

Post-postmodernism in Russia

This section is devoted to post-postmodernism in Russia and is aimed at people who know Russian (most of the sources and works discussed here are in that language). I've provided occasional quotes in English, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Russian Concepts of Post-postmodernism

Because the Russian discussion of postmodernism started fairly late (in the 1990s), by the time critics got around to writing book-length studies postmodernism was well past its peak. For example, at the end of his book *Русский литературный постмодернизм* (Moscow 2000) Vladimir Kuricyn notes that the political correctness, irony, and the endless critique of language of postmodernism were already starting to become a bore ("надоело," see pp. 257-259). Although Kuricyn goes on to suggest that there is a post-postmodernism, it is not a "принципиально новое состояние мира" (p. 270) but an

"уточнение, уплотнение представлений, конец героической эпохи постмодерна [...]. Постмодернизм победил, и теперь ему следует стать несколько скромнее и тише" (p. 270).

Needless to say, Kuricyn's position is similar to that of the many Western critics who are aware that postmodernism has become predictable but nonetheless insist it will continue on in a new guise that miraculously renews its own tired clichés (for more on this see Post Nr. 1 in the [Blog](#), "The Misery of Posthistoricism"). Kuricyn, for his part, seems to think that postmodernism is going to keep rolling along in a state of semi-retirement where it is "more modest and quiet." Posthistoricism, in other words, is alive and well in Russia, too.

Some Russian approaches to post-postmodernism (like many Western ones) offer sweeping socio-cultural visions but don't go into much detail about how they actually appear in real works of art or literature. One example of this is Nadežda Man'kovskaja's 1998 article on post-postmodernism ("*От модернизма к постпостмодернизму via постмодернизм*," *Kollaž-2*, Moscow 1999). Man'kovskaja speaks of "технообразы" and "интерактивность" as typical features of post-postmodernism (thus predating Alan Kirby's digimodernism by a good ten years):

"Преобразование зрителя, читателя из наблюдателя в сотворца, влияющего на становление произведения и испытывающего при этом эффект обратной связи, формирует новый тип эстетического сознания. Модификация эстетического созерцания, эмоций, чувств, восприятия связана с шоком проницаемости эстетического

объекта, утратившего границы, целостность, стабильность и открывшегося воздействию множества интерартистов-любителей."

As with Kirby's approach, it isn't clear how this applies to literature, which in media terms is still a pretty stuffy affair where writers write copyrighted books and readers read them. (The same applies to almost all forms of serious artistic endeavor, which generally involve people with very highly developed skills creating physically fixed works of art that amateur readers/viewers/listeners don't meddle with directly.)

Regarding literature itself, Man'kovskaja cites features such as

"[...] нов[ую] искренность и аутентичность, новый гуманизм, новый утопизм, сочетание интереса к прошлому с открытостью будущему, сослагательность, «мягкие» эстетические ценности. Идеи «мерцающей» эстетики (Д. Пригов), эстетического хаосмоса как порядка, логоса, живущего внутри хаоса (Ж. Делез, М. Липовецкий) сопряженные происходящим в самом искусстве синтезом лиризма и цитатности («вторичная первичность»), деконструкции и конструирования."

Unfortunately all this doesn't amount to much more than a collection of buzzwords, and it's not clear how even these relate to the virtual interactivity Man'kovskaja is touting in the rest of her essay.

Another early (and quite prescient) approach to post-postmodernism is Natal'ja Ivanova's article "*Преодолевшие постмодернизм*," *Znamja* 4 (1998). Ivanova notes the predictability of postmodern strategies and sees a turn towards "new sincerity" (новая искренность), "человекоцентризм" and new forms of realism. She also suggests a category of her own called "transmetarealism" that applies to the works of Oleg Ermakov, Dmitriy Bakin, Aleksej Slapovskij, Marina Višneveckaja and several others. This type of literature addresses "крупные мировоззренческие, онтологические проблемы" in a non-ironic way and operates simultaneously on a realistic and a phantastic or metaphorical level in which nothing is accidental ("нет места случайностям") and where we find strong authorial positions ("автор-демиург," "писец" and "скриптор"). Transmetarealism is based on postmodern strategies ("интертекстуальность, гротеск, иронию") but "подчиняет все эти усвоенные и преодоленные элементы сверхзадаче."

Ivanova's observations are directly comparable to the later theses advanced by the Western critics treated in my [Blog](#) (see Post Nr. 4, "Theory Smack-down"). These include:

- a non-ironic interest in ontological and existential questions;

- narrative closure or control ("нет места случайностям") resulting from the congruence of realistic and metaphoric levels;
- strongly marked authorial positions;
- the use of typical postmodern strategies to achieve entirely different goals than those of postmodernism.

Unfortunately, Ivanova never seems to have developed her ideas beyond this particular essay.

