la investigación es describir el modelo alternativo de cultura en las obras de los escritores rusos contemporáneos en relación con su interacción con la cultura como tal y con sus principios civiles, creativos y morales a través del análisis histórico-tipológico y cultural-contextual de las obras literarias. En consecuencia, el discurso soviético en el Demarche de Entusiastas se actualiza al nivel de la deconstrucción del ideólogo soviético, convertido por el autor en una representación de la miserable vida cotidiana de la gente común, sus sentimientos y estados de ánimo. En conclusión, en el período soviético, junto con el espacio cultural oficialmente denotado, también existía otro modelo cultural alternativo.

Keywords: Dehistorization, Generalization, Ideologeme, Mythologeme, Discourse.

Entorno cultural alternativo en la prosa Rusa contemporánea

Resumen

El objetivo de la investigación es describir el modelo alternativo de cultura en las obras de los escritores rusos contemporáneos en relación con su interacción con la cultura como tal y con sus principios civiles, creativos y morales a través del análisis histórico-tipológico y cultural-contextual de las obras literarias. En consecuencia, el discurso soviético en el Demarche de Entusiastas se actualiza al nivel de la deconstrucción del

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Palabras clave: Dehistorización, Generalización, Ideologema, Mitologema, Discurso.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term cultural space is relatively new for philology. This concept was first used in sociology, cultural studies and philosophy. Under the cultural space, the socio-cultural area is comprehended, in which the life of culture is taking shape and existing inseparably connected with a certain system of values and ideas, the influence of which, in turn, extends to various forms of people's creative activity (Benevolenskaya, 2010; Lahusen, 1997). The cultural space is a necessary condition for the existence, development, and functioning of various forms of art, in which the informative and symbolic content of public life is expressed, preserved and developed (Lahusen, 1997; Boym, 2002). Each concrete stage of the existence of culture presupposes the simultaneous coexistence and functioning of several types of cultural space, interconnected, on the one hand, with different traditions; and on the other – creating an alternative cultural life that contradicts them.

In this regard, of particular interest is the Soviet cultural space, which had a number of specific features. This space is chronologically limited to a certain period – from mature Stalinism (the second half of the 1930s) to the so-called stagnation period (the first half of the 1980s). The Soviet cultural space is a territorially limited by the USSR borders

sociocultural area with the timeframe from 1917 to the early 1990s; the main value and purpose of which was the idea of building communism, which served as the main guide of the entire life of Soviet society. The formal trait of the Soviet cultural space was extreme ideologization and utopianism. The causes of this phenomenon should be sought not only within the specifics of the historical situation, but also in the peculiarities of the national mentality and native culture (Liokumovich, 2005; Borja, 2018).

Many researchers have noted the utilitarian and pragmatic function of culture within the Soviet period (Benevolenskaya, 2010; Boym, 2002; Epstein, 2000; Liokumovich, 2005). For instance, Soviet and Russian philosopher and culturologist Igor Kondakov, considering the colossal Stalinist political and literary project (referring to socialist realism), describes it as grafting of politics into fiction (when realism ceasing to be critical, but becoming life-affirming – unlike the classical one), which ultimately leads to the loss of the social criticism and the emergence of social poetization of reality, along with the apologetics of political actualities and ideas and terminally complicates the relationship between realism in the arts and social actuality; socialist realism also contributes to the formation of “ideological model of virtual reality masquerading as actual – in its generalized and artistic expression” (Kondakov et al., 2011: 18). The genesis of an alternative cultural space in such a condition became an inevitable consequence of the emergence of virtual ideological reality.

Soviet cultural space with its exterior appearance of orderliness, uniformity and harmony, was in fact extremely contradictory and acosmic,

since along with the dominant official ideological culture there was an alternative system of values. It was represented, on the one hand, by works of high culture, in particular - highly regarded by Russian and foreign progressive classics (such as writings by Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and others) who asserted values that often had little in common with officially recognized Soviet ideology, and on the other – phenomena directly opposed to Soviet official narrative; thus, the ideas formulated by the oppositional dissident movement were also an important part of the spiritual culture of the Soviet period (Liokumovich, 2005). An alternative value system, figuratively refracted in the culture of the Soviet era, formed a special alternative cultural space in art and literature of the last third of the twentieth century. Alternative to the Soviet system of values, artistic cultural space, which had its own stable range of motifs and images, formed, in turn, a special way of reading, developing the principles of dialogue with the addressee, potentially embedded in the works of Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Anton Chekhov, who assumed the maximum use of the opportunities of allegories and subtext overtones as the main means of expressing the author's position. This cultural situation was reflected in the work of a number of the late 20th century writers, who created the artistic image of an alternative cultural space in their works.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study is determined by the principles of historical-typological and cultural-contextual analysis of literary works. The theoretical basis of the paper was the works of representatives of

