ANALYSIS

Post-Apocalypse, Intermediality and Social Distrust in Russian Pop Culture

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Abstract

Pop culture is not just entertainment. It conveys values, beliefs and even historic knowledge to a broad audience. Often, pop culture even overrides institutionalized education and shapes ideological attitudes in the public sphere. In the Russian case, bestsellers, blockbuster movies and video games present peculiar narratives of societal or political orders that need to be taken into account when analyzing Russia's potential for democratization.

Metro 2033: A Multi-Media Success

In an age when the modern mass media is converging, it has become difficult to talk about isolated cultural events in Russian pop culture. Frequently specific content surfaces in one medium, but shortly afterwards undergoes several transformations and appears in another reincarnation as a movie, book or computer game.[1] Such an intermedial diversity buttresses the public presence of a certain style in a successful product.

A good case in point is Dmitry Glukhovsky's "Metro 2033" science fiction project. In 2002, the journalist (born 1973) created a dark world in a post-apocalyptic setting. The main idea is that in 2013 a global atomic war will turn the earth into a radioactive desert. Sunlight no longer reaches the planet's surface. All human beings who were above ground die, leaving only mutant animals and dinosaurs. Only 70,000 people survive in Moscow: individuals who happened to be in the metro during the atomic strikes. Twenty years after the devastating war, several communities exist in different metro stations, they fight each other for water, food and other supplies.

Glukhovsky started off with the publication of single chapters in his LiveJournal blog. He also instructed his readers as to the music they should listen to while reading. In doing so, he shaped the situation of reception and made sure the readers were in the right mood for his dark fiction. Later, he collected the various entries and published the story as a book.[2] Eventually, other writers were hired and produced their own novels in the "Metro 2033" universe. Finally, a video game was produced—the aesthetics of the literary fiction were transposed into the visual world of an Ego Shooter. The task of the player consists in defending his own people from the attacks of mysterious aliens, called "the Blacks." The player has to fight both Communist and Fascist enemies and eventually manages to destroy the base of the "Blacks" (see screenshot on p. 5).

However, apart from the usual bleak conclusion, the game also provides the possibility of a happy ending. If the player engages in good deeds like giving alms or sparing enemies from death, he is able to eventually arrange peace with the "Blacks." This second solution requires a high ethical commitment, otherwise the game falls back into the standard "Live and let die" mode. The basic weltanschauung (worldview) of the game is that of an eternal fight. The anthropological condition of the game "Metro 2033" implies a fragile individual existence—the hero constantly has to monitor his own wounds, radiation levels, oxygen supply, equipment and ammunition. Only a highly ethical player can influence the virtual reality in a way that changes the nature of the adversary. Contrary to the book, the video game thus assumes not a hopelessly lost world, but allows for redemption, though one that requires a strong moral effort from the player.

"Metro 2033" is just one example of the wanderings of a fictional topic through different media in contemporary Russian pop culture. Economic aspects have to be taken in account when analyzing similar phenomena. Initially, Glukhovsky brought his idea to the public without financial risks—LiveJournal is a popular platform where blog entries can be posted for free and reach a broad audience without production or marketing expenses.[3] In Russia, LiveJournal is widely read and a literary success in this virtual medium usually opens a path to the big publishing houses. Glukhovsky was thus able to test the economic potential of his fiction—and in 2005 his novel came out with EKSMO-Press, one of Russia's leading publishers.[4] At the same time, the electronic version of his text was deleted in order to force the reading public into buying the printed book. Before that, Glukhovsky explored in his LiveJournal the possibility of selling fan items to his virtual readers—

1 Henry Jenkins. Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

2 Polyarnye sumerki. Zhurnal Dmitriia Glukhovskogo, http://dglu.livejournal.com/profile

3 Henrike Schmidt. Russische Literatur im Internet. Zwischen digitaler Folklore und politischer Propaganda. Bielefeld 2011, 126.

4 Ulrich Schmid. "Bestseller in Russland." In: Kodex. Jahrbuch der Internationalen Buchwissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft. Wiesbaden 2012, 91–105

but ultimately refrained from doing so in light of negative polling results.

"Metro 2033" gained success despite the rather clumsy literary artistry of its creator. In fact, the narration follows clichés that are notorious for socialist realist novels. The main reason it produced an enormous echo lies in its symbolic power. The post-apocalyptic setting of "Metro 2033" seems to hit a nerve in contemporary Russian society. Traditionally, Russian culture is very much oriented towards the future. In the 19th century, the most popular novels dealt with utopian scenarios for Russia, and the whole Soviet project in the 20th century was obsessed with the future happiness not only of the Russian people, but mankind as a whole.[5] In 1991, this utopian design was destroyed—time itself seemed to fall apart.