The most ambitious critic is perhaps Mixail Epštejn (Mikhail Epstein), one of the leading authorities on postmodern Russian literature (see, for example, his *After the Future. Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, Amherst 1995 and *Postmodern v Rossii*, Moscow 2000).

Writing in the mid-1990s, Epštejn (like almost everyone else) was aware that postmodernism was on its way out. In its place he suggests there is a "trans-" movement arising that would involve the "overcoming of contingent sign systems, of national and temporal limitations and of the splintering of culture into narrow disciplines" and would result in the "building of a complex, self-reflexive whole beyond postmodernism's playful pluralism" (*After the Future*, p. 328). Somewhat confusingly, Epštejn then switches gears and suggests using another prefix, "proto-," which he uses to designate "the next, now ripened shift in post-postmodern culture" which involves a "radical transition from finality to initiation as a mode of thinking" (p. 339). Epštejn also throws in the notion of "protodiscourse," which is

"a kind of self-quotation by which an individual enters the process of self-differentiation, whereby his discourse is absolutely original and derivative at the same time. [...] The other is located within me, and I speak in his name. This is a 'derivative originality,' in which originality itself is produced as a quotation from some possible source contained in the speaker's consciousness, but not equivalent to his own selfhood" (*After the Future*, p. 335).

The suspicion that Epštejn is trying to have his post-postmodern cake and eat it too (being original and derivative, sincere and ironic at the same time) is confirmed when he cites as his main source Dmitrij Prigov, a Conceptualist poet trying to reconcile the "new sincerity" with his manifestly ironic postmodern way of writing. In all fairness to Epštejn, though, it would have been hard (given what was being written in Russia in the mid-1990s) to conceive of post-postmodernism as anything other than a "sincere" extension of post-modernism.

Six years later, in a manifesto published in *Znamja 5* (2001) called "Début de siècle, или От пост- к прото-. Манифест нового века," Epštejn expands his original term. This time, he speaks of "proteism," which is

a "vast historical epoch" ("огромная историческая эпоха") and nothing less than a "философия и эстетика Начала." The new epoch is "only the beginning of a "virtual era" based on digital technology and its offshoots and opening up broad planetary and futurological perspectives.

Erštejn goes on to propose a 7-point program for proteism that I will flatly ignore here because it not only says nothing about literature or culture in the narrow sense of the word but also contains passages like this (Point Nr. 3):

"Протеизм — это не только метод исследования, но и сфера самосознания: сам субъект воспринимает себя как отдаленный прообраз какого-то неизвестного будущего, и его отношение к себе проникнуто духом эмбриологии и археологии. Мы — эмбрионы будущих цивилизаций, и одновременно мы — их древнейшие реликты, примитивные зачатки того, что впоследствии приобретет полноту формы и ясность смысла."

Erštejn's paean to virtual technology tends to dissolve in flowery metaphor like that above (the empirical substance of his arguments is more or less zilch), and one gets the distinct feeling that he has been reading too many of the modernist manifestos that he cites at the end of his essay. In fairness to Erštejn, it must be said that he goes into more philosophical detail in a hefty book entitled *Знак пробела. О будущем гуманитарных наук* (Moscow 2004). However, the book appears to have dropped the subject of post-postmodernism entirely and is of little or no use for analyzing literature or other contemporary arts.

The most recent book addressing Russian post-post-modernism is Mark Lipoveckij's *Паралогии. Трансформации (пост-)моденистского дискурса в русской культуре 1920-2000-х годов* (Moscow 2008). I use the word "post-postmodernism" advisedly, since Lipoveckij's book is rigorously posthistorical in the sense that it assumes that postmodernism will go on forever in a new mode ("late postmodernism"), even if that mode contradicts almost everything that postmodernism was in his original definition (see in particular Chapter 11, "Постмодернизм переехал" pp. 457-530).

Like all posthistorical constructs (see Posts Nr. 1 and 2 in the [Blog](#)) Lipoveckij's notion of postmodernism is based on poststructuralist theories that don't allow the use of binary concepts that would be needed to mark different categorical stages of historical development. Lipoveckij's starting point in this case is Jean-François Lyotard's notion of "paralogy," which is an "intellectual construct" that "synthesizes relations and contradictions, parallels and conflicts ("синтезирует связь и противоречие, параллель и конфликт," p. 46). I don't have the space here to go into Lipoveckij's rather complicated explication of Russian postmodernism, which he describes in terms of an "explosive aporia"

("взрывная апория", see chapter 11, pp. 45-72). However, Lipoveckij's thinking at this point is still historical: he can conceptually distinguish postmodernism from socialist realism, realism, and from the "classical" avant-garde (see p. 52).

