

Simonek, Stefan

Closing the gap between high and popular culture? : a closer look at Viktor Pelevin's novel *Chapaev i pustota*

In: *Problémy poetiky*. Dohnal, Josef (editor); Kšicová, Danuše (editor); Pospíšil, Ivo (editor). 1. vyd. Brno: Ústav slavistiky Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity., 2006, pp. 173-182

ISBN 802104179X

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/132678>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN HIGH AND POPULAR CULTURE? A CLOSER LOOK AT VIKTOR PELEVIN'S NOVEL CHAPAEV I PUSTOTA

STEFAN SIMONEK (VIENNA)

In his famous essay *Cross the Border – Close the Gap* (which finally became one of the essential programmatic texts of postmodern theory in the humanities), Leslie Fiedler at the end of the sixties attacked 'high' modernist literature for its elaborated semantic structure full of complex quotations and intertextual allusions, which require a sophisticated and erudite reader. Instead of this traditional élitist literary approach for a limited circle of readers, Fiedler in his essay calls for a new kind of literature, one which should be able to 'close the gap' between high and popular culture mentioned in the title by integrating recent genres of popular culture and the mass media, such as Science Fiction, Pornography or, most notably, the Western, into the literary discourse (Fiedler 1999:278); Fiedler himself, by the way, emphasized his programmatic departure by publishing this famous essay in the December 1969 issue of the American version of „Playboy“, a magazine which can hardly be called a scientific journal. According to Fiedler, as a result of including elements of popular culture in literature, the hierarchical opposition between high and low was to break down and give way to some sort of 'flat' and democratic cultural model, which has no need for privileged and skilled interpreters and is equally accessible for the general non-sophisticated reader.

This attempt to break up the hierarchical differences between high and popular culture by mixing together elements of both spheres has turned into a central moment of postmodern theory and is an overall literary device in the novels and short stories of Viktor Pelevin. Because of his novels like *Omon Ra*, *Zhizn' nasekomykh* or *Generation 'P'*, Pelevin next to Vladimir Sorokin, Tat'iana Tolstaia or Valeriia Narbikova is nowadays acknowledged as one of the leading Russian postmodernist writers by literary critics in the United States, Western Europe (Dalton-Brown 1997

and 1998, Genis 1999, Lauer 2000:869, Engel 2002:401) and Russia (Bogdanova 2001:109–18, Kuritsyn 2001:174–76). All of Pelevin's works mentioned before correspond with the theoretical positions offered by Leslie Fiedler due to their forceful intertextual approach, which combines elements of classic Russian literature with popular culture imported to Russia mostly from the United States¹. Pelevin's novel *Chapaev i Pustota*, published in 1996, shifts the essential gap of Fiedler's essay – the emptiness and absence of meaning – into the very personality of one of the central characters, Petr Pustota, whose name again refers to Fiedler's gap, since the English for „pustota“ is „emptiness“.

In this novel as in his other literary texts, Viktor Pelevin weaves a dense net of intertextual allusions and quotations taken from various cultural realms. The specific way in which this Russian writer links elements of highbrow Russian literature and Western popular culture can be seen most distinctly in the first two chapters of Pelevin's ambitious novel. These two chapters open up the two central strands of action, which are later positioned by the author in a complex relation to each other: on the one hand, Pustota acts in post-revolutionary Russia as a member of the literary bohemian set and as a writer of mediocre poems, and on the other hand he is presented as a patient in a mental hospital in present-day Moscow.

In the novel's first chapter the postmodern intertextual approach provided by Pustota's description of literary life in Post-revolutionary Russia is strictly limited to classic Russian literature of the 19th and early 20th century. It is no coincidence that Pelevin first of all puts his focus on the monument of Aleksandr Pushkin on Moscow's Tverskoi-Boulevard (Pelevin 1996:10) and thus opens up his intertextual game with a writer who more than anybody else represents the best in Russian literature and its tradition through the centuries. The Pushkin monument therefore represents high culture to its fullest degree and serves as a cornerstone of the intertextual area that the author is going to construct in the following chapters. This first allusion to Russian literature is later on extended by various names of prestigious Russian writers, first of all Fedor Dostoevskii, including his characters Razkol'nikov, Marmeladov and captain Lebiadkin (who by the way resembles Pelevin's main hero Pustota by an overwhelming production of mediocre verses) (20, 29, 35) and next to him Nekrasov (12), Chernyshevskii (47) and Semen Nadson (13). The specific brand

¹ For the specific way, in which Pelevin uses capitalist strategies of advertisement and commerce as textual devices in his works and as a deliberate technique of self-presentation as well, see Mélat 2001.

of Russian modernism is evoked by the names of Konstantin Bal'mont (47), Aleksandr Blok (including his poem „The Twelve“) (33, 36), Vladimir Maiakovskii (13) and Vladimir Nabokov (48), whereas Valerii Briusov (29) and Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoi (31) themselves are present as active characters in this part of the novel.