Apocalypse Now in Post-Soviet Russia

The breakdown of the Soviet Union was perceived by many Russians as a catastrophe. Chernobyl, the political chaos of the early 1990s, the hyperinflation, the war in Chechnya—all these elements contributed to an apocalyptic mood in Russia that was not really overcome but only suppressed in the consciousness of most citizens during the era of stabilization at the beginning of the 21st century.[6]

The first production of pop culture that came to terms with this post-apocalyptic atmosphere was the movie "Night Watch" (2004).[7] The movie is based on a popular novel by science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko, who originally was trained as a psychiatrist. Director Timur Bekmambetov set his film in contemporary Moscow, but constructed a mythological narrative that provided a striking explanation for the unstable situation in Russia: The forces of good and evil are equally strong and agreed on a truce ages ago. During the day, representatives of the evil power control the good, and during the night, representatives of the good watch over the bad. This Manichean concept provided a convincing explanation for the ideological void of the post-Soviet period. All ethical norms were lost—for most Russians, life seemed to be an endless fight without a final goal. Bekmambetov's film embedded this mental state into a mythological narrative that gave little comfort, but at least endowed the struggles of Russian everyday life with a deeper sense. This narrative was told in a visual language that by that time was very familiar to the Russian audience: The special effects of "Night Watch" borrow extensively from popular American films like "Star Wars," "The Matrix" or "The Terminator."

In his first Hollywood movie, "Wanted" (2008), Bekmambetov presented a similar interpretation of the world. His hero is an insignificant accountant working in a cubicle. He becomes a member of a fraternity which has existed for the last 1,000 years. The activities of this conspiracy are guided by a mysterious loom, which produces a symbolic cloth with secret messages. The fraternity carries out assassinations and thus keeps a balance between good and bad in a cursed world. The final scene of the movie shows the hero, taking control of his life, by killing the assassin of his father. As in "Night Watch," Bekmambetov presents a world at war in which the individual has to fight and eventually to kill for his own happiness. There is even a new kind of "invisible hand" in this conception: The assassins of the fraternity kill not only for their own advantage, but are hunters in the global ecology of mankind.

The post-production of the movie "Wanted" and the creation of the visual effects were carried out by Bekmambetov's own company "Bazelevs" in Moscow. For the Russian version of the film, Sergei Lukyanenko translated the dialogue. Lukyanenko is a good example of an intermediary between books, films and computer games. His novel "The Rivals" (2008) was based on the Russian video game "Starquake," in which human pilots have to defend themselves against invaders from outer space. Lukyanenko builds his narrative on the idea that the uncertainty of real life is a computer game. His protagonists come to the conclusion that in either case they have to abide by the rules of the game. This kind of world interpretation seems to apply for many Russians—especially the young generation in urban areas.[8]

The popular video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (2007) also creates a post-apocalyptic world. The setting assumes that a second nuclear disaster happens at Chernobyl. The natural environment turns into a polluted zone with strange objects and aggressive mutants. Evidently, the game conflates two sources: The real events in Ukraine in April 1986 and Andrei Tarkovsky's acclaimed science fiction movie "Stalker" (1979) based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky brothers. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is also an Ego Shooter. The protagonist who has lost his memory at the beginning of the story has to explore both the mysterious zone in which he lives and his own

5 Leonid Heller, Michel Niqueux. Histoire de l'utopie en Russie. Paris, 1995.

6 Olga Shevchenko. Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009.

7 Vlad Strukov. "The Forces of Kinship: Timur Bekmambetov's Night Watch Cinematic Trilogy." In: Helena Goscilo, Yana Hashamova (eds.): Cinepaternity. Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 191–216.

8 Rossiiskoe kino i film Nochnoi dozor. http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/cult/art_art/cinem/dd043311

identity. Objects, as well as human beings, are endowed with consciousness. As in "Metro 2033," the hero is vulnerable and has to cope with several problems: radiation, hunger, bleeding. The game features more than one ending—but only one of them is happy: The protagonist has to kill all his adversaries. After the victory he has to destroy all things in the zone that contain the zone's consciousness—and the zone will vanish. The alternate endings imply a self-mutilation of the player. He may, for instance, wish the disappearance of the zone, which will cause his own blinding, or he may wish his own immortality, which will turn him into a metallic statue.[9] These endings show the two fundamental modes of the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world: Either the protagonist shapes reality according to his wishes or he changes himself in order to comply with external challenges.

The post-apocalyptic mode has also diffused into the Fantasy bestseller market. The giant publishing house EKSMO features a series with the programmatic title "Russian apocalypse". The covers are clearly modeled on the aesthetics of S.T.A.L.K.E.R., and the book titles promise doomsday: "Death City" (Viktor Glumov 2012), "Food and Ammunition. The Renegade" (Artyom Michurin 2012), "Atomic Autumn" (Viacheslav Khvatov 2012), "Russian Dawn" (Oleg Kulagin 2011). This series was preceded by another series call just "Apocalypse" with titles like "The Midnight World" (Aleksandr Yan, 2011) or "There won't be a second chance" (Suren Tsormudian, 2011). The plots of all these books are set in a devastated world after an atomic war. The hero has to fight for his own survival, very often he is threatened by Manichean forces. There is no security for the individual, neither from the state nor from society. In all post-apocalyptic tales, the hero is wounded and has to pay attention to his own diminishing forces. However, the will to kill and survive will guarantee the individual's place in a hostile environment.