Russian and Western literary criticism and semiotics, in which the position on the signed nature of culture was formulated and developed: Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspensky, Vladimir Toporov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and others. Methodologically, the works of the classics of Russian philology Mikhail Bakhtin and Dmitry Likhachov, which developed the principles for the study of the historical evolution of literature and the theory of the interpretation of works of art, were of essential relevance. As a material for the study of the principles of the artistic realization of the «alternative cultural space», three prose works created by well-known authors of Russian literature from the 1980s to the 2000s were selected: *Demarche of Enthusiasts* by Dovlatov (2008), *Flying-Away Monakhov* by Bitov (1991), and *Moskva Kva-Kva* by Aksyonov (2006) – all representing different periods and different creative individualities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the forms of expression of an alternative cultural space was the so-called dissident prose (Bukin, 2006; Gutkin et al., 2005) – a form of demonstration of the opposition sentiments of the intelligentsia of the last third of the 20th century, which problematized the values that prevailed in the Soviet cultural space. Dissident prose is a concept that combined literary works created in the period 1960s-1980s (the period when the very phenomenon of dissidence arises in USSR) – and also during the following decade, when cultural memory maintained a negative attitude toward the values of the Soviet period. A common feature of the dissimilar utopias of various forms and genres was their anti-totalitarian orientation

(Ilyin, 1996; Vorozhbitova, 2012). In the events described, the realities of Soviet life are easily guessed - which, as a rule, were checked by universal values.

The alternative cultural space, recreated in the world of artistic works, reflected the influence of the postmodern era, which manifested itself in the author's refusal to formulate the truth (ideal), in appeal to the principles of gaming poetics, wide use of parody, grotesque, hyperbole and constant laughter on playing off citations (Gutkina, 2003; Kagansky, 2001; Khanov, 2016). These artistic techniques allowed identifying a range of values - both true and imaginary - that determined the functioning of this cultural space (Harris, 1999; Jameson, 1992). The features of postmodern poetic style were also expressed in the use of the principle of parodic citation of the classical literary texts and the use of citation-based secondary aesthetics (Clark, 1981).

Expressed through the text, the alternative cultural space inevitably turned out to be intertextual, i.e., created from various quotations and references, citations – not in their usual form and without quotes, often anonymous impersonal and almost imperceptible (from the standpoint of their authorship). This cultural space was implemented on the field of interaction of the meanings of the author, the reader and the recorded history Günther (2009) & Ivleva (2008) as a writing that :

is always permeated with numerous hidden and open excerpts from other texts and in one way or another is associated with a large number of texts (or even, in the radical formulation of the question, with all texts); and other writings that can be comprehended as texts of other

arts, the texts of everyday life, and even biography as a kind of text (Bystrova, 2004: 20).

Postmodernism as a direction of Russian literature arose as a consequence of the crisis of Soviet ideology and the subsequent total denial of Soviet culture (Sinyavsky, 1999). At the same time, it was based on the artistic paradigm of socialist realism art (Epstein, 2017). The alternative cultural space created in Russian prose of the 1980s-1990s, on the one hand - exercised the idea of continuity of Soviet culture, and on the other hand - in accordance with the principles of postmodernism poetics transformed the traditions and values of Soviet literature, often replacing them with the opposite ones. There is a good reason why for the literature of the period under consideration, the hero-narrator becomes so common; simultaneously close to the author by his semantic-value position, and in the same time separated from him – being system-aside from both the Soviet and the alternative cultural spaces.

Exhibitive in this respect is the image of the hero-narrator in Bitov's novel *Flying-Away Monakhov*. Really, the story-teller can be called Alyosha Monakhov, and Andrei Bitov himself, and the conditional me, but this does not change either the nature of the character, or his attitude to the world. The hero throughout the novel remains the same by nature: it is the hyper-reflective Soviet high-brow, the dreamer and contemplator who is confronting the reader, constantly searching for true existence and persistently exposes himself and others to a moral assessment. In fact, this hero is the heir of many characters of Russian classical literature, in particular, the works of Garshin and Chekhov. He tests for authenticity various literary interpretations of the variants (images

or types of cultural space) of modern everyday life: urban, heroic, alien, creative. The situational activities related to the protagonist are entirely conditioned by the historical features of the self-consciousness of the people of the Soviet era, however, in the same time, they are oriented to the reproduction of universal situations.