This enumeration of Russian literature is followed in Pelevin's novel by a sequence which is embedded into the overall plot in only a relative way and therefore also printed in a different font. Here a woman named Mary recounts in a dreamlike vision with distinct erotic overtones the meeting with her bridegroom who turns out to be nobody else but the Austro-American actor Arnold Schwarzenegger². The intertextual devices of the novel at this point are turning into intermediality by transgressing the borders of a written text. Due to the postmodernist use of mass media and popular culture, Schwarzenegger is presented here not as a coherent personal character, but as a product of medial performance, since various clips from Schwarzenegger's most successful action films are assembled montage-like in this passage; three Hollywood blockbusters with Schwarzenegger in one of the leading roles can be traced here. To begin with, Schwarzenegger takes away his bride on a Harrier fighter jet (68); Mary is sitting at the back of the plane by taking hold of the antenna and listens to the music of a band named „Crimson Jihad“ (70). Aficionados of Schwarzenegger's movies already will have identified the corresponding film by now, but a few pages later Pelevin offers a direct quotation from the movie: Schwarzenegger's laconic remark „You are fired“ is undoubtedly taken from the action-comedy *True lies* (76).

By means of the band mentioned before (in the movie itself „Crimson Jihad“ is a radical Islamist terror organisation which threatens New York with an atomic bomb) it can be shown, how Victor Pelevin further unfolds the intermedial postmodernist game in his novel, since Mary mentions a certain Robert Fripp as a member of this band (71). In fact, Fripp was the musical master-mind of a British experimental pop-band whose name was not „Crimson Jihad“, but „King Crimson“. Next to this allusion to pop music, Pelevin offers two more scenes from Schwarzenegger's movies: the metallic man with the ability to morph into various bodies whom Mary

² For the function of dreams in Pelevin's work see Nagornaia 2001. In an interview with the German weekly „Die Zeit“, Pelevin in the year 1999 declared that for him there doesn't exist any difference between dream and reality and that the so-called reality in fact is only a dream with a distinct length and sequence (Pelevin 1999:53).

had seen in a movie, derives from *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (73), and the bloody lens of Schwarzenegger's mechanical eye hints at *Terminator I* (75).

By juxtaposing the plot-line situated in post-revolutionary Russia and Mary's vision, it becomes clear to what extent Pelevin combines the spheres of high and popular culture: Dostoevskii and Blok on the one hand and Schwarzenegger and Fripp on the other hand are participating in Pelevin's intertextual and intermedial postmodernist game, which therefore mixes up the realms of high and low or the serious and the trivial and does away with the hierarchical structures of modernist literature in the tradition of Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot. These artistic devices result in a sort of 'flat' literary structure without a central hidden meaning the reader has to find out by decoding the numerous quotations. Pelevin underlines this effacement of cultural hierarchies by a specific form of change: The so-to-say high-brow realm of Russian culture in the first chapter of the novel is presented in a rather simple, approachable manner, at times close to a simple and rather boring name-dropping of Russian literary celebrities; in opposition to that, Pelevin in Mary's vision never directly mentions the movies at which he is hinting, but only presents some of their key scenes. Pelevin thus blends the realms of high and low, since at this point it is not the sphere of elaborated and refined high culture, but that of popular culture which requires a sophisticated reader, or (taking into account the moment of intermediality) a sophisticated viewer. This anti-hierarchical textual strategy which crosses the border between the different cultural spheres, without any doubt at least on the author's side should be able to overcome the „outmoded ability to discriminate between High and Low“ mentioned in the essay by Leslie Fiedler (Fiedler 1999:285)³. In addition to this,