Social Homelessness

The homelessness of the post-apocalyptic hero corresponds to the dominating self-perception of Russian society. Economic, political and social uncertainty is a wide-spread phenomenon in Russia. The eminent sociologist Lev Gudkov has identified "fear" as one of the constituents of the "negative identity," which dominates the self description of the average Russian post-Soviet citizen. The individual uses "fear" as one of the dominant models of his interpretation of the world. Fear affects most realms of individual life: family, health, politics, economy, ecology. Such a perception significantly limits the individual range of action, since most factors that influence life are out of control and thus to be "feared." Russian society defines itself as an in-group, which is threatened by various fears. Its core does not rely on a positive set of values, but is constituted as a defense against everything that seems to be hostile. "Negative identity" means that Russians try to describe themselves through a discursive process of "othering." Potentially, everything that comes from outside is perceived as threatening and calls for resilience.[10]

In line with this argument, Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin and Natalia Zorkaya hold that today's Russian society is exclusively dominated by values of survival that imply passive or reactive behavior to social change.[11] Post-apocalyptic narratives in films, video games and literature exploit these fears and fill the void with dark visions that act like a tremendum fascinosum: Excitement may be derived not only from pleasure, but also from horror.[12]

Fear corresponds to a general feeling of disenfranchisment and helplessness when it comes to questions of political or social participation. In 2007, 72% of all respondents in Russia maintained that they are not able to influence state decisions, and 80% thought that they had no possibility to shape the political or economic situation in Russia.[13]

Moreover, social capital in Russia is very low. Only 26% of Russians thought in 2006 that they could trust fellow citizens, while 70% held that contact with people from the street is dangerous.[14]

Finally, the category of the future in Russia has melted down to a very short period ahead of the present. In 2007, 48% of all respondents said they could imagine their future life for the next year or two, not longer.[15] Time is not perceived as a continuous evolution, but in terms of traumatic events that either already happened or are expected to happen. The official Soviet culture may have been false and flawed, but it had one advantage: It promised a bright future. Communism was close, even imminent. In 1961, Nikita Khrushchev announced a perfect communist society for 1980.[16] This

9 Charles Onyett: S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl Review, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2007/03/19/stalker-shadow-of-chernobyl-review

10 Lev Gudkov. Negativnaiai identichnost'. Stat'i 1997–2002. Moscow 2004, 81, 272.

11 L.D. Gudkov, B.V. Dubin, N.A. Zorkaya: Postsovietskii chelovek i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo. Moscow 2008, 18.

12 Eliot Borenstein. Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2008.

13 Ibid., 31.

14 Ibid., 72.

15 Boris Dubin. "Koordinata budushchego v obshchestvennom mnenii Rossii." In: Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura. Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsenarii. Moscow 2011, 500–513, 507.

16 William J. Tompson, Khrushchev: A Political Life, New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 1997, 238.

optimism is lost now, and for good. Time has reversed its interpretational vector: The Russian present is no longer interpreted in terms of the great future to come, but in terms of what happened (and failed). The most prominent attribute of time today is the category "post"—the post-apocalypse is already here, the artistic imagination just finds new metaphors for this dominant model of societal self-perception.[17]

The various manifestations of Russian pop culture have clear implications for Russia's potential for democratization. If fear and post-apocalypse remain the main categories for the social perception of the future, the possible range of political action and participation is severely limited. In the United States, Obama could win the presidential elections in 2008 with the slogan "change." Such an announcement would evoke nothing but horror in Russia—"change" would immediately be interpreted as "change for the worse."

Putin's popularity among the Russian population has suffered a severe blow after the presidential elections in 2012. However, 65% of respondents still think that Putin did more good than bad to Russia during his term in office.[18] Against the background of pop culture's predominant world view, Putin may appear as the hero who fights dangerous foreign influences and tries to keep the Russian in-group together. Putin's face and body have even become one of the most recognizable state insignia for Russia.[19] Thus the implicit Manichean and post-apocalyptic world view of Russian pop culture products in their various intermedial manifestations fosters political passivity, social distrust and reliance on the leader in power.

About the Author
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*Figure 1: Screenshot from "Metro 2033", Developed by the Ukrainian Company 4A Games (*http://enterthemetro.com/*)*

Source: http://article.techlabs.by/53_9028.html

17 Yulia Liderman. "V storonu travmy. Kak vremia priobretaet kachestvo 'post.'" In: Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura. Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsenarii. Moskva 2011, 522–533.

18 God so dnia prezidentskikh vyborov 4 marta 2012 goda. Otsenka deiatel'nosti Putina. http://www.levada.ru/28-02-2013/god-so-dnya-prezidentskikh-vyborov-4-marta-2012-goda-otsenka-deyatelnosti-putina

19 Helena Goscilo. Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon. London, New York: Routledge, 2013. Rosalinde Sartorti. "Politiker in der russischen Ikonographie. Die mediale Inszenierung Vladimir Putins." In: Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Hg.): Kultur in der Geschichte Russlands: Räume, Medien, Identitäten, Lebenswelten. Göttingen 2007, 333–348. Alexandra Engelfried. "Das Porträt des Präsidenten. Putin zwischen Kunst, Kult und Kommerz.". In: Osteuropa 10/2007, 51–66.