Bitov reproduces the painful sense of love of the protagonist against the backdrop of his complete social irresponsibility and simultaneously reflects the essence of human relationships and the nature of creative inspiration. So, for example, referring to the seemingly completely random theme of motorcycle racing, the author discusses the essence of heroism and as a result comes to the conclusion that the circle is a measure of all things, whose ideal form helps to understand the meaning of life. There are numerous philosophical digressions from the main storyline in the novel, since everything most important occurs in the inner world of the character. The author seems to repeat the initial segment of his own writing path, guided by the simple to the complex principle of development, which corresponds to the natural chronology of personal spiritual space.

The image of the reflecting hero-narrator assumes also a special type of narrative layout. The *Flying-Away Monakhov* novel, created throughout the duration for over 30 years and published in different versions, with each new publication changed its name, composition, and grew up with new chapters, which helped express the constantly refined author's concept (Bitov, 1991). Such a balancing of the hero-narrator on the border separating the Soviet and the alternative cultural space, corresponds to the position of the writer himself, who was not fully a

dissident or at least did not feel completely like it. The most vivid representatives of Russian dissident prose, Aksyonov and Dovlatov consider the Soviet discourse primarily through the prism of personal experience of collision with totalitarian practice. Specific signs of the alternative cultural space in their works are generalization and dehistoricization. Generalization ensures its internal homogeneity and integrity, as well as its limitations within a certain period – from late Stalinism to the so-called stagnation. Dehistoricization, however, allows perceiving the Soviet past not as a historical, but as a sociocultural phenomenon.

In the Moskva Kva-Kva novel by Aksyonov Soviet discourse is presented in the form of an imperial utopia. Such an artistic presentation of this discourse is due to the negative nature of the author's appeals to the phenomenon of the Soviet. In this case, the imperial utopia itself is represented in different versions: heroic (in the image of the charactonym (Smelchakov – Braveheart) last name; tyrannical (in the image of Stalin); and mere utopian (in the image of Mockinacchi .(

In the halcyon period, the feature writer Smelchakov immediately became a yes-man at the construction sites of Magnitogorsk, Dneprostroï Dam and the Karakum Canal. Once again, the trumpet of class battles sounded, and Kirill, driving one of the multi-hundred armada of red tanks, rolled along the streets of Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Lvov, Bialystok and sang, singing the dawn of a new century of proletarian freedom (Aksyonov, 2006: 53).

The image of Glika Novotkannaya conceptualizes a utopian imperial idea in the form of a naive belief in a brighter future :

Sometimes it seemed that she herself was something of the kind, a sort of a soaring Virgo of Socialism, akin to the one that overshadowed in flight the vast intersection of Gorky Street and Pushkin Square. At such moments, she humbled her half-child skip-hop on the steps of the Moscow University building in order to pass with due solemnity, or rather, to ascend, past the thoughtful statue of a girl with a book (Aksyonov, 2006: 126) .

This image in the novel pertains to the motif of the flight, which represents the ideal side of the empire:

The students crowd saw in Glika not only the brightest representative of their generation, but, perhaps, even a certain creature from the enchanting close future, when all of Moscow will be built up by the high-altars of victorious Stalinism, and residents of the capital of happiness will drive their personal motor-crafts on suspended viaducts, and maybe even fly by their own passenger helicopters (Aksyonov, 2006: 134).

The image of deprived of life, abandoned space, demonstrating the inconsistency of a utopian project is also conceptually important in the novel of Aksyonov :

At Yauza River in those days there were places where unfinished and long-lasting constructions, coupled with other abandonments, were

interwoven so closely that it was difficult to understand where you are: in industrial backwater, mixed with the remains of the Second World War that ended seven years ago, or in the overstocked packaging barrels facility with welded and riveted pipes, suspended constructions and surfaces of brick and cement, of which a heap of dried insects were often sticking out and, as well as beat-up prisoners' shoes and knee-high boots of security guards, well – and some other waste of urban socialism(2006: 120).

The image of Stalin's skyscrapers also exposes the utopian project as untenable and rather deadlock :

They were remarkable not only by the size, but also by the grandeur of architecture. Soviet architects and sculptors who created and decorated these buildings unequivocally stressed their connection with the great tradition, with the creations of such masters of the Golden Age of Athens as Ictinus, Phidias and Callicrates (Aksyonov, 2006: 2) .

The high-rise, embodying imperial ambitions, is full of deadlocks and labyrinths, which reveals the internal inconsistency of the utopian project :

This link of times is especially noticeable in that gigantic residential creature, which spread its enclosed buildings at the confluence of the Moskva River and Yauza. It is in it that all the main characters of our scenes settle; it is destined for them to pass through the crucible of pure, almost utopian feelings, true to those sterile times. Let us take the central, that is – the most exalted part. Its cyclopean spire is based on the colonnades that evoke in the cultural memory the Athenian Acropolis

with its unforgettable Parthenon, with the only difference being that the role of the mighty city rock is played by the giant, multistage building itself; all spurs of the structure are designed not to worship the gods, but for the proud living of the best citizens of the atheistic Union of the Republics (Aksyonov, 2006: 3).