³ This strategy of combining the artistic realms of high and popular culture is also valid for the author's other novels published before and after *Chapaev i Pustota*; Pelevin, for example, opens up his novel *Generation 'P'* (1999) with a motto taken from Leonard Cohen's song *Democracy* and confronts it with two other paratextual elements, the titles of the chapters *Bednye liudi* and *Oblako v shtanakh*, alluding to Dostoevskii's first novel and to Maiakovskii's famous poem. The fact that Cohen's work cannot simply be fit into the borders of popular culture alone, since the songwriter next to his songs also became famous for his poems and novels, shows up the relativity of the distribution between high and popular culture (consequently, Fiedler mentioned Cohen as one of the new writers who were able to close the gap; Fiedler 1999:282). Pelevin himself demonstrated this relativity by using Fedor Tiutchev's essential line "Umom Rossiuu ne poniat'", quoted in *Chapaev i Pustota* as first allusion to Russian classic literature imme-

Pelevin also follows his strategy of breaking down cultural hierarchies by using a language which deliberately neglects the rules and traditions of Russian literary language and which has been rejected by Russian critics either as dull and unattractive (not least due to the frequent use of English words) or praised as a welcome attack on Russian logocentrism⁴.

In comparison to the writer's position, the part of the reader (the addressee of a literary text), however, looks somewhat different. The issue here is again the different spheres of culture and the question of how these different spheres can be put together with the help of the intellectual and cultural background of the reader. Postmodernist intertextual devices (as has just been shown by means of Pelevin's novel) always include numerous codes and cultures and rework them into a new patchwork of quotations and allusions. Manfred Pfister, for example, in his seminal essay *How Postmodern is Intertextuality?*, published in 1991, emphasizes the basic duality of postmodernist intertextuality which neither chooses between high and popular culture, nor despises the latter, but always strives to include both spheres. Therefore, this specific form of intertextuality according to Pfister doesn't ask the question „Donald Duck or Dante?“, but is much more a matter of „Donald Duck and Dante“, since postmodernism wants to demonstrate that the one is just as worthless and waste as the other (Pfister 1991:218). For the reader of postmodernist texts, however, this double-bind intertextual strategy in my opinion again opens up the gap that Fiedler wanted to close, since it requires a reader with an intellectual background simultaneously rooted in two completely different

diately after Mary's vision (Pelevin 1996:77), in *Generation 'P'* as an advertising slogan for vodka (Pelevin 2001:92). The range between high and popular culture in this novel is even wider than in *Chapaev i Pustota*, since next to Tiutchev we can find here Aleksandr Griboedov (70), Marina Tsvetaeva (16) and Boris Pasternak (13) on the one hand and *Star Wars* (65), Harold Robbins (90) and the „Pet Shop Boys“ (106) on the other.

In the novel *Omon Ra* (1993) next to allusions to several classics of Socialist Realism, as for example, Boris Polevoi's *Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*, and to Russian literature in general (as later on also in *Chapaev i Pustota* by Pushkin, Blok and Pasternak), we can find throughout the text an intermedial play with the albums of „Pink Floyd“, as for example with *Atom Hearth Mother*, according to Pelevin's obvious love for gaps and omissions of all kind, the album most essential for unfolding the novel's plot (a flight to the moon), *Dark Side of the Moon*, is completely ignored. For a detailed analysis of Pelevin's technique of linking together different layers of culture in *Omon Ra* see Petters 2006.

⁴ For Pelevin's language see Markova 2005 and Paulsen 2006.

spheres of culture. Only a reader who is equally at ease with Donald Duck and with Dante will be able to play the postmodernist intertextual game in its full range and thus to cross the border between the two realms. Or, if we take for example Pelevin's novel *Chapaev i Pustota* in the context of post-Soviet readership: A typical member of the older generation of Russian intelligentsia in the humanities surely could have coped with the novel's first chapter and its intensive reworking of Russian modernist culture and lifestyle, while it's difficult to imagine a distinguished member of the Academy of Sciences watching a Schwarzenegger movie in any other way than with utter disgust. Younger fans of Schwarzenegger's action films, on the other hand, possibly would mistake Nadson or Briusov for Soviet special agents.

So what might the reader's response be to this complicated twofold aesthetic configuration – a configuration which, notwithstanding Leslie Fiedler's attempt to close the gap, opens it up maybe even wider than high modernist literature, such as for example Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*? The answer to this question can only be given when we consider the notion of intellectual understanding in general; outside the borders of postmodernist theory, the gap mentioned by Fiedler could possibly be considered an imperfect situation and a deficit of sense, which has to be corrected in order to regain a status of semantic balance and fullness again. This takes us straight to the crucial question, whether there exists some sort of sense in a literary text at all and whether the reader is supposed to grasp it. In order to prove that outside postmodernist theory there exists a longing for sense and for filling up semantic gaps that might open up in the text, let's turn to German Reception theory, where the question of understanding a literary text is at the very core of reflection. Wolfgang Iser, for example, interprets the literary text as a sequence of semantically underdetermined configurations (so-called „Leerstellen“) which are to be filled up by the reader's imagination during the process of reading according to his or her individual cultural and psychological background. Iser emphasizes the fact that while these gaps („Leerstellen“) don't represent any artistic shortcoming of the text, by definition they stand for a semantically undecided condition, which becomes definite only in the reader's mind⁵.