In any case, if we follow Lipoveckij, Russian paralogical discourse creates the effect "of a continual fluctuation of meaning between opposing, incompatible concepts and categories ("непрерывной флуктуации смысла между противоположными, несовместимыми понятиями и категориями," p. 53; the original is in italics). The result of this in narrative is a continuous chain of "recodings" or "iterations" of previously formulated contradictory and incompatible positions:

"В результате нарратив разворачивается как непрерывный процесс перекодировки одних и тех же значений в свете остающихся непримиренными оппозиций. При этом каждая новая перекодировка наслаивается на предыдущую: именно таким образом формируется новый, хотя никогда не окончательный, смысл. Эти постоянные перекодировки строят постмодернистский текст как систему смещающих повторов (то, что Деррида называет «итерациями»), оформляющих отсутствие или опустошенность центрального, примиряющего или же снимающего противоречия (трансцендентного) смысла [...]" (pp. 53-54, the original is in italics).

Given this "paralogical" reasoning, which generates an unbroken chain of fluctuating, contrary, and incompatible meanings continuously piling up on top of one another and lacking any sort of center point or unity, it's no wonder that Lipoveckij isn't able to end his own notion of postmodernism. This leads to rather odd arguments regarding authors like Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin, who in novels like *Священная книга оборотня* and *Пути Бро* are evidently trying to make readers experience the kind of unified truth beyond discourse that Lipoveckij says Russian postmodernism continually subverts through "paralogies."

Since Lipoveckij can't help but notice this "воля к истине" he doesn't have much choice but to dismiss it as a) lousy art ("собственно романная поэтика [...] оказывается бедной и невыразительной") and b) as a naive return to modernist or pre-modernist mythology. Lipoveckij calls both novels "неомифологические тексты" (p. 673) and says that they try to hybridize pre-modern and (post-)modern discourses (p. 674) in a way that throws us back to the "crisis of modernity" that predated 20th century culture and history (which as we know ends badly). Furthermore, he accuses both authors of deliberately ignoring the "ineradicable power of discourse" ("неустранимость власти дискурса," p. 674) and of "merely modeling conceivable, or rather, imaginary variants dispensing with our dependency on discourse" ("они лишь моделируют мыслимые, а вернее, воображаемые варианты устранения

дискурсивной зависимости," p. 674). Lipoveckij's implicit conclusion is that Pelevin and Sorokin are naive (or perhaps cynical) mythologists whose work will throw us back into the dark ages of (pre-)modern-ism.

Lipoveckij seems vaguely aware that Sorokin, Pelevin and countless other writers are deliberately trying to overcome postmodern paralogy and endless discursive irony, he just doesn't think it's *possible*. And the *reason* he doesn't think it's possible is because he can't conceive of anything that isn't "paralogical." Indeed, any attempt to contradict paralogy just leads to its further *intensification* (since paralogy after all consists of contradictions synthetically piling up on top of one another *ad infinitum*). Because this sort of circular "paralogic" is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, Lipoveckij and others like him are unable to conceive of anything "outside of," "beyond," or "opposed to" postmodernism. Given this type of definition, postmodernism cannot but help go on forever.

Performatism and Russian Literature

Performatism is, needless to say, an attempt to do precisely what Lipoveckij doesn't do, which is to explain the attempts to overcome postmodernism in their own categorical terms rather than in terms of the epoch that they are trying to leave behind (for more, see the section [What is Performatism?](#)). Regarding Russian literature, performatism originally began as an attempt to understand the work of Viktor Pelevin, whose short stories and novel *Čapaev i pustota* (Buddha's Little Finger/Clay Machine Gun, 1996) seemed to me extremely un-postmodern in their emphasis on transcendence and religious (Buddhist) experience. Although I did treat Pelevin in my [initial article on performatism](#) in 2000, I later started to take a more comparatist tack and avoided lengthy discussions of Russian literature. My most recent scholarly article on the subject is on Mixail Šiškin's novel *Venerin volos* (*Maidenhead*, see the [Bibliography of Performatism](#)), and I hope to focus more attention on Russian literature in the future.

A former pupil of mine, Zarifa Mamedova, has written a book entitled *Narren als Vorbilder. Die Überwindung der Postmoderne in der russischen Literatur der 1990er und 2000-er Jahre* [Fools as role models. Overcoming post-modernism in Russian literature of the 1990s and 2000s] that treats post-postmodern (performatist) subjectivity in contemporary Russian literature, however the book is available only in German.

Conclusion

None of the major theoreticians of Russian postmodernism (Kuricyн, Epštejn, Groys, Lipoveckij) has shown much interest in formulating theories of post-postmodernism, and the contributions of critics like Man'kovskaja and Ivanova

are too essayistic to be of much use. It is to be hoped that the growing awareness that much contemporary writing is no longer compatible with the old postmodern and post-structuralist models will lead to a more intensive scholarly and critical investigation of Russian post-postmodernism.

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