Yet another form of alternative cultural space becomes in the novel the myth of dissidents, embodied in the images of Yurka Donderon and Tak Takovski. In the picturesque by V. Aksyonov, dissidence appears as a necessary attribute of maintaining the imperial myth and an important condition for the existence of a utopian idea. The inclusion of the ancient myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in the text of the novel, the leitmotif of which is passing through the whole work, actualizes one more aspect of the Soviet discourse - the mythologization of the Soviet world-view based on stable mythologemes such as the rejection of the present in the name of a bright future, the inevitability of the victory of communism, the priority of common over private and collective over personal. Demythologization (Kondakov, 1993) is thus one of the main techniques in the novel by Aksyonov. The very name of the novel by Sergei Dovlatov –*Demarche of Enthusiasts* contains a negative, revealing connotation. The novel presents a very limited space, which includes completely different characters, at the same time united by an emphatic political apathy and focused on ordinary, purely every day :

The staff was piled on the pavement. Ficus greened among the furniture, like poplar in the new developments area. The major with the director were smoking in the shade of the beer stand. Losik, sitting on his haunches, leafed through the Yugoslav magazine. Varya cut the sausage,

and then took out the pownies. They were wrapped in a newspaper, each separately. While pouring vodka, the usual Russian silence reigned (Dovlatov, 2008: 25).

The emphatic space of political apathy in the writing is structured by the generality of the plot-forming motifs, such as the motive of rejection of the Soviet world image, the motive of bitter irony in relation to the surrounding reality, the motive of duality in people's behavior. Such duality is presented as a form of survival in the context of a conflict with totalitarian power :

Lenin's image is an indispensable part of any office of the nomenclature establishment. I knew the only exception, and even that is partial. I had a friend named Avdeev. He used to work as an executive editor of the youth newspaper. He had a father, a provincial actor from Lugansk. For years his father played Lenin in local drama theater. So Avdeev cleverly found the way out from the situation. He screwed a huge photo above the table – Dad in the role of Ilyich. It seems airtight – as if Lenin, and yet – Dad (Dovlatov, 2008: 178).

Yet the main motive that unites all the heroes of the novel, both main and secondary, is Dovlatov's motif of cop-out :

The janitor's name was Lydia Vasilyevna Brykina. No Mr. Holiday there! Her living quarters were a horrible sight. A rickety table, a couple of torn mattresses, a stifling stinks. Ragged, messy kids everywhere. The youngest yowled in a plywood cradle. A girl of fourteen grimly drew on the window pane with her finger (Dovlatov, 2008: 203) .

Soviet discourse in the Demarche of Enthusiasts is actualized at the level of deconstruction of Soviet ideologeme, turned by the author into a depiction of everyday miserable cut-and-dried life of ordinary people, their feelings and moods.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, along with officially allowed culture in the Soviet period, another alternative cultural model functioned, depicted in works of literature from a later period – the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. This is a sociocultural area that exists inseparably linked with a certain system of values and ideas that are not affected by the attitudes of an ideological Soviet society. One of the varieties of alternative cultural space was dissident prose - a special form of demonstration of the opposition sentiments of the intelligentsia of the last third of the 20th century, which problematized the values that dominated the Soviet cultural space. The alternative cultural paradigm in the prose of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is influenced by postmodernism, which is expressed in rejection of truth (ideal), citations, parody, playing poetic style, grotesque, hyperbolization, gamification of historical alternatives. These artistic techniques were applied within the framework of modern culture and allowed to reveal the range of values that determine the life of this cultural space, among which the first place was occupied by the freedom of creativity .

Forms of expressing an alternative cultural space in contemporary Russian prose are diverse. The expression of the protagonist of the alternative culture is often the image of the main hero – intellectual, specifically confined to the limits of own creative or philosophical search and experience. Soviet discourse is sometimes represented in the form of an imperial utopia, which also reveals its inconsistency. An alternative model can be limited space, characterized by an emphatic political apathy, and focused on the ordinary, purely everyday routine. Another form is the dissident myth, presented as a necessary attribute of maintaining the imperial myth. The phenomenon of alternative cultural space occupies a special, significant place in the formation of art systems of representatives of contemporary Russian prose. In the legacy of Andrei Bitov, Vasily Aksyonov, and Sergei Dovlatov, the alternative cultural space functions as a deconstruction of the ideologemes and mythologemes that formed the essence of the Soviet project. The result of this deconstruction was an ironically detached attitude to the phenomenon of the Soviet and the construction of a different, alternative cultural space.

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