⁵ „Die Leerstellen eines literarischen Textes sind nun keineswegs, wie man vielleicht vermuten könnte, ein Manko, sondern bilden einen elementaren Ansatzpunkt für seine Wirkung. [...] Der Leser wird die Leerstellen dauernd auffüllen beziehungsweise beseitigen“ (Iser 1979:235).

The postmodernist answer to this epistemological challenge would possibly encourage a form of reading that doesn't aim to overcome the lack of semantic determination, but deliberately leaves the gap open, which Iser and Fiedler wanted to close. A postmodernist strategy of reading would be able to come to terms with an occasional lack of meaning, since in a playful manner it understands the text as a riddle or as a game – a game, which is necessarily based on a certain amount of chance and unpredictability. Consequently, the complex structure of Pelevin's works has already been compared to a game by Western critics. Dirk Uffelmann, for example, used the metaphor of dominos to illustrate, how Pelevin linked the chapters of his novel *Chapaev i Pustota* together in such a way that the beginning of each chapter echoes the previous one, whilst its further plot is allowed to unfold freely in an (albeit limited) range of possible ways (Uffelmann 1999:328–29). Chistine Engel compared the narrative structure of Pelevin's story *Prints Gosplana* to the computer game „Prince of Persia“, simultaneously stressing the writer's appeal to modern mass media and popular culture and the moment of joyful surprise, which is inherent in every game (Engel 1999:337–38)⁶. At this point, I'd like to add to these comparisons between text and game a further interpretation of Pelevin's novel, which takes into account the permanent presence of the gap in the text (alluded by the name of the main hero, Petr Pustota). In contradiction to Wolfgang Iser's „Leerstelle“, which has to be filled, the gap in a mechanical puzzle, whose parts have to be moved within a rectangular frame to get the correct order of numbers or the right shape of the picture, plays a central role and can't be filled, since this would make the game itself impossible. Paradoxically, only the dynamic presence of the gap, which can be moved freely within the framework of the game, is able to restore the original state of order and harmony in the puzzle. Without the

⁶ From the area of computer games mentioned by Engel again opens up a connection to Arnold Schwarzenegger: Toby Gard, the producer of the successful computer game „Tomb Raider“, finally decided to take Lara Croft as the central heroine of his game, since all male figures inevitably looked like Schwarzenegger (see Deuber-Mankowsky 2001:34–35); this decision against Schwarzenegger, nevertheless, even more underlines his prominent function as a cultural icon, which also has been used by Pelevin. This function is also proved by the fact that especially the movie *Terminator I* in the meantime has become an object of intensive, mainly poststructuralist research work in psychoanalysis and cultural studies; Slavoj Žižek, for example, mentioned the movie in his Lacanian reading of the mass media (Žižek 1991:103). For the Terminator as a cultural icon see Blitz – Krasniewicz 2004:87–115.

mobility of the gap the game would simply come to an end. In Pelevin's novel the semantic gap to some extent also roams through the text, undermining on its way literary conceptions of wholeness and completion.

A postmodernist form of reading thus accepts the inner fractures and contradictions of a literary text not as an aesthetic defect, but as a central part of the game. Closing the gap in this sense would result in a contradiction to the postmodernist quest for open and heterogeneous structures and result in restoring overall synthetic conceptions, which the French postmodernist thinker Jean-François Lyotard in his famous essay *La Condition Postmoderne* called „métaréçits“, such as for example the concepts of technological progress, civilization or religion (Lyotard 1979). The map of postmodern landscape is instead characterized by inner dislocations and ruptures, which deny any concept of synthesis. According to this distrust of holistic and harmonizing theoretical conceptions, which is so typical of postmodernist thinking in general, the reader of Pelevin's novels should not start to search for an overall meaning or message in the text, but participate in the intertextual game and, by doing so, always keep in mind that there may be a gap somewhere. This gap can neither be filled nor removed from the text in order to somehow get rid of it, since in a paradoxical way (again I'd like to mention the mechanical puzzle) it is the mobility and emptiness of the gap that evokes such an old fashioned thing like „sense“.

References

- Blitz – Krasniewicz 2004: M. Blitz, L. Krasniewicz, *Why Arnold Matters. The Rise of a Cultural Icon*, New York
- Bogdanova 2001: O. V. Bogdanova, *Sovremennyi literaturnyi protsess (K voprose o postmodernizme v russkoi literature 70–90-kh godov XX veka)*, Sankt-Peterburg
- Dalton-Brown 1997: S. Dalton-Brown, *Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose*, *Slavonic and East European Review* 75, 216–33
- Dalton-Brown 1998: S. Dalton-Brown, Viktor Pelevin, in N. Cornwell (ed.), *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, London – Chicago, 630–32
- Deuber-Mankowsky 2001: A. Deuber-Mankowsky, Lara Croft – Modell, Medium, Cyberheldin, Frankfurt am Main
- Engel 1999: Ch. Engel, *Der Text als Vexierbild, oder: Wo steckt Big Brother? Viktor Pelevins Erzählung „Prinz Gosplana“*, in W. S. Kissel, F. Thun, D. Uffelmann (eds.), *Kultur als Übersetzung. Festschrift für Klaus Städtke zum 65. Geburtstag*, Würzburg, 335–48

- Engel 2002: Ch. Engel, Vom Tauwetter zur postsozialistischen Ära (1953–2000), in K. Städtke (ed.), *Russische Literaturgeschichte*, Stuttgart – Weimar, 349–406
- Fiedler 1999: L. Fiedler, *A New Fiedler Reader*, Amherst, N. Y.
- Genis 1999: A. Genis, *Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature*. In M. Epstein, A. Genis, S. Vladiv-Glover (eds.), *Russian Postmodernism. New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, New York – Oxford, 212–24
- Iser 1979: W. Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, in R. Warning (ed.), *Rezeptionsästhetik. Theorie und Praxis*, München, 228–52
- Kuritsyn 2001: V. Kuritsyn, *Russkii Literaturnyi Postmodernizm*, Moskva
- Lauer 2000: R. Lauer, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur. Von 1700 bis zur Gegenwart*, München
- Lyotard 1979: J.-F. Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris
- Markova 2005: T. N. Markova, „Osobyi iazyk“ prozy V. Pelevina, *Russkaia rech'* 2005/1, 46–51
- Mélat 2001: H. Mélat, *Generation 'PPP': Pelevin – Pepsi – Pustota. Proizvodstvo – Prodazha – Pribyl'*. In W. Weitlaner (ed.), *Kultur. Sprache. Ökonomie. Beiträge zur gleichnamigen Tagung an der Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien*, 3.–5. Dezember 1999, Wien, 217–29
- Nagornaia 2001: N. A. Nagornaia, *Kontseptsii i snovideniia v rasskazakh V. Pelevina*, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 48, 153–65
- Paulsen 2006: M. Paulsen, *Criticizing Pelevin's Language: The Language Question in the Reception of Viktor Pelevin's Novel „Generation 'P'“*, in I. Lunde, T. Roesen (eds.), *Landslide of the Norm. Language Culture in Post-Soviet Russia*, Bergen, 143–58
- Pelevin 1996: V. Pelevin, *Chapaev i Pustota*, Moskva
- Pelevin 1999: *Russland ist nur eine böse Parodie. Ein Gespräch mit dem Schriftsteller Viktor Pelevin über Terror in Moskau, virtuelle Politik und russische Mythen*, *Die Zeit* Nr. 45 (4. November 1999), 53
- Pelevin 2001: V. Pelevin, *Generation 'P'*, Moskva
- Petters 2006: J. Petters, „*Obratnaja storona sovetskogo mira / The Dark Side of the Soviet World*“. Eine intertextuelle Analyse zur Dekonstruktion von Sowjetmythen im Roman *Omon Ra* von Viktor Pelevin, Wien [unpublished thesis]
- Pfister 1991: M. Pfister, *How Postmodern is Intertextuality?*, in H. F. Plett (ed.), *Intertextuality*, Berlin – New York, 207–24

- Uffelmann 1999: D. Uffelmann, Interkulturelle Übersetzung in der Postmoderne – akademisch (Derrida) und phantastisch (Pelevin), in W. S. Kiesel, F. Thun, D. Uffelmann (eds.), Kultur als Übersetzung. Festschrift für Klaus Städtke zum 65. Geburtstag, Würzburg, 319–34
- Žižek 1991: S. Žižek, Liebe Dein Symptom wie Dich selbst! Jacques Lacans Psychoanalyse und die Medien, Berlin